

the definite article

Nouns are words that name a person, an object or a concept. They can be singular or plural, and in French they have a gender.

- A** In French, nouns have a gender: they are either masculine or feminine. In dictionaries gender is shown by *nm* and *nf*. (*m*) or (*f*) are also used.

Masculine		Feminine	
le cinéma	<i>the cinema</i>	la voiture	<i>the car</i>
le dictionnaire	<i>the dictionary</i>	la liberté	<i>freedom</i>

- B** There are two words for *the* in the singular – **le** and **la**. These are called definite articles. Masculine nouns take **le**, feminine nouns take **la**.

- For all nouns beginning with a vowel (a, e, i, o, u) and most nouns beginning with an unsounded **h**, **le** and **la** are shortened to **l'**.

l'hôpital (*nm*) *the hospital* **l'église** (*nf*) *the church*

To talk about more than one thing (masculine or feminine) you use **les**.

Masculine		Feminine	
les cinémas	<i>the cinemas</i>	les voitures	<i>the cars</i>
les livres	<i>the books</i>	les circonstances	<i>the circumstances</i>

Nouns: the indefinite article

Like the word for the, the words for a/an, some or any vary according to the number and gender of the noun they relate to.

- A** The two words for *a* (or *an* before a vowel) are **un** and **une**. These are called indefinite articles. **Un** is used with masculine nouns, and **une** with feminine ones.

un journal

a newspaper

une veste

a jacket

une église

a church

- B** If you want to say *some books*, *any books* or even just *books* (rather than *a book*), you will need to use the word **des**. **Des** is used for both masculine and feminine nouns in the plural.

un journal

a newspaper

des journaux

(some/any) newspapers

une secrétaire

a secretary

des secrétaires

(some/any) secretaries

une école

a school

des écoles

(some/any) schools

Unlike **les**, **des** refers to an unspecified group of people, things or ideas. Compare:

J'ai vu **les** documents sur le bureau. *I saw **the** documents on the desk.*

J'ai vu **des** documents sur
le bureau.

*I saw documents (or some
documents) on the desk.*

The word **des** cannot be left out, as *some* often is in English.

J'ai acheté des sandwichs
au supermarché.

*I bought sandwiches (or some
sandwiches) at the supermarket.*

- C** In English, we often use *any* after a question. This is expressed in French by **des**.

Vous avez des enfants?

Have you got any children?

- D** **Des** is replaced by **de** (or by **d'** before a noun beginning with a vowel or an unsounded **h**):

- after a negative:

Je n'ai pas d'enfants.

I haven't got any children.

- when an adjective precedes a plural noun:

Ils vendent de belles voitures.

They sell (some) beautiful cars.

Ils ont de vieux meubles.

They've got (some) old furniture.

Uses of the articles

French usage of the definite and indefinite articles differs in some ways from English usage.

A The French definite article is used as follows:

- with nouns being used in a general way
Il s'intéresse à **la** pêche. *He's interested in fishing.*
Le poisson est délicieux. *Fish is delicious.*
- to express price, rate or quantity
C'est 12 F **le** kilo *It's 12 francs a kilo.*
- with parts of the body (rather than **son/sa**, etc.)
Elle a **les** cheveux longs. *She has long hair.*
Il s'est cassé **le** bras. *He broke his arm.*

⚠ However, the possessive adjective (**mon, ma, mes**, etc.) is used when an adjective qualifies the noun (except with **avoir** indicating possession, which always needs the definite article in sentences like those above).

- Elle a ouvert ses beaux yeux bleus. *She opened her lovely blue eyes.*
- with proper names used with an adjective, or with titles, ranks and professions
La petite Marie s'est endormie. *Little Marie went to sleep.*
C'est **le** colonel Chabart. *It's Colonel Chabart.*
Le docteur Michelet est venu me voir. *Dr Michelet came to see me.*
- with the names of some festivals
La Toussaint *All Saints' Day* La Pentecôte *Whitsun*

⚠ The definite article is not used with **Pâques** *Easter* and **Noël** *Christmas*.

- with nouns when they refer to a particular thing
C'est à **la** page 5. *It's on page 5.*
C'est **la** chambre numéro 18. *It's room 18.*
- with continents, countries, lakes, mountains, rivers, oceans, seas
Le lac Léman est beau. *Lac Léman is beautiful.*

B The indefinite article means *a* or *an* and is used much as in English. Its plural form is **des** (*some, any* when plural). This is never omitted in French, although it can be in English.

- Elle a **un** nouveau bureau. *She's got a new office.*
Des policiers l'ont arrêté. *Police officers arrested him.*