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978-0-521-73175-1 - English Grammar Today With CD-ROM An A-Z of Spoken and Written Grammar  
Ronald Carter, Michael McCarthy, Geraldine Mark and Anne O'Keefe

Excerpt

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A/an and the 1

**A/an and the****1****A/an and the: meaning****1a**

*A/an* and *the* are articles. They are a type of determiner and they go before a noun. *A/an* before a noun shows that what is referred to is not already known to the speaker, listener, writer and/or reader (it is the indefinite article):

*Do you have a car?*

A: *Do you live in a house?*

B: *No, actually, I live in an apartment.*

*The* before a noun shows that what is referred to is already known to the speaker, listener, writer and/or reader (it is the definite article):

*Where did we park the car?* (The speaker and the listener know what car is being referred to.)

*We had to paint the apartment before we sold it.* (The speaker and the listener know what apartment is being referred to.)

*The* makes a noun specific.

↔ **Compare**

<i>Have you been to an ice rink?</i>	Have you ever been to any ice rink? ( <i>an</i> doesn't make the noun <i>ice rink</i> specific)
<i>Have you been to the ice rink?</i>	The speaker and listener know the ice rink which is being referred to (e.g. the one in their town/the local one). <i>The</i> makes the noun <i>ice rink</i> specific.

**Not specific**

*Would you like an apple?*

*Do you have a cat?*

**Specific ('the one you and I know')**

*Would you like to try the apple pie?*

*Have you seen the cat?*

→ **Determiners 98****When do we use a and when do we use an?****1b**

In speaking, we use *a* /ə/ before a consonant sound:

*a car a house a big truck a wheel a grey day*

**!**

Some words that begin with a vowel letter in writing have a consonant sound:

/ə ju:'naɪtɪd .../ /ə ju:'nɪvɜ:sɪti/ /ə wʌn .../

*a united group a university a one-year-old child*

We use *an* /ən/ before a vowel sound:

*an apple an old shoe an orchestra an umbrella*

**!**

Some words that begin with a consonant letter in writing have a vowel sound:

/ən aʊə(r)/ *an hour* /ən empi:θri: .../ *an MP3 player*

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[More information](#)*A/an and the 1***How do we pronounce *the*?****1c**

We pronounce *the* in two ways depending on whether the sound which comes after *the* is a vowel or a consonant:

*/ði:/* before vowel sounds*/ði: eksɪt/ the exit      /ði: æpəl/ the apple**/ðə/* before consonant sounds*/ðə ti:m/ the team      /ðə ju:niən/ the union***When do we use articles?****1d*****A/an* and *the* with types of nouns****Countable nouns**

We only use *a/an* with singular countable nouns:

*I have **a** sister and **a** brother.**That was **an** excellent meal.*

We can use *the* with singular and plural countable nouns:

***The** lion roared.      **The** tree fell.****The** lions roared.      **The** trees fell.***Uncountable nouns**

We don't use *a/an* before uncountable nouns:

*Could I have rice instead of potatoes with my fish?*Not: ~~Could I have a rice~~*I hope we have nice weather.*Not: ~~I hope we have a nice weather.~~

We can use *the* before uncountable nouns when they refer to a specific example:

***The** rice we bought in the Thai shop is much better than the supermarket rice.****The** weather was awful last summer.*

To talk about an individual quantity or more than one quantity of an uncountable noun, we use expressions such as *a bit of*, *a piece of* or *a [specific measure] of*:

*That's **an** amazing **bit of** news.*Not: ~~That's an amazing news.~~*We just made **a** big **bowl of** pasta.*Not: ~~We just made a pasta.~~*Could I have **a** **litre of** milk, please?*Not: ~~Could I have a milk, please?~~**General nouns**

We only use *the* with general plural nouns when we are referring to a specific set within a general class of people or things.

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## ↔ Compare

<b>Books</b> are so important in my life.	I mean all books in general.
<b>The books</b> were all over the floor.	I mean specific books (that you and I know).

We can make general nouns specific by using an article and adding more information after the noun.

<b>Life</b> is wonderful. (life in general)	<b>The life</b> of a soldier is full of danger. (specifically the life of soldiers, not life in general) She had <b>a life</b> of hard work. (one specific life)
<b>History</b> sometimes repeats itself. (history in general)	He wrote a book on <b>the history</b> of boxing. (specifically the history of boxing) The country has <b>a history</b> of going to war. (one specific history of one country)

**Inventions, musical instruments and cultural institutions**

When we talk in general about inventions, musical instruments or cultural institutions (such as the cinema, the theatre, the circus, the opera, the ballet), we often use *the*:

**The computer** must be the greatest invention ever. (The computer as an invention in general, not a specific computer)

**The violin** sounds different to the viola.

I love a night at **the opera**.

