

PRACTICE DRILLS IN THE USE OF THE ARTICLES IN ENGLISH

PART TWO: THE DEFINITE ARTICLE

2.1 THE: specific reference

In general, the definite article points to what has a specific identity. You can go and look at it, perhaps pick it up, drop litter on it, or take a photograph of it. It is the one and only. It is unique.

In conversation, THE refers to something known to both speakers, possibly personal. For example

1. The house plant died.
2. The goldfish lost its colour.
3. The telephone bill came today.
4. Mr Grummett is sitting in the garden.

If the reference of the word is not specific, but general, you will not use THE. Frequently, generalisations are made in the plural. For example

1. House plants like shade.
2. Goldfish often lose their colour.
3. Luckily, telephone bills don't come every day.
4. Mr Grummett is reading the book you gave him about gardens.

It is important to remember that the article depends on the reference of the word. If you use the word to refer to a specific, then it takes THE:

The fire has gone out. The door is open.

This is a fire that you can see, now just ashes, and the door is one you can get up and close.

But in the following sentence "fire" and "door" are used in a general way, and do not take THE:

In case of fire, doors should not be left open.

IMPORTANT. Think of the reference of the word. Ask yourself, "What is being talked about here?"

Do I really know what specifically it is? Can I point at it? Look at sentences 5 and 6 in the following drill. What is the difference between the mustard in sentence 5 and the mustard in sentence 6?

Exercise. Which of the nouns in these sentences are specific, and need THE? Which are general, and do not take THE?

1. Put..... kettle on.
2. Switch..... light on.
3. ....light is needed to read by.
4. I'm going to..... library.
5. Please pass..... mustard.
6. I like..... mustard on..... sausages.
7. .... doctor gave me this medicine.
8. .... cat has fleas.
9. .... cats kill..... birds.
10. .... central heating has broken down.
11. In the tropics, you do not need..... central heating.
12. He was late at..... office again.
13. The President was in..... office for four years.
14. .... weather is depressing.
15. Some countries have..... climate; England has..... weather.
16. .... marmalade is on..... table next to..... cornflakes.
17. .... marmalade is not put on..... cornflakes.
18. .... fridge is empty. I'll have to go to..... supermarket.
19. I prefer..... open-air markets to..... supermarkets.
20. .... car must go to..... garage.

2.2 GETTING SPECIFIC INFORMATION: WHICH?

Look at this sentence:

Mrs Grummett took the children to the park.

Without other information, the assumption is that these are Mrs Grummett's own children, and that the place they went to is near to where the Grummetts live.

If the reference is not clear, then information is added to make it clear. A phrase or clause may be used. For example

Mrs Grummett took the children staying with her next-door neighbour to the park.

In order to get the specific information, you can use "which?":

Mr Grummett planted the flowers.  
Which flowers?  
The ones he bought at the garden centre,

This chair wobbles.  
Which chair?  
The one I'm sitting on, stupid!

Exercise. Drill. Answer these questions, giving specific information:

1. Which house do you live in?
2. Which of those books is yours?
3. Which restaurant do you go to?
4. Which train do we catch?
5. Which road do we take?
6. Which is your pen?
7. Which shop can I buy a newspaper at?
8. Which hotel did you stay at?
9. What floor is your office on?
10. Where can I catch a tube to the airport?
11. Which tube line?
12. Which of these cakes would you prefer?
13. Which is your favourite pub?
14. Where have they gone? (give several answers)

Exercise. Compose similar questions and answers using the following words. Give several answers to each question.

street    room    office  
people    dinosaur    menu

### 2.3 ABSTRACTIONS

the truth    the freedom    the accident  
the work    the expectations    the hopes

But, as the examples show, THE can also be used with abstractions. With THE, these abstractions are still specific, as in the following examples:

Exercise 1. Drill. Complete:

1. .... policies of..... government have been criticised by..... press.
2. .... truth of..... matter is that..... organisation is top-heavy.

3. One complication which gives some students difficulty is the idea of classes or groups which have a specific identity, and so take the definite article:

The good, the bad and the ugly. (movie title)  
The language student needs patience. (BUT, Language students need...)

In the second example, the abstraction does not take the article, but the group idea (when it is singular!) does.

[Advanced students only! Can you explain the difference between the following?

The patience needed by the language student is considerable.

Patience is needed by the language student.]

