ESOL – Articles 2 (zero article and some tips)

# 1 of 26 - Introduction

In this unit, you will learn to use the zero article.

This is when we don’t use an article before a noun.

By the end of this unit you will be able to:

* Understand why we sometimes don’t use an article before a noun
* Know when we have to use an article and when we don’t have to use an article
* Generalise about ‘things’

# 2 of 26 - Rule for ‘a’ and ‘the’

We use different articles to show if a noun is specific, or if it is non-specific:

I need to borrow a pen. This non-specific could be any pen.

The pen you lent me doesn’t work. This is specific can only be that specific pen.

# 3 of 26 - The rule for specific groups (the)

# If we’re talking about a specific group of ‘things’, then we use the:

# The people at my work are really helpful.

# The clothes they sell are fabulous.

# I’m not a big fan\* of the people who live above me.

# The tigers in that zoo were really friendly.

# \*“I’m not a fan of something” is a nice way of saying that you don’t like something:

# I’m not a big fan of football. (Is the same as saying I don’t like football.)

# I’m not a fan of this government. (Is the same as saying I don’t like this government.)

# 4 of 26 - The rule for generalising (zero article)

Look at this example again. Here, we are talking about specific tigers, not tigers in general.

The tigers in that zoo were really friendly.

When we talk about tigers in general, we don’t use an article.

– Tigers are quite dangerous creatures.

The dash represents the zero article.

We don’t need the – symbol:

Tigers are quite dangerous creatures.

# 5 of 26 Articles video 1 (zero article)

If available, watch the accompanying video, BLC articles 3, for more examples of the zero article.

Otherwise see the video transcript below:

Articles video transcript

The sentence:

Shall I open the window?

Refers to a specific window.

The window = this window

The sentence

Shall I open the windows?

Refers to specific windows (plural)

The windows = these windows

The sentence

Mummy I love dogs

Refers to dogs in general.

The sentence

I love the dogs Refers to a specific set of dogs.

If we speak about specific things, then we use ‘the’.

I like the café opposite my work,

Or we use a different determiner:

I like my children’s school.

This food is lovely.

But if we speak about things in general then we don’t use anything:

I think salt is bad if you use too much.

People like watching football.

Tea is the most popular drink in the UK.

# 6 of 26 Speaking in general terms part 1

If we are speaking about things in general, then we don’t use the:

I love dogs. - Maybe not all dogs, but dogs in general.

Tea is very popular in the UK. - This is true in general. Not everyone likes it.

Cats are beautiful animals. - This is true in general, but it is not true for all cats.

Children should be allowed to enjoy themselves. - This is true in general, but children can’t enjoy themselves all the time! What about homework?!

# 7 of 26 Speaking in general terms part 2

If we are speaking about things in general, then we don’t use the:

I love dogs.

Tea is very popular in the UK.

Cats are beautiful animals.

Children should be allowed to enjoy themselves.

When we speak generally, we use a plural (2+) noun:

dogs,

cats,

children,

If a word is uncountable we don’t use s at the end, tea.

# 8 of 26 – Question 1

Let’s practise this idea. In some languages, such as Italian or Spanish, the definite article (the) is used for generalising. The opposite is true in English.

Which of the following is correct?

1. Cats are such beautiful animals. They love to sleep all day, and at night they like to chase mice.
2. The cats are such beautiful animals. They love to sleep all day, and at night they like to chase the mice.

Answer a) is correct.

Cats are such beautiful animals. They love to sleep all day, and at night they like to chase mice.

Here, cats and mice are general, not specific things.

# 9 of 26 – Question 2

Which of the following is correct?

1. The children in UK have to go to school when they are 4 or 5 years old. On my street, I see all the children leaving home at about 8.30.
2. Children in the UK have to go to school when they are 4 or 5 years old. On my street, I see all the children leaving home at about 8.30.
3. The children in the UK have to go to school when they are 4 or 5 years old. On my street, I see all children leaving home at about 8.30.

Answer b) is correct.

Children in the UK have to go to school when they are 4 or 5 years old. On my street, I see all the children leaving home at about. 8.30.

We usually say ‘the UK’. Here, children are specific – they are the ones on my street.