## → Nouns 226

**No article before determiners (any, some, my, this)**

We don't use an article with other words that specify a noun (determiner), e.g. *any, some, my, her, this, that*:

I love **my** job.

Does she want **this** book?

Not: I love ~~the~~ my job. Not: Does she want ~~the~~ this book?

## → Determiners 98

**The with things that are universally known**

We use *the* with things known to everyone (the sun, the stars, the moon, the earth, the planet) because they are a part of our physical environment or part of the natural world:

**The earth** moves around **the sun**.

We lay on **the grass** and watched **the stars**.

**The with everyday things**

We use *the* with things that we know as part of our daily lives. *The* does not refer to particular things in this context.

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*I don't buy **the newspaper** these days. It's free on **the Internet**.* (newspapers in general)

*They always take **the train**.* (trains in general)

### Jobs and professions

When we talk about a person's job, we use *a*:

*She's **a** gardener.*

*He's **an** ambulance driver.*

### Places

We use *the* with mountain ranges and some mountains (*the Alps, the Eiger*), groups of islands (*the West Indies*), rivers (*the Danube*), deserts (*the Gobi Desert*), seas (*the Black Sea*), geographical regions or habitats (*the Amazon rainforest*), motorways (*the M42*), the names of some countries (*the People's Republic of China*).

We don't usually use articles with individual mountains or lakes when the name includes *Mount* or *Lake*: *Mount Fuji, Lake Victoria*. We don't use articles with continents (*Asia*), countries (*Romania*), towns (*Edinburgh*), and streets (*Lombard Street*).

→ **Geographical places** ○; **Nationalities, languages, countries and regions** ○; **Place names** ○

### The with groups within society

When we talk about particular groups or people within society, we use *the* + adjective:

*I think **the rich** should pay more tax and that **the poor** shouldn't pay any.*

***The young** need to be encouraged and supported in society.*

### The with dates

When we say a specific date, we use *the*, but when we write it, we don't use *the*:

Speaking: *I'll see you on **the** twenty fourth of May.*'

Writing: *I'll see you on 24th May.*

When we talk about months, we don't use *the*:

*My birthday is in **September**.*

***May** is my favourite month of all.*

When we talk about seasons in general, we can use either *in* or *the*. *In* without *the* is often used in more formal or literary contexts:

*These birds arrive in Britain **in summer**, and leave as **the winter** begins.*

***In the summer**, we usually go to the mountains.*

*We rarely get snow **in the winter**.*

When we talk about a specific season, we use *the*:

***The winter** of 1947 was one of the coldest in Britain.*

*We'll definitely visit you **in the summer**.* (meaning next summer)

→ **Nouns 226**

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A/an and the 1

**The with Internet, radio and newspaper but mostly not with TV***I looked it up on **the Internet**.*Not: ~~on internet~~*She was on **the radio** once.*Not: ~~on radio~~*Did you see that story about parrots in **the newspaper**?*Not: ~~in newspaper~~*There's usually nothing on TV. (TV means television)**There's usually nothing on **the television**. (less common)***The with go to, be at, be in hospital, school, prison**When we talk about the activity that happens in a building rather than about the building itself, we don't use *the*.**↔ Compare**

without <i>the</i>	with <i>the</i>
<i>She didn't want to be <b>in hospital</b> but she was too ill to go home. (in hospital means being there as a patient)</i>	<i>She didn't want to be <b>in the hospital</b> ... (in the hospital means being in the building)</i>
<i>When I was <b>at school</b>, we didn't have computers. (at school means being there as a student)</i>	<i>When I was <b>at the school</b> ... (at the school means being in the building)</i>

We don't use *the* with *bed* when we go there to sleep:*I always **go to bed** at eleven o'clock.*Not: ~~I always go to the bed ...~~We don't use *the* before *work* when we talk about the place where we do our job:*They **go to work** at 8 am every morning.*Not: ~~They go to the work ...~~**→ At, on, and in (time) 51****Possessive expressions**We don't use *the* to refer to an individual's behaviour or to parts of an individual's body:*He spends most of **his** free time playing computer games.*Not: ~~He spends most of the free time ...~~*I must wash **my** hands.*Not: ~~I must wash the hands.~~**This, that and articles**We can use *this* instead of *a/an* or *the*, and *these* instead of *zero article* or *some* when we tell stories and jokes to create a sense of the present:

