

# The and a/an (2): 'things already known', etc.

## A

We use **the** when we expect the listener or reader to be able to identify the thing or person we are talking about, and we use **a/an** when we don't. Compare these pairs of sentences:

- Helen's just bought **a house** in Wilson Street. *and*
- Helen's just bought **the house** in Wilson Street. (= the house for sale we have previously talked about)
- **A Korean student** in our class has had to go home. *and*
- **The Korean student** has had to go home. (= the Korean student we have previously talked about)
- There's **a bus** coming. *and*
- **The bus** is coming. (= it's the bus we are waiting for)
- There's **a woman** from the bank on the phone. *and*
- He's in a meeting with **the woman** from the bank. (= you know which woman I mean)

## B

We also use **the** when it is clear from the situation which person or thing we mean:

- What do you think of **the table**? (= the table we are looking at)
- This tastes lovely. What's in **the sauce**? (= the sauce here on my plate)
- **The tree** looks beautiful now that it's spring. (= the tree here in the garden)

## C

Study these examples:

- Dorothy took a cake and **an apple pie** to the party, but only **the apple pie** was eaten.

We say '**an apple pie**' when we first mention it, and '**the apple pie**' after that, when the listener or reader knows which apple pie we mean.

- There was a serious fire in a block of flats in Glasgow last night. **The building** was totally destroyed.

We say '**a block of flats**' when we first mention it. We use '**the building**' because the listener (or reader) will know which building we mean.

Even if the person or thing hasn't been mentioned before, if the person or thing we mean can be understood from what has been said before, we use **the**:

- We had a good time on holiday. **The hotel** (= the hotel we stayed in) was comfortable, and **the beach** (= the beach we went to) was only ten minutes away.

Notice that fictional writing (novels, short stories, etc.) will often mention something for the first time with **the** to build up suspense, expectation, etc. For example, a story might begin:

- **The woman** opened **the gate** and looked thoughtfully at **the house**.

## D

**The** is often used with nouns before a phrase beginning **of...** The **of...** phrase connects this noun to a particular thing or person:

- Pictures can help students learn **the meaning of new words**.
- The disease could have killed off half **the population of the country**.
- He was woken up by **the sound of gunfire**.

Compare these sentences with:

- Each new word has **a different meaning**.
- The country has **a rapidly expanding population**.
- He suddenly heard **a sound like a gunshot**.

Some nouns are commonly used in the pattern **the...of...** to refer to a particular place, time, etc., including **back, beginning, bottom, end, middle, side, top**:

- In **the middle of** his speech he started to cough uncontrollably.

**58.1** Decide if the most appropriate articles (a/an and the) are used in each of these texts. (A–D and Unit 57)

- 1 Dan was playing outside in a street when he saw a red car go past driven by the teacher from his school.
- 2 A University has announced proposals to build a new library, to replace an existing one by the year 2005.
- 3 A: The car's been stolen from outside a house!  
B: Oh, no. I left my wallet and the camera in it.
- 4 I must buy the tin opener. I keep having to borrow one from a woman next door.
- 5 A: Jane bought a fridge and a washing machine for her house, but the washing machine wouldn't go through a kitchen door so she had to send it back.  
B: What did a shop say?  
A: They offered to sell her a smaller one.
- 6 Now, when I start pushing a car, take your foot off the clutch. If it doesn't start then, I'll have to phone the garage.
- 7 We went out to the excellent restaurant last night. The food was delicious and the service was first class.
- 8 A: Where's a tea pot?  
B: It's in the cupboard on the right.  
A: I thought you had a blue one.  
B: Yes, but it broke so I had to get the new one.
- 9 A: I've no idea what to get Mark for his birthday.  
B: What about a new jumper?  
A: Well...it's not the very interesting present.  
B: Why don't you buy him a set of golf clubs he's always wanted?  
A: What a great idea.
- 10 Dr Pike has developed a way to teach musical theory. A method is designed for children over five.
- 11 A: Who's a woman in red?  
B: She's a journalist, I think. She works for a local newspaper.
- 12 Once, when I won the competition, I had to choose between a holiday in Disneyland and a Volvo. I chose a car, of course.



**58.2** Write a sentence beginning *The...of..., with a similar meaning to the one given. (C)*

- 1 The telephone has had an enormous impact on how we communicate.  
*The impact of the telephone on how we communicate has been enormous.*
- 2 The company has a complex management structure.
- 3 The drought had a severe effect on agriculture.
- 4 Picasso has had a substantial influence on modern art.
- 5 We should not underestimate how important Crogan's discovery is.
- 6 The bad weather meant that the bridge wasn't completed on time.