

3 Known or unknown information

We use *a/an* to introduce information (i.e. a noun) that is not known to our listener/reader; but we use *the* when the information is known. Therefore, we usually use *a/an* for the first reference to something in a text, but *the* for subsequent references:

*In 1907 an English soldier set up **an organisation** to educate boys ... **the organisation** was the beginning of the World Scout Movement.*

We do not always have to mention something for it to be known to the listener.

We consider that it is known in the following situations:

SITUATION	EXAMPLE
something is unique, i.e. there is only one of it	<i>The organisation was the beginning of the World Scout Movement. The BBC's funding is under threat again.</i>
superlatives	<i>Is Michael Schumacher the greatest motor racing driver ever?</i>
the context makes it 'known'	<i>'Has the last candidate arrived yet?' 'Yes, she's in the boardroom.'</i> (= the only boardroom in the office)
the speaker's and listener's shared knowledge makes it 'known'	<i>Mum's out – she's gone to the dentist.</i> (we both know which dentist she goes to)
a defining relative clause makes it 'known'	<i>Zadie Smith is the writer who shot to fame with the publication of her first novel 'White Teeth'.</i>
a prepositional phrase makes it 'known'	<i>Croatia today is like the Greece of thirty years ago – unspoilt and not overrun by tourists. Meet me in the café next to the bus stop.</i>

4 General and specific

With plural nouns and uncountable nouns we use either *the* or no article. We don't use an article when we want to refer to a group or class in general. Compare:

***Tourists** are often blamed for changing the character of a town. (= all tourists)*

*Did you notice what **the tourists** in the castle were doing? (= specific tourists)*

*It is commonly accepted today that **brown bread** is good for you.*

*Did you remember to get **the brown bread** out of the freezer?*



We only use an article before an abstract noun if we wish to talk about a specific type of the noun:

*✗ It is impossible to live in a world without **the** hope.*

*✓ It is impossible to live in a world without **hope**. (hope in general)*

***The hope** of finding a cure for cancer drives a lot of medical research.*

(the specific hope of finding a cure for cancer)

We do not use an article in front of nouns such as *hospital, prison, school* if we are focusing on their function, i.e. school as a place of learning or prison as a place of punishment/correction:

*Can children leave **school** at fourteen in your country?*

*Rick's son is in **prison** for burglary.*

If we focus on the physical place or building, we do use an article:

*Is there **a** school in the village or do the children have to go to the town?*

*Joanne is an administrative officer at **the** prison.*

ACADEMIC ENGLISH The definite article is very common in academic English, particularly with a prepositional phrase that identifies the noun:

*Motorised boats harm **the** ecology of waterways, unless their use is kept at a low level ...*