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[beginning of a joke]

*There was **this** chicken who wanted to cross the road ... (compare *There was a chicken who wanted to cross the road ...*)****These** tourists came into the restaurant once and they ordered fifteen Irish coffees. (compare *Some tourists came into the restaurant once and they ordered ...*)*

 In informal speaking, we can use *that* as an alternative to *the* in stories when we refer to something familiar or known to the listener. *That* highlights the fact that the thing being referred to is known to the speaker and listener:

A: *Where did you buy your skirt? I really like it.*B: *I got it at **that** new shop next to Green's Hotel. (compare *I got it at **the** new shop next to Green's Hotel.*)***A/an and the: typical errors****1e**

- We don't use *the* with plural nouns when we are referring to things in general:  
*We have to protect wild animals.* (referring to wild animals in general)  
Not: ~~the wild animals.~~
- We don't use *the* when we refer in general to something abstract or uncountable:  
*I love Japanese food.* (all Japanese food/Japanese food in general)  
Not: ~~I love the Japanese food.~~
- We don't use *the* when the noun is not known to the listener or reader:  
*Last Sunday, we saw **a** film called 'Nightmare'.* (The speaker doesn't think that the listener knows of this film.)  
Not: ~~... we saw the film called 'Nightmare'.~~
- We don't use *the* instead of a possessive pronoun:  
*The police asked us to put **our** hands up.*  
Not: ~~The police asked us to put the hands up.~~
- We don't use an article with *go to bed*:  
*I **go to bed** at eleven most nights.*  
Not: ~~I go to the bed at eleven most nights.~~

**About****2***About* is a preposition or an adverb.**About as a preposition****2a**The most common meaning of *about* as a preposition is 'on the subject of' or 'connected with':*Do you know anything **about** cricket?**I'm very worried **about** my brother. He's not well.**About* is not as specific as *on*.

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About 2

## ↔ Compare

He wrote a book <b>about</b> the Spanish Civil War.	<i>about</i> is more general and slightly more informal.
He wrote a book <b>on</b> Barcelona during the Spanish Civil War.	<i>on</i> focuses on more specific and detailed information and is slightly more formal.

There are some words we use with *about*:*complain, concern, excited, happy* and *worry*:He never **complains about** the pain.Everybody was very **concerned about** the accident.I'm very **excited about** coming to France and I can't wait to see you.I'm very **happy about** my trip.Please don't **worry about** me.There are some words we don't use with *about*:*aware, consider, description, discuss, experience* and *mention*:She's not **aware** of the rules of the road.Have you **considered** changing your career?Can you give us a **description** of the bag?Let's **discuss** the new schedule.They have no **experience** of looking after children.She didn't **mention** where the keys were.→ *On, onto* 245**About as an adverb****2b**We use *about* as an adverb when we talk about time, number and quantity. *About* makes the time, number or quantity less specific and more approximate:**specific**

Dinner is at six.

**approximate**Dinner is **about** six.We moved house three years ago. We moved house **about** three years ago.*About* can also be used (though less commonly) as an adverb with a meaning of 'around':I was thinking of all the pollution that's floating **about** in the air.→ *Around or round?* ○; *Vague expressions* 359; *Suggestions* 341**Be about to****2c**We use the modal expression *be about to* as an adjective in the modal expression *be about to* to refer to something that will happen very soon in the future:He was **about** to phone the police.→ *Modality: expressions with be* 212c

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Above 3

**Above****3***Above* is a preposition (PREP) or an adverb (ADV).**Above meaning 'higher than'***Above* means 'higher than'. We usually use it when there is no contact between people or things:

[a doctor asks a patient]

[ PREP ]

*Can you raise your hand **above** your head for me please?* (Can you raise your hand higher than your head?)

