

1D. The definite article in English

“The” is the only definite article in English. It is used to indicate a specific noun. “The” is usually unstressed and has two pronunciations, which depend on the word it is preceding. Before consonant sounds, “the” is pronounced [ðə]. The pronunciation changes to [ði] before vowel sounds.

“The” can be used with all types of common nouns, but in practice, there are four situations that determine the use of the definite article. First, “the” can be used if the noun “the” is modifying has already been mentioned or is “discourse old.” For example, “I didn’t know what page the topic on nouns began, so I checked the table of contents.” Second, “the” can be used if the noun its modifying is further identified by postmodifiers: “The book *that I’m reading* has 32 chapters.” (The italicized phrase explains which book, so “the” can be used as a premodifier.) Third, it can be used if the speaker/writer can expect that the reader/hearer understands which thing “the” is referring to as a part of normal expectations. For example, “I met the mayor when I visited city hall.” Finally, “the” can be used in cases where the noun referred to is unique, as in “the sun” or “the horizon.”

In some situations, “the” can also be used with proper nouns, especially if there is a post-noun modifier that provides some special information about that person. For example, in the sentence, “The Katie *who lives upstairs* is studying botany,” the is used to distinguish which girl named Katie the speaker is referring to, and the phrase “who lives upstairs” is a post-noun modifier.

The definite article can also be used with other names that are not proper nouns: royal titles and organizational titles. We would refer to “the prime minister,” “the CEO,” and “the secretary.”

Additionally, the definite article is regularly used with place names, particularly plural place names such as mountain ranges and island chains. For example, “the Alps” are in Europe, and “the Aleutians” are islands off the coast of Alaska. The definite article is used with singular nouns that name rivers, seas and oceans, and canals. For example, “The Dan River flows through my hometown. The Atlantic Ocean is the eastern border of North Carolina. I’d love to take a cruise through the Panama Canal.”

Finally, “the” can be used with some public facilities, monuments, buildings, etc., if the places are well known. “We drove across the Union Street Bridge and stayed at the Holiday Inn downtown.”

