

Articles

Articles podcast 2 *the*

Jeanne: Hello, I'm Jeanne McCarten.

Mike: And I'm Mike McCarthy.

Mike: In this podcast series, we want to help you understand some tricky points of English grammar - the kinds of things even very advanced users of English need help with.

Jeanne: We won't solve all your problems, but we'll give you a couple of rules of thumb - some guidelines that will help you make the right decisions to express the meanings you want to express.

Mike: So, in the first two podcasts, *Articles 1 and 2*, we want to help you to use **a**, **an** and **the**. In *Articles 1* we looked at the indefinite article: **a** and **an**. In this podcast, we're looking at **the**.

Jeanne: So, what about the word **the**? **The** is the **definite** article. *Definite* is the opposite of *indefinite*, so what's the difference?

Mike: Actually, it's not that complicated. In most cases, the word **the** just means 'You and I share the idea of this noun.' or 'You and I are familiar with the idea of this noun.'

Jeanne: So that's why we say *the sun*, *the earth*, *the universe*, *the sky* – because we all share those things. We call that *shared knowledge*.

Mike: Yes, so one example of shared knowledge is when Cambridge students say 'I'm at the Language Centre' or 'I'm doing a PhD in the department of engineering', they are talking about places in Cambridge, not places in some other city.

Jeanne: And when people in the same family are talking to one another and they say 'Let's eat in the kitchen' or 'turn on the TV' or 'Where's the cat?', they don't have to say, 'our kitchen, our TV, our cat', because it's clear to everyone what they're talking about. So, ideas and concepts that we share with one another within different countries are things like **the economy**, **the education system**, **the capital city**, **the currency** and so on.

Mike: Yes, and, as we said, some concepts and ideas are shared by everyone, for example, **the Pacific Ocean**, **the North Pole**, **the internet**.

Jeanne: So basically, it's all about understanding shared knowledge.

Mike: Right. And that's why an indefinite article - a or an - is a good way of introducing something that **isn't** shared knowledge, for example, if I say 'She carried out **a** study of economic growth in South Korea', then I say '**The** study

was published in 2012.' **A** *study* (which I have not mentioned before) has become **the** *study*, because now it is shared knowledge.

Jeanne: There is one complication, though, with abstract nouns such as *life*, *beauty*, *love*, *music*. When you use them in a **general** sense, they don't need any article. For example, you say 'I like folk music', and 'modern life is very stressful'. If you speak a European language, you may be tempted to say, 'I like the folk music', or 'the modern life is very stressful', but we don't use the definite article in general statements like these.

Mike: That's not the whole story about **the**, but we hope it has given you the basics.

Jeanne: So, what are today's take away points?

Mike: I think there are two, really. Use the definite article **the** when you are talking or writing about something that is shared knowledge between you and the person you are talking to or your reader (**the** *sky*, **the** *university*, **the** *department of geography*, **the** *government*, **the** *economy*).

Jeanne: And the second one is, don't use **the** with abstract nouns such as *life* and *beauty* and *music* when you're using them in a general sense. And the best advice we can give you is when you read or listen, notice how other writers and speakers use articles.

Jeanne:/Mike: Thanks for listening.