# 10 of 26 – Question 3

Replace the blanks in the texts with ‘the’ or for ‘zero article’, don’t type anything.

A: Where are you?

B: I’m in **blank** kitchen. What do you want?

A: Nothing. Do you want to go to **blank** cinema later?

B: What’s on?

A: **Blank** new James Bond film. I heard it’s very good.

B: OK. Do you want to walk, or should we take **blank** car?

Answers:

A: Where are you?

B: I’m in **the** kitchen. What do you want?

A: Nothing. Do you want to go to **the** cinema later?

B: What’s on?

A: **The** new James Bond film. I heard it’s very good.

B: OK. Do you want to walk, or should we take **the** car?

The kitchen, the James Bond film and the car are specific things. We usually say ‘the cinema’.

# 11 of 26 Useful tips part 1

In the video, we saw this sentence:

Tea is the most popular drink in the UK.

With superlative adjectives, we usually use the:

the best,

the nicest,

the most popular.

With countries, we don’t usually use the:

France,

England,

Syria,

But there are a few exceptions:

the UK,

the USA,

the Netherlands.

# 12 of 26 Articles video 2 (useful tips)

If available, watch the accompanying video, BLC articles 3, for useful tips.

Otherwise look at this transcript of the video:

Articles video 2 transcript

But if we speak about things in general then we don’t use an article:

I think salt is bad if you use too much.

People like watching football.

Tea is the most popular drink in the UK.

We don’t use the for generalising, but we do use it for superlatives (e.g. the best, the most)

In some expressions we usually use the.

I live in the UK.

I go to the gym twice a week.

Let’s go to the cinema tonight.

There are a few exceptions like this, where we use the, although the thing is not specific.

Now here is the good news.

Very often we know when to use a or the because it sounds good,

I go to gym twice a week, sounds wrong,

whilst,

I go to the gym twice a week, sounds right.

Let’s go to cinema, sounds wrong,

whilst,

Let’s go to the cinema, sounds right.

There are a few exceptions like this, where we use the, although the thing is not specific.

More examples:

Could you lend me a pen please?

I’m in the bathroom.

# 13 of 26 Guess the missing article

Let’s try a little experiment. See if you can guess the missing article just by the sound of it.

What do you think is the most typical article, a or the, to use with these words?

1. door
2. bathroom
3. pen
4. table
5. gym
6. bath
7. hat

Remember that this is just an experiment. It’s OK even if you get them all wrong!

Answers:

1. the door
2. the bathroom
3. a pen
4. the table
5. the gym
6. the bath
7. a hat

# 14 of 26 Lexical activity discussion part 1

Why did we see these combinations?

Remember that when we use the, we’re talking about a specific thing, so when we talk about doors, we’re usually talking about one that is obvious:

1. the door Could you open the door for me, please?
2. the bathroom I’m in the bathroom. I’ll be out in a bit.
3. the table Just leave them on the table.
4. the gym I go to the gym at least once a week.
5. the bath Let’s put her in the bath.

15 of 26 Lexical activity discussion part 2

Why did we see these combinations?

Remember that when we use a, we are talking about a general thing, so when we talk about pens, we are usually talking about any pen:

1. a pen Have you got a pen I could use for a sec, please?
2. a hat If it’s sunny outside, take a hat with you.

# 15 of 26 Using a and the

Of course, we can use a or the with these words. It is just less common to use them like this:

1. a door Look – there’s a door we can use.
2. a bathroom There are two bedrooms and a bathroom.
3. the pen Sorry! I lost the pen you lent me.
4. a table A table for two, please.
5. the hat Have you worn the hat I bought you yet?

# 16 of 26 PDF task

# Download the accompanying interactive PDF, Articles - sentence construction, and complete the task. ​

# This is designed to test your writing skills from this session. ​

# Answer the questions with full sentences. ​

# If you need some help, click the button to reveal some helpful hints. ​

# Try to do it on your own first!

# 17 of 26 - End

Well done. You have completed this session on using articles.

You should now:

* Understand why we sometimes don’t use an article before a noun
* Know when we have to use an article and when we don’t have to use an article
* Be able to generalise about things

If you have any questions about anything covered in this session, please speak to your tutor for more help.