

A, An or The?

When do we say "the dog" and when do we say "a dog"? (On this page we talk only about singular, countable nouns.)

The and a/an are called "articles". We divide them into "definite" and "indefinite" like this:

Articles	
Definite	Indefinite
the	a, an

We use "definite" to mean sure, certain. "Definite" is particular.

We use "indefinite" to mean not sure, not certain. "Indefinite" is general.

When we are talking about one thing in particular, we use **the**. When we are talking about one thing in general, we use **a** or **an**.

Think of the sky at night. In the sky we see **the** moon and millions of stars. So normally we would say:

- I saw **the** moon last night.
- I saw **a** star last night.

Look at these examples:

the	a, an
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The capital of France is Paris.• I have found the book that I lost.• Have you cleaned the car?• There are six eggs in the fridge.• Please switch off the TV when you finish.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• I was born in a town.• John had an omelette for lunch.• James Bond ordered a drink.• We want to buy an umbrella.• Have you got a pen?

Of course, often we can use **the** or **a/an** for the same word. It depends on the situation, not the word. Look at these examples:

- We want to buy **an** umbrella. (Any umbrella, not a particular umbrella.)
- Where is **the** umbrella? (We already have an umbrella. We are looking for our umbrella, a particular umbrella.)

This little story should help you understand the difference between **the** and **a, an**:

A man and a woman were walking in Oxford Street. The woman saw a dress that she liked in a shop. She asked the man if he could buy **the** dress for her. He said: "Do you think **the** shop will accept a cheque? I don't have a credit card."