

Unit 71

A/an and the

a Study this example:

For lunch I had **a** sandwich and **an** apple. **The** sandwich wasn't very nice.

The speaker says 'a sandwich/an apple' because this is the first time he talks about them.

The speaker says 'the sandwich' because the listener now knows which sandwich he means - the sandwich he had for lunch.

Here are some more examples:

- There was **a** man talking to **a** woman outside my house. **The** man looked English but I think **the** woman was foreign.
- When we were on holiday, we stayed at **a** hotel. In the evening, sometimes we had dinner at **the** hotel and sometimes in **a** restaurant.
- I saw **a** film last night. **The** film was about **a** soldier and **a** beautiful girl. **The** soldier was in love with **the** girl but **the** girl was in love with **a** teacher. So **the** soldier shot **the** teacher and married **the** girl.

b We use **a/an** when the listener doesn't know which thing we mean. We use **the** when it is clear which thing we mean:

- Tom sat down on **a** chair. (we don't know which chair)
Tom sat down on **the** chair nearest **the** door. (we know which chair)
- Ann is looking for **a** job. (not a particular job)
Did Ann get **the** job she applied for? (a particular job)
- Have you got **a** car? (not a particular car)
I cleaned **the** car yesterday. (a particular car, my car)

c We use **the** when it is clear in the situation which thing or person we mean. For example, in a room we talk about '**the** light/**the** floor/**the** ceiling/**the** door/**the** carpet' etc. Study these examples:

- Can you turn off **the** light, please? (= the light in this room)
- Where is **the** toilet, please? (= the toilet in this building/house)
- **The** postman was late this morning. (= our usual postman)
- I took a taxi to **the** station. (= the station of that town)
- We got to **the** airport just in time for our flight.

Also: **The** police / **the** fire-brigade / **the** army.

We also say **the** bank, **the** post office:

- I must go to **the** bank to change some money and then I'm going to **the** post office to buy some stamps. (the speaker is usually thinking of a particular bank or post office.)

We also say **the** doctor, **the** dentist:

- John isn't very well. He has gone to **the** doctor. (= his doctor)

For **the** see also Units 72 - 77.

- Ann is looking for **a** job. (not a particular job)
Did Ann get **the** job she applied for? (a particular job)