

ARTICLES (A, AN, THE): IS IT DEFINITE?

Developed by the Center for Global Communication and Design
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A noun is *definite* if it refers to something specific that is known to *both* the writer/speaker and the reader/listener. (Note: You should memorize this definition!) For example, if Jane needs to drive somewhere, she might ask her father, “May I use *the* car?” She uses the **definite article** *the* because both she and her father know which car Jane is referring to (the family car). But later Jane might say to her friend Bill, “I saw *a* funny-looking dog today.” She uses the **indefinite article** *a* because she knows which dog she saw, but Bill doesn’t.

Table 2 below illustrates that there are four possible conditions involved in this decision, but only one results in a noun that is definite.

Table 2: Matrix of Definiteness/Indefiniteness *

In the following examples, definiteness is determined by whether the Writer/Speaker and the Reader/Listener knows specifically what is being referred to:

- **Definite:** “Can I use *the* car?”

Writer/Speaker: YES
Reader/Listener: YES

- **Indefinite:** “I saw *a* funny-looking dog today.”

Writer/Speaker: YES
Reader/Listener: NO

- **Indefinite:** “I heard that you once wrote *a* book about ecology.”

Writer/Speaker: NO
Reader/Listener: YES

- **Indefinite:** “I need to buy *a* new belt.”

Writer/Speaker: NO
Reader/Listener: NO

* adapted from Brown, R., *A First Language*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973.

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Five Sources of Definiteness

There are five principal ways in which a reader/listener can know specifically what a noun is referring to (that is, five reasons a noun might be considered definite):

1. The noun has been previously mentioned.
 - I saw **a** funny-looking **dog** yesterday [first mention, indefinite]. It looked like a cross between a Pekinese and a German shepherd. When it saw my cat, **the dog** ran away [second mention, definite].
2. A superlative or ranking adjective makes the noun's identity specific.
 - **The tallest** girl in the class is 6'2" tall. [There can be only one girl who is the tallest.]
 - Please read **the fourth** paragraph on page 3. [There can be only one fourth paragraph.]
 - Today is **the most important** day of my life. [There can be only one day that is the most important.]
3. The noun describes a unique person, place, or thing.
 - **The** earth revolves around **the** sun once every 365 days. [There is only one earth and only one sun—in our solar system, that is!]
4. A modifying word, phrase, or clause **follows** the noun and makes it clear which specific person or thing you are referring to. But not every noun that is modified in this way is definite; it depends largely on the situation and on what you can reasonably expect your listener/ reader to know about.
 - Do you remember **the** girl *who went camping with us*? [Using *the* here implies that there was only one girl who went camping with you; otherwise the clause *who went camping with us* would not be sufficient to identify the particular girl that you are referring to. If there were two girls, then you would have to be more specific, saying perhaps "Do you remember **the** girl *from Iowa who went camping with us last May*?"]
 - John is reading **a** book *about quantum physics*. [Here the noun *book* is modified by the phrase *about quantum physics*. But there is undoubtedly more than one book about quantum physics. Therefore, to make *book* definite, we would have to add more information: "**the** book *about quantum physics that was assigned by Professor Jackson last week*."]]
5. The context or situation makes the noun's identity clear. For example, you might ask someone to "Close **the** door." You would use *the* because it would undoubtedly be clear to both of you which door you were referring to. Similarly, if you tell someone that you are going to **the** library, that person will assume that you are talking about whichever library is most familiar to both of you—RPI's Folsom Library, for example.

Again, you have to be sure that your reader or listener has the same context or situation in mind that you are thinking of; otherwise, he or she will be confused by your use of *the*. For example, one student wrote the following sentence:

- This magazine helps women analyze **the** problematic situation and offers possible remedies.

But this was the first time she had mentioned a problematic situation. Her readers were therefore confused because her use of the word *the* implied that they were already supposed to know which problematic situation she was referring to.