

A / an, the and zero article 1

Reminder → 11–19

A

We usually use **the** when we talk about –

- ★ things which are unique; that is, there is only one of them (or one set of them):
 - the world the sky the atmosphere the sun the ground**
 - the climate the horizon the human race the environment**
 - the travel industry the Internet**
- ★ general geographical areas with **the** as in:
 - the beach the town the sea(side) the land the country(side)**
(where 'the country' or 'the countryside' means 'the area where there are no towns')
- ★ **the past the present the future**

Note, however, that some nouns like this can be used with **zero article** (i.e. no article) to refer to a concept in general:

- Climate** is one of the many factors involved in changing farming methods. (*or The climate ...*)
- These flowers grow best in sandy soil and **sun**. (= sunshine)
- In autumn the temperature difference between **land** and **sea** decreases. (*or ... the land and the sea ...*)

If we want to describe a particular instance of these we can use **a / an**. Compare:

- I could see the plane high up in **the sky**. *and*
- When I woke up there was **a bright blue sky**.
- What are your plans for **the future**? *and*
- She dreamt of **a future where she could spend more time painting**.

B

We can use **the** when we make generalisations about classes of things using singular countable nouns. (See also Unit 47A.) Compare the use of **the** and **a / an** in these sentences:

- The computer** has revolutionised publishing. (this refers to computers in general) *but not* A computer has revolutionised publishing. (computers *in general* have done this, not an individual computer)
- The computer** is an important research tool. *and*
- A computer** is an important research tool. (this statement is true of both the general class and the individual item)

As an alternative to **the + singular countable noun** we can use a plural countable noun to talk about a class of things:

- Computers** are an important research tool.

Note that if **the** is used with plural and uncountable nouns we refer to a specific thing or group:

- The computers** have arrived. Where shall I put them?
- The music** was wonderful. I could have listened to the orchestra all night.

When we define something or say what is typical of a particular class of people or things, we generally use **a / an** rather than **the**:

- A corkscrew** is a gadget for getting corks out of bottles.
- A garden** is there to give you pleasure, not to be a constant worry.

C

Some nouns can be used uncountably when we talk about the whole substance or idea, but countably when we talk about an instance or more than one instance of it. When these nouns are used countably we can use **a / an** (and plurals). Compare:

- I don't drink **coffee**. *and* Would you like **a coffee**? (= a cup of coffee)
- He shook with **fear**. *and* He has **a fear** of heights.

There are many other nouns like this, including **conversation, grammar, importance, iron, pleasure, shampoo, sound**. Some of these nouns (e.g. **grammar, iron**) have different meanings when they are used countably and uncountably.

Exercises

45.1 Complete both sentences in each pair using one word from the box. Add **the** or **a / an** in an appropriate place. **A**

beach future past world

- 1 a I think the best Australian wine is as good as any in
- b As a child, Dariya would often daydream about travelling forward in time to very different from the one she lived in.
- 2 a If we are elected, we will build our policies on the simple belief that our purpose is to create bright for our children rather than achieving short-term goals for ourselves.
- b Although our current financial position is worrying, we have many new orders for our products and is looking very positive.
- 3 a As I get older, I remember better than things that happened recently.
- b Many tourists come to the village looking for that never really existed.
- 4 a If you want to get away from it all, you can take a small boat to deserted on one of the islands.
- b Dear Mum and Dad, We're having a great holiday. The weather's wonderful and we're spending most of our time on

45.2 Underline the correct or more likely answer. If both answers are possible, underline them both.

B

- 1 We get some strange requests in our shop. We had *the customer / a customer* in the other day who wanted to buy chocolate-covered ants.
- 2 It often seems that *the individual / an individual* can have little impact on government policy.
- 3 The invention of *a car / the car* is normally attributed to the German engineer Gottlieb Daimler.
- 4 *The television / A television* has changed the way we think more than any other modern invention.
- 5 The campaign against smoking in public places argues that its harmful effects are not confined to *the smoker / a smoker*.

45.3 Complete the sentences using the nouns from the box. Use each noun twice. If necessary, insert **a / an** in the correct place. **C**

conversation grammar iron pleasure sound

- 1 My sisters were clearly having ^a ~~X~~ serious *conversation* so I didn't like to disturb them.
- 2 It now gives me great to introduce that marvellous ventriloquist, Marco Lutman.
- 3 As we walked through the rainforest we heard we weren't expecting – the ring of a mobile phone.
- 4 The failure to teach in schools has affected people's ability to write well.
- 5 Most red meat is relatively high in
- 6 travels at different speeds, depending on the temperature of the air.
- 7 It's real to travel by rail in Sweden. The trains are clean and punctual.
- 8 I have of English printed in 1890 on very thin paper.
- 9 Although he's got he never seems to use it. His shirts are always creased.
- 10 As she walked into the party, ceased and everyone in the crowded room stared at her.

