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Fourth edition

A Practical English Grammar



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Preface to the fourth edition

A Practical English Grammar is intended for intermediate and post-intermediate students. We hope that more advanced learners and teachers will also find it useful.

The book is a comprehensive survey of structures and forms, written in clear modern English and illustrated with numerous examples. Areas of particular difficulty have been given special attention. Differences between conversational usage and strict grammatical forms are shown but the emphasis is on conversational forms.

In the fourth edition the main changes are as follows:

- 1 Explanations and examples have been brought up to date.
- 2 There is now more information on countable and uncountable nouns, attributive and predicative adjectives, adverbs of place, sentence adverbs, cleft sentences, prepositions, conjunctions, modal verbs, perfect tenses, infinitive constructions, the passive, purpose clauses and noun clauses.
- 3 Some material has been rearranged to make comparisons easier. For example, parts of chapters on *can*, *may*, *must* etc. are now grouped by function; verbs of liking and preference have a chapter to themselves; suggestions and invitations have joined the chapter on commands, requests and advice.
- 4 The contents list now summarizes every section heading, and there is a new index containing many more entries and references.

In this edition the sign ' ~ ' is frequently used to denote a change of speaker in examples of dialogue. Note also that although the sign '=' sometimes connects two words or expressions with the same meaning, it is often used more freely, e.g. to indicate a transformation from active to passive or direct to indirect speech.

We wish to thank all at Oxford University Press who have assisted in the preparation of the fourth edition. We would also like to thank Professor Egawa of Nihon University, Japan, Professor René Dirven of Duisburg University, West Germany and other colleagues for their friendly and helpful suggestions.

London, November 1985

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

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1 Articles and one, a little/a few, this, that

1 a/an (the indefinite article)

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

*a man a hat a university a European
a one-way street*

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

*an apple an island an uncle
an egg an onion an hour*

or individual letters spoken with a vowel sound:

an L-plate an MP an SOS an 'x'

a/an is the same for all genders:

a man a woman an actor an actress a table

2 Use of a/an

a/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 visa. They live in a flat. He bought an ice-cream.
- 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:
It was an earthquake. She'll be a dancer. He is an actor.
- D** In certain expressions of quantity:
*a lot of a couple
a great many a dozen (but one dozen is also possible)
a great deal of*

1 Articles etc.

E With certain numbers:

a hundred a thousand (See 349.)

Before **half** when **half** follows a whole number:

1½ kilos = one and a half kilos or a kilo and a half

But *½ kg = half a kilo* (no **a** before *half*), though *a + half + noun* is sometimes possible:

a half-holiday a half-portion a half-share

With $\frac{1}{3}$, $\frac{1}{4}$, $\frac{1}{5}$ etc. **a** is usual: *a third, a quarter* etc., but **one** is also possible. (See 350.)

F In expressions of price, speed, ratio etc.:

5p a kilo £1 a metre sixty kilometres an hour

10p a dozen four times a day

(Here **a/an** = **per**.)

G In exclamations before singular, countable nouns:

Such a long queue! What a pretty girl! But

Such long queues! What pretty girls!

(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 4. For **a few** and **a little**, see 5.)

3 Omission of a/an

a/an is omitted:

A Before plural nouns.

a/an has no plural form. So the plural of *a dog* is *dogs*, and of *an egg* is *eggs*.

B Before uncountable nouns (see 13).

C Before names of meals, except when these are 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.

4 a/an and one

A a/an and one (adjective)

- 1 When counting or measuring time, distance, weight etc. we can use either **a/an** or **one** for the singular:

£1 = a/one pound £1,000,000 = a/one million pounds

(See chapter 36.)

But note that in *The rent is £100 a week* the **a** before *week* is not replaceable by **one** (see 2 F).

In other types of statement **a/an** and **one** are not normally interchangeable, because **one** + noun normally means 'one only/not more than one' and **a/an** does not mean this:

A shotgun is no good. (It is the wrong sort of thing.)

One shotgun is no good. (I need two or three.)

2 Special uses of one

- (a) **one** (adjective/pronoun) used with **another/others**:

One (boy) wanted to read, another/others wanted to watch TV.

(See 53.)

One day he wanted his lunch early, another day he wanted it late.

- (b) **one** can be used before *day/week/month/year/summer/winter* etc. or before the name of the day or month to denote a particular time when something happened:

One night there was a terrible storm.

One winter the snow fell early.

One day a telegram arrived.

- (c) **one day** can also be used to mean 'at some future date':

One day you'll be sorry you treated him so badly.

(*Some day* would also be possible.)

(For **one** and **you**, see 68.)

B a/an and one (pronoun)

one is the pronoun equivalent of **a/an**:

Did you get a ticket? ~ Yes, I managed to get one.

The plural of **one** used in this way is **some**:

Did you get tickets? ~ Yes, I managed to get some.