[ ADV ]

*The river flowed gently through the valley, while birds flew **above**. It was a beautiful scene.*The opposites of *above* are *under*, *below* and *beneath*.→ **Over 255; Beneath 0; Above or over? 4****Measuring higher**We use *above* to talk about measurements and temperatures that are higher than a particular level:*Mexico City is 2,240 metres **above** sea level.**Temperatures **above** 25 degrees are rare in this part of the world.***As mentioned above: Referring back in writing**In formal writing, we often use *above* not *before* to refer back to something we have already written about. We can use *as mentioned above*, *as noted above*, *as demonstrated above*, *as shown above*:***As noted above**, all employees must take part in our health and safety course.*Not: ~~*As noted before*~~ ...***As demonstrated above**, this problem is very complex.*Not: ~~*As demonstrated before*~~ ...We can also say *the above*. We only do this when the readers understand clearly what *the above* refers to:*As **the table above** shows, there has been a rapid rise in greenhouse gases. (or **As the above** shows ... the reader understands that *the above* refers to the table)***Above or over?****4**When we use *above* as a preposition, it means 'higher than'. Its meaning is close to that of the preposition *over*. In the following sentences, *over* can be used instead of *above*:*The waves came up **above** her head and she started screaming. (or ... came up **over** her head ...)*



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According to 5

*She is a nervous flier. But once the plane got **above** the clouds, she started to relax.*  
(or ... got **over** the clouds ...)

We use *above*, but not *over*, to refer to things that are at an upper or higher level:

[a 'chalet' is a small wooden building usually found in mountainous areas]

*Do they live in that chalet **above** the village?*

Not: ~~Do they live in that chalet over the village?~~

We usually use *above*, but not *over*, when there is no contact between the things referred to. *Over* or *on top of* have a more general meaning, and can be used when one thing touches or covers another:

*They made her comfortable and put a blanket **over** her.*

Not: ~~They made her comfortable and put a blanket above her.~~

We normally use *over* not *above* with numbers:

*I get **over** sixty emails a day.*

Not: ~~I get above sixty emails a day.~~

*If you weigh **over** 100 kilograms, then you may need to start a diet.*

Not: ~~If you weigh above 100 kilograms~~



When we talk about temperatures in relation to *zero* or *(the) average*, we use *above* not *over*:

*It was three degrees **above** zero.*

Not: ~~It was three degrees over zero.~~

When we refer to temperatures in other contexts, we can normally use *above* or *over*:

*The temperature is already **above** 30 degrees. (or ... **over** 30 degrees.)*

### Typical errors

- We don't use *over* to mean 'higher level'.

*Most of the race is 500 metres **above** sea level.*

Not: ~~Most of the race is 500 over sea level.~~

- We don't use *above* when one thing touches or covers another.

*Pour some cream **over** the tart and serve it warm.*

Not: ~~Pour some cream above the tart~~

- We don't use *above* with numbers.

***Over** 100 people complained about the programme.*

Not: ~~Above 100 people complained~~

→ **Over 255; Beneath 0; Above 3**

## According to

5

*According to* means 'as reported by' or 'as stated by' and refers to an opinion which is not the speaker's opinion. *According to* usually occurs in front position. It is commonly followed by a noun phrase and sometimes by a clause:

***According to** Jeff, the film starts at 7.30.*

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[More information](#)*Across, over or through?* 6

**According to** the instructions, you'll need to buy some glue.

The government, **according to** a poll taken last month, may lose the next election.

We often use *according to* in formal contexts to refer to official evidence such as statistics or reports:

**According to** a recent report by the Department of Health, most people still do not take enough exercise.

*According to* also means 'depending on' or 'in agreement with':

They take a test and are then put in to groups **according to** their ability.

The rents are high but they vary **according to** whether you want a garden.

### Typical error

- We only use *according to* when we refer to an opinion from someone else or somewhere else. When we talk about our opinion, we use phrases such as 'in my opinion' or 'in our view':

**In my opinion**, they were not very polite.

Not: ~~According to me~~ ...

→ **Opinion 249**

## Across, over or through?

**6**

### Across

**6a**

We use *across* as a preposition (PREP) and an adverb (ADV). *Across* means on the other side of something, or from one side to the other of something which has sides or limits such as a city, road or river:

[ PREP ]  
We took a boat **across** the river.

[ PREP ]  
**Across** the room, she could see some old friends. She got up and went to join them.

[ ADV ]  
My neighbour came **across** to see me this morning to complain about our cat.

[ ADV ]  
The road was so busy that we found it difficult to get **across**.

We also use *across* when something touches or stretches from one side to another:

The Ponte Vecchio is a beautiful old bridge **across** the river Arno in Florence.

She divided the page by drawing a red line **across** it. Then she cut it in two.

Especially in American English, *across from* is used to refer to people or objects being 'opposite' or 'on the other side':

The pharmacy is **across from** the Town Hall.

Helen's office is just **across from** mine.

We use *across* to emphasise that something is happening at the same time in many places, e.g. within an organisation, a city or a country: