

A Practical English Grammar

New edition



**A.J. Thomson
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Oxford

A. J. Thomson and A. V. Martinet

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Preface to the third edition

A Practical English Grammar is intended for intermediate and advanced students, both adults and students in the higher forms of schools. Teachers may also find it useful for reference.

The book is a comprehensive survey of grammar written in simple modern English with numerous examples to illustrate each point. Areas where students have particular difficulty, such as the use of tenses and auxiliary verbs, have been treated with particular care and fullness. The difference between strict grammatical usage and conversational forms is shown where necessary, but the emphasis is on conversational forms in order to encourage students to speak the language as it is spoken by native speakers today. To further this aim many of the examples are in the form of short conversations between two people.

In the third edition the main changes are as follows:

- 1 Explanations have been revised or rewritten wherever necessary to make them easier to understand.
- 2 New material has been added to the chapters on (prepositions, pronouns, infinitives, gerunds, future and conditional forms and reported speech.)
- 3 Both explanations and examples have been brought up to date where necessary to reflect current usage.
- 4 The index is now fuller (and should be more useful).
- 5 The book has been designed afresh and reset in a larger format and typeface to make it easier to read.

As already noted in previous editions, this is not a graded course and the chapters are not presented in order of difficulty. Difficult paragraphs or sections may therefore be met with in any part of the book. Some of these are marked with a box round their serial numbers or letters, e.g. 276, E. Students may prefer to omit these at the first reading.

To accompany this book there are two volumes of exercises and two volumes of structure drills with tapes and cassettes. Both exercises and structure drills are cross-referred to the *Grammar* and the level of difficulty is indicated where appropriate. Keys are given for both exercises and drills.

Dublin, August 1979

A. J. T., A. V. M.

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1 Articles

The indefinite article

1 Form

The indefinite article is **a** or **an**.

The form **a** is used before a word beginning with a consonant, or a vowel sounded like a consonant:

a man a table a university a useful thing

The form **an** is used before words beginning with a vowel (**a, e, i, o, u**) or words beginning with a mute **h**;

an hour an honourable man an elephant an apple

It is the same for all genders:

*a man a woman an actor an actress a table
an animal*

2 The indefinite article **a** or **an** is used:

- A Before a singular noun which is countable (i.e. of which there is more than one) when it is mentioned for the first time and represents no particular person or thing:

*I need a holiday. They live in a bungalow. $\Psi \frac{1}{2}$
There is a policeman at the door.*

- B Before a singular countable noun which is used as an example of a class of things:

A car must be insured = All cars/Any car must be insured.

A child needs love = All children need/Any child needs love.

- C With a noun complement. This includes names of professions:

He is a doctor. She is a teacher. He became an actor.

- D In certain numerical expressions:

<i>a couple</i>	<i>an eighth</i>	<i>a hundred</i>	<i>a lot of</i>
<i>a dozen</i>	<i>a quarter</i>	<i>a thousand</i>	<i>a great many</i>
<i>half a dozen</i>	<i>a score (20)</i>	<i>a million</i>	<i>a great deal of</i>

- E In expressions of price, speed, ratio etc.:

*5p a kilo £1 a metre sixty kilometres an hour
10p a dozen four times a day*

(Note that **a** and **one** are not usually interchangeable. For the difference between them see 23.)

F With **few** and **little**:

a few = a small number, or what the speaker considers a small number.

a little = a small amount, or what the speaker considers a small amount.

few and **little** can also be used without article but then have an almost negative meaning, and can usually be replaced by **hardly any**:

We had little time for amusement implies that we were always busy.
Few people know this (it is almost unknown).

(See 29.)

G In exclamations before singular, countable nouns:

What a hot day! What a pretty girl! Such a pity!

But *What pretty girls! What big dogs!*

(Plural nouns, so no article. See 3.)

H **a** can be placed before Mr/Mrs/Miss + surname:

a Mr Smith a Mrs Smith a Miss Smith

a Mr Smith means 'a man called Smith' and implies that he is a stranger to the speaker. *Mr Smith*, without *a*, implies that the speaker knows Mr Smith or knows of his existence.

(For the difference between **a/an** and **one** see 23.)

3 The indefinite article is not used:

A Before plural nouns.

The indefinite article has no plural form. Therefore the plural of *a dog* is *dogs*.

B Before uncountable nouns.

The following nouns are singular and uncountable in English:

advice information news baggage luggage furniture

They are often preceded by *some, any, a little, a lot of, a piece of* etc.:

I'll give you a piece of advice. There isn't any news.

You need some more furniture.

knowledge is also considered uncountable, but when used in a particular sense takes the article:

A knowledge of languages is always useful.

He has a good knowledge of mathematics.

hair ('all the hair on one's head') is considered uncountable, but if we consider each hair separately we say *a hair, two hairs* etc.:

She has black hair.