5 a little/a few and little/few

A a little/little (adjectives) are used before uncountable nouns:

a little salt/little salt

a few/few (adjectives) are used before plural nouns:

a few people/few people

All four forms can also be used as pronouns, either alone or with **of**:

Sugar? ~ A little, please.

Only a few of these are any good.

B a little, a few (adjectives and pronouns)

a little is a small amount, or what the speaker considers a small

1 Articles etc.

amount. **a few** is a small number, or what the speaker considers a small number.

only placed before **a little/a few** emphasizes that the number or amount really is small in the speaker's opinion:

Only a few of our customers have accounts.

But **quite** placed before **a few** increases the number considerably:

I have quite a few books on art. (quite a lot of books)

C little and few (adjectives and pronouns)

little and **few** denote scarcity or lack and have almost the force of a negative:

There was little time for consultation.

Little is known about the side-effects of this drug.

Few towns have such splendid trees.

This use of **little** and **few** is mainly confined to written English (probably because in conversation **little** and **few** might easily be mistaken for **a little/a few**). In conversation, therefore, **little** and **few** are normally replaced by **hardly any**. A negative verb + **much/many** is also possible:

We saw little = We saw hardly anything/We didn't see much.

Tourists come here but few stay overnight =

Tourists come here but hardly any stay overnight.

But **little** and **few** can be used more freely when they are qualified by *so, very, too, extremely, comparatively, relatively* etc.

fewer (comparative) can also be used more freely.

I'm unwilling to try a drug I know so little about.

They have too many technicians, we have too few.

There are fewer butterflies every year.

D a little/little (adverbs)

1 a little can be used:

(a) with verbs: *It rained a little during the night.*

They grumbled a little about having to wait.

(b) with 'unfavourable' adjectives and adverbs:

a little anxious a little unwillingly

a little annoyed a little impatiently

(c) with comparative adjectives or adverbs:

The paper should be a little thicker.

Can't you walk a little faster?

rather could replace **a little** in (b) and can also be used before comparatives (see 42), though **a little** is more usual.

In colloquial English **a bit** could be used instead of **a little** in all the above examples.

2 little is used chiefly with **better** or **more** in fairly formal style:

His second suggestion was little (= not much) better than his first.

He was little (= not much) more than a child when his father died.

It can also, in formal English, be placed before certain verbs, for example *expect, know, suspect, think*:

He little expected to find himself in prison.

He little thought that one day . . .

Note also the adjectives *little-known* and *little-used*:

a little-known painter a little-used footpath

6 the (the definite article)

A Form

the is the same for singular and plural and for all genders:

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

B Use

The definite article is used:

- 1 When the object or group of objects is unique or considered to be unique:

the earth the sea the sky the equator the stars

- 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 girl in blue the man with the banner
the boy that I met the place where I met him

- 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)

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

Similarly: *the postman* (the one who comes to us), *the car* (our car), *the newspaper* (the one we read).

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

the first (week) the best day the only way

- ### C **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.

But *man*, used to represent the human race, has no article:

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

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

The small shopkeeper is finding life increasingly difficult.

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

The first-class traveller pays more so he expects some comfort.

- ### D **the** + adjective represents a class of persons:

the old = old people in general (see 23)

1 Articles etc.

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

the Atlantic *the Netherlands*
the Thames *the Sahara*
the Azores *the Crimea*
the Alps *the Riviera*

and before certain other names:

the City *the Mall* *the Sudan*
the Hague *the Strand* *the Yemen*

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

the Bay of Biscay *the Gulf of Mexico*
the Cape of Good Hope *the United States of America*

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

the Arabian Sea *the New Forest* *the High Street*

the is used before the adjectives *east*/*west* etc. + noun in certain names:

the East/West End *the East/West Indies*
the North/South Pole

but is normally omitted:

South Africa *North America* *West Germany*

the, however, is used before *east*/*west* etc. when these are nouns:

the north of Spain *the West* (geographical)
the Middle East *the West* (political)

Compare *Go north* (adverb: in a northerly direction) with *He lives in the north* (noun: an area in the north).

- F** **the** is used before other proper names consisting of adjective + noun or noun + of + noun:

the National Gallery *the Tower of London*

It is also used before names of choirs, orchestras, pop groups etc.:

the Bach Choir *the Philadelphia Orchestra* *the Beatles*

and before names of newspapers (*The Times*) and ships (*the Great Britain*).

- G** **the** with names of people has a very limited use. **the** + plural surname can be used to mean 'the . . . family':

the Smiths = *Mr and Mrs Smith (and children)*

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

We have two Mr Smiths. Which do you want? – I want the Mr Smith who signed this letter.

the is used before titles containing **of** (*the Duke of York*) but it is not used before other titles or ranks (*Lord Olivier*, *Captain Cook*), though if someone is referred to by title/rank alone **the** is used:

The earl expected . . . The captain ordered . . .

Letters written to two or more unmarried sisters jointly may be addressed *The Misses* + surname: *The Misses Smith*.

A Practical English Grammar

Fourth edition

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Oxford University Press
ISBN 0-19-431342-5



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