

Using the Right Article

What word appears most often in English? It's "the," also known as the **definite article**. Its partner, the **indefinite** article "a", is also among the top 10 most frequent words in English. According to Professor Elka Todeva of the SIT Graduate Institute in Brattleboro, Vermont, "a" and "the" are also some of the most difficult words for learners to figure out how to use without some assistance.

"A," "an" and "the" are called **articles**. Why are these small words so hard to learn? More than 200 languages do not have articles. Other languages have articles but use them differently than English does. As a result, figuring out the logic of English articles can be challenging.

Professor Todeva says English article usage falls into certain patterns. A basic understanding of common patterns can make learning articles easier.

Fairy tales capture one such powerful pattern, which Elka Todeva calls the *a/the switch*. The *a/the switch* occurs between the first and second mention. It is a shift from new to already familiar information.

Listen for the articles as she reads an example. Pay attention to the way "a" turns into "the" with the second mention of the old man and the old woman.

"Once upon a time, there was an old man and an old woman who lived in a little cottage in a vast open field. The old woman and the old man were very hungry, so the old woman decided to bake a **gingerbread man**."

Before we explore this pattern and fairy tales further, let us look at some basic rules for article usage.

Indefinite articles

"A" and "an" are indefinite articles used before non-specific members of a group or category of nouns. The article "a" appears before singular nouns starting with a consonant sound. For example, "I ate *a* banana." The article "an" comes before singular nouns beginning with a vowel sound. For example, "Give me *an* apple."

Definite article

"The" is called a **definite** article. "The" appears before nouns which are specific members of a category as in, "I want to see *the* movie George Clooney just made." Also use "the" with previously mentioned nouns. For example, "We went to *a* movie last night. *The* movie was called *Spy*." Use "the" with unique things like *the sun*, *the moon*, *the front door*, and *the tallest man in the world*.

The zero article

In some situations, there is no article before a noun. Grammarians call this the "zero article." The zero article appears before proper nouns, names like *Picasso* and *John Lennon*. It also goes with names of places and institutions which consist of a proper name and another noun, as in *Michigan State University*.

There is also no article before the names of days, months, seasons and holidays. There is no article before geographical names like *Europe*, *Italy*, *Tokyo*, and *Lake Superior*.

The "zero article" applies to names of languages and nationalities, as with *Chinese* or *English*. For example, "Spanish is spoken in Spain." But if you are describing the people of that country, use the definite article. "*The* Spanish are known for being friendly."

The zero article also goes with names of sports and academic subjects.

The "a/the switch"

Professor Todeva is both a learner and teacher of English. She says the human brain loves patterns and finding logic behind things. She encourages teachers and learners to explore grammatical patterns in fun, engaging ways. She calls this "grammaring." Let's look at some common patterns in article usage.

Professor Todeva takes us back to fairy tales, or traditional stories, to demonstrate how the switch from "a" to "the" works.

"This particular pattern is very beautifully illustrated in most English fairy tales and in many jokes as well. Most fairy tales in English start with 'Once upon a time' ... there is suspense, there is sweet anticipation, we are not sure what the story is about yet; we expect something exciting and something new, thus the use of the indefinite article at the beginning of most fairy tales as in the following piece from *The Gingerbread Man*:

"Once upon a time, there was an old man and an old woman who lived in a little cottage - first mention - in a vast open field."

Here, the story teller uses the indefinite articles because the characters are new to the listener or reader. When the information becomes familiar, the story teller uses the definite article, "the."

"*The* old woman and *the* old man were very hungry, so *the* old woman decided to bake *a* gingerbread man."

You might notice the "a/the switch" in most jokes. Here is an example.

"*A* man walks into *a* doctor's office. He has *a* cucumber up his nose, *a* carrot in his left ear and *a* banana in his right ear.

"What's wrong with me?" he asks *the* doctor (because it's already implied).

And *the* doctor says, "You're not eating properly."

Notice how the joke sets the stage with new information first. It starts with "a" before switching to "the."

General statements

Another important pattern involves general statements. General statements refer to all, or many members of a group. For example, "Politicians only care about money." You will often see general statements on bumper stickers. These are small labels on the back of cars that express the owner's feelings or opinions.

You might see bumper stickers that say, "Well-behaved women rarely make history" or "Teachers touch the future." Notice that general statements use the zero article.

Here's another general statement that you will probably agree with: "Articles are challenging for English learners." Look for a future Everyday Grammar with more tips for using articles.

Take Professor Todeva's advice and let your brain pay attention to some of the patterns that we just explored. Happy learning and "grammaring" with the English language!