The fisherman used a hair to tie the feather to the hook.

experience meaning 'practice in doing (something)' is uncountable. But *an experience* meaning 'something which happens to someone' is countable:

He had an exciting experience (an adventure) last night.

Materials, *glass, wood, iron, stone, paper, cloth, wine, coffee, tea* etc., are considered uncountable. But many of these nouns can also denote one particular thing, and then take an article:

Windows are made of glass but *Have a glass of wine.*

We write on paper but *I've got a paper* (newspaper).

Iron is a metal but *I use an iron* (electric iron).

some, any, a piece of, a lot of etc. are often used here as shown above:

Would you like some coffee? I want a piece of wood.

- C Before abstract nouns: *beauty, happiness, fear, hope, death* etc., except when they are used in a particular sense:

He was pale with fear.

Some children suffer from a fear of the dark.

- D Before names of meals, except when preceded by an adjective:

We have breakfast at eight. He gave us a good breakfast.

The article is also used when it is a special meal given to celebrate something or in someone's honour:

I was invited to dinner (at their house, in the ordinary way)

but *I was invited to a dinner given to welcome the new ambassador.*

The definite article

The definite article is **the**. It is the same for singular and plural and for all genders:

the boy the boys the girl the girls the day the days

4 Use of the definite article

- A The definite article is used:

- 1 Before nouns of which there is only one, or which are considered as one:

the earth the sea the sky the weather the North Pole

- 2 Before a noun which has become definite as a result of being mentioned a second time:

His car struck a tree; you can still see the mark on the tree.

- 3 Before a noun made definite by the addition of a phrase or clause:

the boy that I met the place where I met him

the girl in blue the man on the donkey

- 4 Before a noun which by reason of locality can represent only one particular thing:

Ann is in the garden (the garden of this house).

He sent for the doctor (his own doctor).

Please pass the wine (the wine on the table).

- 5 Before superlatives and *first*, *second* etc. and *only*, used as adjectives or pronouns:

Mont Blanc is the highest mountain in Europe.

Most people think that Monday is the worst day of the week.

- B **the** + singular noun can represent a class of animals or things:

The whale is in danger of becoming extinct.

The deep-freeze has made life easier for housewives.

man can be used to represent the human race, but here it has no article:

If oil supplies run out, man may have to fall back on the horse.

the can, however, be used before a member of a certain group of people:

The small shopkeeper is finding life increasingly difficult.

But in spoken English a plural noun would be more usual here:

Small shopkeepers are finding life increasingly difficult.

the + singular noun as used above takes a singular verb. The pronoun is **he**, **she** or **it**:

If man destroys other species, he may be next on the list.

- C **the** + adjective represents a class of persons:

the old = old people in general

the strong = strong people in general

The verb is plural, the pronoun is **they**:

The young are impatient; they want changes. (See also 18.)

- D **the** is used before certain proper names of seas, rivers, groups of islands, chains of mountains, plural names of countries, deserts:

the Arctic *the Antarctic* (both land and sea) *the Atlantic*

the Alps *the Netherlands* *the U.S.A.*

the Sahara *the Gobi Desert*

the is also used before names consisting of noun + **of** + noun:

the Cape of Good Hope *the Bay of Biscay*

the Straits of Dover *the U.S.S.R.*

the Rann of Kutch *the Union of South Africa*

the Gulf of Mexico

the is used before names consisting of adjective + noun (provided the adjective is not *east*, *west* etc.):

the Gold Coast *the Ivory Coast* *the New Forest*

the Hindu Kush *the High Street*

the is not used before *east/west* etc. + noun, e.g. *Yucatan is in North America*. But we use **the** if *east/west* etc. is followed by *of*, e.g. *the west of Spain*; and with *east/west* etc. used alone as nouns: *The south is warmer than the north*.

Compare:

I am going to the south (noun)

with *I am going south* (adverb)

and *North of the town there is a lake*

with *To the north (of the town) there is a lake*.

Note also *the North Pole, the South Pole, the East End*.

the is also used with certain other names:

the Sudan *the Yemen* *the Hague* *the Riviera*

the Camargue *the Costa Brava* *the Mall* *the Strand*

E **the** is used before musical instruments:

She learnt to play the flute.

F **the** is used before the names of meals if these are qualified by a clause:

The dinners Peter used to give were really memorable.

The tea we got on the boat was rather disappointing. (See also 3 D.)

5 Omission of the definite article

A The definite article is NOT used:

1 Before names of places except as shown above, or before names of people.

Exceptions:

the + plural surname can be used to mean 'the . . . family':

The Smiths = Mr and Mrs Smith (and children).

the + singular name can be used to distinguish one person from another of the same name:

We have two Mr Smiths. Which one do you want?

I want the Mr Smith who works in the Post Office.

Note also that although **the** is not used before title + noun:

Captain Jones was talking to Doctor Black

it is used before the title alone:

The captain seemed angry with the doctor.

