

A / an, the and zero article 2

Reminder → 11–19

A We use **a / an** to say what a person's job is, was, or will be:

- She was **a company director** when she retired.
- Against her parents' wishes, she wants to be **a journalist**.

However, when we give a person's job title, or their unique position, we use **the** or **zero article** (i.e. no article), not **a / an**. Compare:

- She's been appointed **(the) head of the company**. *and*
- I'm **a production manager** at Fino. (= there may be more than one production manager)

After **the position of**, **the post of**, or **the role of** we use **zero article** before a job title:

- Dr Simons has taken on **the position of** Head of Department.

B We usually use **zero article** (i.e. no article) before the name of an individual person or place. However, we use **the** –

☆ when there are two people with the same name to specify which one we mean:

- That's not **the Stephen Fraser** I went to school with.

but compare 'There was **a** Stephen Fraser in my class.' (= a person named Stephen Fraser)

☆ when we want to emphasise that the person we are referring to is the most famous person with that name. Used this way, **the** is stressed and pronounced /ðɪ:/:

- Do they mean **the Neil Armstrong**, or someone else?

☆ with an adjective to describe a person, or another noun which tells us their job:

- the late Michael Jackson**
- (the) artist Joseph Turner** ('the' is sometimes left out, particularly in journalism)

☆ when we talk about a family as a whole:

- The Robinsons** are away this weekend.

C Note that **a / an**, or sometimes **zero article**, is used with a name when referring to the particular excellent qualities of the person named:

- Majid plays tennis well, but he'll never be **(a) Roger Federer**.

We also use **a / an** when we refer to an individual example of a product made by a particular manufacturer (e.g. I've just bought **a** Mercedes) or a work by a particular artist (e.g. Do you think it could be **a** Van Gogh / **a** Rembrandt?).

You can use **a / an** before a person's name if you don't know the person yourself. Compare:

- Dr Lee is here for you. (= I know Dr Lee) *and*
- There's **a** Dr Amy Lee on the phone. (= I haven't heard of her before) Do you want to talk to her?

D In stories and jokes in conversation, **this** is commonly used instead of **a / an** to introduce a new person or thing. Using **this** highlights the person or thing as the topic of what is to come next:

- As I was walking along, **this** spider (= a spider) landed on my head, and ...
- This** man (= a man) goes into a chemist and he says ...

E We use **the** before a *superlative adjective* (**the biggest**, **the most expensive**, etc.) when the superlative adjective is followed by a noun or defining phrase:

- He is **the finest young player** around at the moment.

However, we can often leave out **the**, particularly in an informal style, when there is no noun or defining phrase after the superlative adjective. Compare:

- A: Why did you decide to stay in this hotel?
B: It was **(the) cheapest**. *and* It was **the cheapest** I could find.

