
BBC LEARNING ENGLISH

The Grammar Gameshow

Articles

Will

Hello, and welcome to today's Grammar Gameshow! I'm your host, Will! To market, to market, to buy a fat pig, then home again, home again, jiggety-jig. And of course, let's not forget Leslie, our all-knowing voice in the sky.

Leslie

Hello, everyone!

Will

Tonight we're going to ask you three questions about...

Leslie

Articles! The definite, indefinite and the zero that help us to define our nouns.

Will

OK! Now, let's meet our contestants! A married couple!

Alfie

How do, all. My name's Alfie.

Will

And contestant number two?

Clara

It's nice to meet you. I'm Clara.

Will

Really, Leslie? A married couple? I mean, we must be getting desperate. So, how long have you two been married then?

Alfie

20 years.

Clara

It's been 24, dear.

Alfie

Oh, yes... 24.

Clara

Happy.

Alfie

Oh, yes. Happy years... under the thumb, as it were, eh?

Clara

Must you?

Alfie

I don't know Clara, must I?

Will

OK! Well, everything seems hunky-dory here. So, let's get going, and don't forget, you can play along at home too. Our first round is a closest-gets-it round. How many types of article are there?

Alfie

I'll say...

Clara

Oi! What happened to ladies first?

Alfie

The key is in the word lady. I'll say two.

Will

And Clara?

Clara

There are three. A or an, the and a zero article. He would know if he paid attention to something other than football.

Leslie

Correct! About the answer, I mean, not the football.

Alfie

Yeah, well you'd...

Will

Next question! Which of these articles is used with singular countable nouns?

Alfie

After you, my darling.

Clara

Oh, Alfie!

Will

Oh, blimey!

Clara

A or an is used with singular countable nouns. The zero article is used with plural and uncountable nouns, and the definite article is used with shared knowledge.

Leslie

Correct!

Will

Leslie?

Leslie

Articles appear before nouns. There are three types: the indefinite article, which is used with singular countable nouns. For example, I see a tree or I see an apple. The zero article, which is used with plural or uncountable nouns. For example, I've got rice. And the definite article, which is used with any noun that is known and understood by both the speaker and listener. For example, I opened a cupboard and the door fell off.

Will

Well done. So, Clara, what do you like most about Alfie?

Clara

Oh, he's just the sweetest man. You know, when he's not being the silent type.

Alfie

The silent type! More like I can't get a word in edgeways, eh? Yack, yack, yackeddy-yack.

Clara

Well, I wouldn't have to if you'd pay me some attention!

Alfie

We sit together watching TV! What else do you...

Will

OK! Sorry I asked... sort of. Let's move on to round two. Complete these sentences using the correct article. I'm afraid you'll have to confer: I can only accept one answer.

- a) It's certainly ___ lovely painting.
- b) John works as ___ engineer.

c) Do you have ___ pen?

Alfie

You spend far too much money on the weekly shopping...

Clara

You never listen to me!

Alfie

I'm not a mind reader, for goodness sake!

Clara

For once I wish you would pick up your socks.

Alfie

Oh, give me a...

Will

OK, time's up! And?

Alfie

The indefinite article! A or an.

Clara

Alfie, that's not what we agreed!

Alfie

I'm right sometimes, you know! A or an.

Will

OK. Leslie?

Leslie

Correct! The indefinite article is either a or an. It is used in front of a noun when we inform a listener about it for the first time. We also use it with a noun being used in a description, such as in sentence A – It's certainly a lovely painting. It's also used with noun being used in classifying or defining, particularly in connection with a job, such as in sentence B – John works as an engineer. And finally, we use it when we talk about a thing but do not wish or need to be specific, such as in sentence C – Do you have a pen?

Alfie

Yes! In your face! Oh, sorry my love. Are you, OK?

Clara

I'm fine! I'm fine!

Will

Well, OK! Not to worry. You've got twenty more points each. So, tell me Alfie. How did you two meet?

Alfie

Well, we met at a party at university. It was nothing special. Except... well, our eyes met across a crowded room, and I was drawn to her like a magnet. I knew then that she was the one for me.

Clara

Oh Alfie! I remember it well. He was such an attractive young fellow. We danced all night. Of course, he's getting on a bit now. Doesn't have much stamina like he used to.

Alfie

Yeah? Well you're not exactly a size six any more, are you? Elephant britches.

Clara

My mother told me never to marry you!

Alfie

Yeah? Well, you should have listened to her then!

Clara

I should've...

Will

OK! OK! I'm sorry I asked... in a way. Let's just put this all behind us and move on to our last round. Look at these words and tell me if they take a zero article or a definite article. Ready? Work.

Clara

Zero. He's always too busy to call me at work.

Leslie

Correct!

Will

Home.

Alfie

Zero. I'm not coming home!

Leslie

Correct!

Will

Dinner.

Alfie

Zero. You won't see me at dinner.

Leslie

Correct!

Will

Dog.

Clara

Whose dog?

Will

Your dog.

Clara

Definite article. I'm keeping the dog!

Leslie

Correct!

Will

Bed.

Clara

Zero. You won't find me in bed tonight.

Leslie

Correct!

Will

Superlatives, for example, best.

Alfie

She's the best thing that's ever happened to me.

Leslie

Correct!

Will

Sun.

Clara

He's like the sun in the sky to me.

Leslie
Correct!

Will
Life.

Alfie
Zero. Life can be hard for some people. She makes mine better.

Leslie
Correct!

Will
Last one. University.

Alfie
Zero. We met at university.

Clara
Hang on. Definite article. I'll meet you at the university.

Alfie
Zero! At university!

Clara
Definite. At the university.

Will
OK, OK! Settle down. Allow us. Leslie?

Leslie
Excellent work! Many nouns have specific rules as to which article to use. We usually use the zero article when we talk about our homes, beds and meals, such as dinner. We also use it when talking about things in general, such as life. We use the definite article with unique things, such as the sun, superlatives, and nouns which are known to both speakers. Finally, institutions such as hospitals, prisons, and universities can often be either. If we are in the hospital, it describes the place. But if we are in hospital, we are probably injured.

Will
There you go. So you're both right in a way!

Alfie
No, I'm right!

Clara
No, I'm right!

Will

OK, OK! Enough! Just stop for a second and take some advice. See, I was married once. They were some of the happiest, and saddest years of my life... but that was such a long time ago. Now, take a deep breath. And look into each other's eyes.

Alfie

Your eyes! I'd forgotten how beautiful they are.

Clara

We were fools to argue. Let's never argue again!

Alfie

Let's never say another word!

Clara

Embrace me!

Will

Like a broken record, you are! Enough! For better or for worse, in sickness and in health, till death do us part. It looks like we'll need two more contestants. Thanks for joining us. Say goodbye Leslie.

Leslie

Tchauzinho, Leslie.

Will

See you next time.