## 2.4 SECOND REFERENCE

Read the following verse (limerick) carefully.  
What do you notice about the use of the articles, definite and indefinite, in it?

There was a young lady of Niger  
Who rode with a smile on a tiger;  
They returned from the ride  
With the lady inside  
And the smile on the face of the tiger.

That's right. The first time we meet them, the lady, the tiger and the smile, we do not know them, and so give them the indefinite article, A. However, once they are known, and become definite, they take THE. Notice that "ride" also has the definite article.

## 2.5 NAMES OF PLACES AND OTHER THINGS

To finish with, let me say that the use of the article in English can be extremely confusing because there are so many exceptions to any rules that may be made.

However, as a general rule, A carries the idea of being one of many, and not known, while THE carries the idea of specific identity and being known to the speaker.

For added confusion, consider the following:

Britain	the UK
Texas	the State of Texas
North America	the North Pole
Lake Geneva	the Great Lakes
Mount Everest	the Himalaya
Oxford University	the University of Oxford
Carnegie Hall	the Albert Hall
Harrods	the Hilton
chapter one	the first chapter
World War II	the Second World War

## 2.6 OMISSION OF THE DEFINITE ARTICLE

And, to make matters even more interesting, note that the article is left out in:

send to prison	stay at school
go to bed	run away to sea
leave by car	study at university
take to hospital	go to work
eat breakfast	have dinner

Also, illnesses do not take the article.  
Exercise. Complete, in ten different ways:

Mrs Grummett suffers from...

## 2.7 SUPERLATIVES

French cooking is the best in the world  
At 104, he is oldest in the village.  
Mrs Grummett was the most beautiful of all the women Mr Grummett had met.  
That boiled egg was the worst I ever had.

Exercise. Use a superlative to describe

1. Van Gogh
2. your prime minister
3. Coca-Cola
4. English
5. United States
6. your last holiday
7. Mrs Grummett's apple pie
8. Elvis Presley
9. Mr Grummett's prize pumpkin

## 2.8 EXERCISES

Elementary. Complete with THE, where needed:

1. .... little boy fell off..... bicycle.
2. .... children like..... sweets.
3. I have lost..... book I took out of..... library.
4. .... cats love..... fish.
5. Smoking..... cigarettes is unhealthy.

6. Mr and Mrs Jones go to..... church on..... Sunday.

7. They go to..... church round..... corner.

8. .... students read..... books.

9. .... student was reading..... book you gave him.

10. .... world is coming to an end on..... Friday.

11. He goes to..... work while Mrs Jones stays at..... home.

12. .... children go to..... school.

13. Mr Jones goes to..... office while Mrs Jones stays at..... home.

14. They live in..... house on..... corner of..... street.

15. .... children go to..... school over there.

16. .... dogs bark, ..... birds cheep, and..... cats mew.

17. .... cat screeched when..... dog bit it.

18. .... bird flew away when..... cat jumped.

19. .... dog is called Fido; but not all..... dogs have..... names.

20. .... dogs are not allowed in..... park.

21. Were you able to get..... books you needed from..... library?

22. .... Prime Minister likes to watch..... cricket, but the burdens of..... office prevent him doing so.

23. Take..... Piccadilly bus on..... other side of..... street.

24. .... men and women have to face many problems in ..... living with each other.

25. What was..... name of..... shop that advertised..... discounts?

26. .... wind in summer blows from..... west.

27. Vegetarians suffer from..... wind.

28. .... Amazon flows from..... Andes to ..... Atlantic.

29. .... Queen will speak on..... Christmas Day.

30. Mary wants to learn..... French before she goes to..... Continent.

Intermediate. Complete with THE, where needed:

1. In Paris, we stayed at..... George V hotel, ate at..... Maxim's, and visited..... Louvre.

2. .... Smiths were supposed to come to..... lunch we gave at..... Ritz, but ..... Mrs Smith phoned to say they had to take..... young one to..... hospital.

3. Some buildings are world-famous: ..... Acropolis, ..... Big Ben, ..... White House, ..... Taj Mahal, ..... St Peter's, ..... Pyramids, ..... Lenin's Tomb.

4. .... nation shall speak peace unto..... nation was..... suggested motto of..... United Nations.

5. Experts were appointed to investigate..... causes of..... disease, known as..... yellow fever, which broke out among..... American troops after..... Spanish-American War.

6. .... brevity is..... soul of..... lingerie.