We also use **the** before a title containing *of*: *the Duke of York*.

Finally, it is possible to address two unmarried sisters as **The Misses** + surname: *The Misses Jones, The Misses Smith*.

2 Before abstract nouns except when they are used in a particular sense:

Men fear death

- but *The death of the Prime Minister left his party without a leader.*
- 3 After a noun in the possessive case, or a possessive adjective:
the boy's uncle = the uncle of the boy
It is my (blue) book. = The (blue) book is mine.
- 4 Before names of meals (but see 3 D):
The Scots have porridge for breakfast
- but *The wedding breakfast was held in her father's house.*
- 5 Before parts of the body and articles of clothing, as these normally prefer a possessive adjective:
Raise your right hand. He took off his coat.
 But notice that sentences of the type:
She seized the child's collar. I patted his shoulder.
The brick hit John's face.
 could be expressed:
She seized the child by the collar. I patted him on the shoulder.
The brick hit John in the face.
 Similarly in the passive:
He was hit on the head. He was cut in the hand.
- B Note that in some languages the definite article is used before indefinite plural nouns but that in English **the** is never used in this way:
Women are expected to like housework (i.e. women in general).
Big hotels all over the world are very much the same.
 If we put *the* before *women* in the first example, it would mean that we were referring to a particular group of women.
- C *nature*, where it means the spirit creating and motivating the world of plants and animals etc., is used without **the**:
If you interfere with nature you will suffer for it.
- 6 Omission of **the** before **home** and before **church**, **market**, **school**, **hospital**, etc.
- A **home**
 When **home** is used alone, i.e. is not preceded or followed by a descriptive word or phrase, **the** is omitted:
He went home. She left home. They got home late.
They hurried home. They arrived home after dark.
 Note that the preposition *to* is omitted and *at* is not used after *arrive*.
 But when **home** is preceded or followed by a descriptive word or phrase it is treated like any other noun as regards articles and prepositions:

We went to the bride's home.

For some years this was the home of your queen.

A mud hut was the only home he had ever known.

B chapel, church, market, college, school, hospital, court, prison, work, sea, bed

These nouns are used without **the** when they are visited or used for their primary purpose:

We go to <i>church</i> to pray	to <i>market</i> to buy or sell
to <i>school</i> to study	to <i>hospital</i> as patients
to <i>college</i> to study	to <i>prison</i> as prisoners
to <i>bed</i> to sleep	to <i>court</i> as litigants
to <i>sea</i> as sailors	to <i>work</i> as workers

Similarly we can be

in *prison/court* as prisoners

in *hospital/bed* as patients

at *church* as worshippers

at *work/sea/market* as workers etc.

We return from *work/school/market/church*.

We get out of *bed*, leave *hospital*, escape from *prison*.

When these places are visited for other reasons the article is used:

I went to the church to see the carvings.

He comes to the school sometimes to speak to the headmaster.

He returned from the prison where he had been visiting his brother.

They are at the sea (at the seaside)

but *They are at sea* (in a ship, but not necessarily as sailors).

He went to the bed (walked over to it)

but *He went to bed* (got into it and presumably went to sleep).

In contrast to the above list, the following very common nouns take **the**: *cathedral, office* (as a place of work), *cinema, theatre*:

He is at the office (but *at work*). *She is going to the theatre.*

2 Nouns

7 Kinds and function

A There are four kinds of nouns in English:

Common nouns: *dog, table, man*

Proper nouns: *Tom, France, Madrid, Mrs Smith*

Abstract nouns: *charity, beauty, fear, courage, joy*

Collective nouns: *swarm, team, crowd, flock, group*

B A noun can function as:

The subject of a verb: *Tom arrived.*

The complement of the verb **be, become, seem**: *Tom is an actor.*

The object of a verb: *I saw Tom.*

The object of a preposition: *I spoke to Tom.*

A noun can also be in the possessive case:

Plato's works = the works of Plato (see 10).

8 Gender

Masculine: men, boys and male animals (pronoun **he/they**).

Feminine: women, girls and female animals (pronoun **she/they**).

Neuter: inanimate things, animals whose sex we don't know and sometimes babies whose sex we don't know (pronoun **it/they**).

Exceptions:

Ships are considered feminine and sometimes cars and other vehicles when regarded with affection or respect. Countries when referred to by name are also normally considered feminine.

The ship struck an iceberg, which tore a huge hole in her side.

Scotland lost many of her bravest men in two great rebellions.

Most nouns have the same form for masculine and feminine:

parent painter driver singer cousin

child artist cook judge rider

Some have different forms:

brother, sister uncle, aunt nephew, niece

lord, lady duke, duchess count, countess prince, princess

bull, cow horse, mare cock, hen drake, duck

Some form the feminine from the masculine by adding **ess**. Note that words ending in **or** or **er** often drop the **o** or **e**:

actor, actress conductor, conductress

but *manager, manageress*