

The definite article

The use of the definite article

The definite article implies that the speaker or the writer presents a person, a thing or an abstract notion as known to the listener or to the reader, either from his general knowledge, or from situation, or from the context.



Functions of the definite article

Specifying

The definite article in its specifying function serves to single out an object or a group of objects from all the other objects.

The specification is carried out by means of

- ❖ a restrictive attribute
- ❖ the preceding context
- ❖ the situation
- ❖ the meaning of the noun

Generic

- * Refers the following noun to the whole class of objects of same kind:
#The lion is the king of the animals
- * Suggests a very high degree of abstraction in a count noun, the next stage of abstraction being achieved by the absence of the articles, as with the words man and woman when used in a generic meaning:
#Woman is physically weaker than man.
#This was more than man can be expected to bear
- * Nouns denoting social classes (both singular and plural forms): the proletariat, the bourgeoisie, the aristocracy, the gentry, the workers, the public, the peasants, the intelligentsia.
- * Before substantivized adjectives in their collective or abstract meaning: the poor = all who are poor, the strong = all who are strong

A restrictive attribute (specifying function)

A restrictive attribute is most useful in singling out or individualizing an object. It may be expressed by a single word, a prepositional phrase, a participial phrase, or by a clause, all functioning as postmodifiers.

#The students **in the next room** are taking an examination.

#I'm convinced Dave is the man **we are looking for**.



The preceding context (specifying function)

An object or a group of objects may be specified by reference to file preceding context. *This use of the definite article is qualified as anaphoric.*

#My wife always had **a passion** for owls.
The passion's grown since our marriage.

#**“My wife has left me.”** Dirk could hardly get **the words** out.



Situational specification (specifying function)

Though the object is mentioned for the first time, no attribute or context is necessary for the speaker to point it out for the listener to understand what object is meant.

#After visiting a theatre we may say: I liked the acting and I enjoyed the music too.



The meaning of the noun (specifying function)

The definite article in its specifying function is used with unique objects or nouns: the sun, the moon, the earth, the sea, the world, the universe, the horizon, the equator, the south, the north, the east, the west.

#**The sun** sank below **the horizon**.

#**The moon** is the heavenly body that moves round **the earth**.

#He sailed round **the world**.



Set expressions

the day after tomorrow
by the dozen (the score, the hundred)
by the hour
in the morning
in (during) the night
in the afternoon
in the evening
in (the) summer
in (the) springtime
in the singular
in the plural
in the past, in the present
in the future (but: in future = from this time on)
on the whole
out of the question
to pass the time

just the same
by the by
by the way
to take (seize) smb by the shoulder
(by the arm)
to pull smb by the hair
to kiss smb on the cheek
(on the forehead, etc.)
to be wounded in the knee
(in the arm, etc.)
to keep the house (but: to keep house)
to play the piano (the guitar, etc.)
to tell the truth
to tell the time

Propper nouns, regularly used with the definite article

- Astronomical manes (The Milky Way, The Great Bear, The Little (Lesser) Bear)
- Geographical names (The North Pole, The South Pole; **mountain ranges**: The Alps, The Pennines (ex. singular mounts); **rivers**: the Thames, the Nile, the Niva; **seas&oceans**: the North Sea, the Arctic Ocean; **canals**: the Panama Canal; **some countries, areas, provinces**: the USA, the Ukraine; **deserts**: the Sahara, the Gobi; **parts of towns**: the West End, the Bronx; **the de facto capital of the Netherlands**: the Hague)



Propper nouns, regularly used with the definite article

- Names of public institutions, unique buildings and monuments (the Tale (Gallery), the National Gallery, the Metropolitan Museum (Opera), the British Museum, the Louvre, the Hermitage, the Prado, the Grand (Hotel), the Savoy, the Kremlin, the White House, the Bronze Horseman, the Sphinx)
- Names of vessels (the Discovery, the Titanic, the Dolores, etc.)
- Names of most newspapers (in English-speaking countries) (the Times, the Canada Tribune, etc.)

