Definite and Indefinite Articles: Part I

The difference between definite articles and indefinite articles can be observed in the following two sentences:

Give me the chocolate chip cookie  Give me a cookie, please.

Imagine a plate full of cookies. There are peanut butter cookies, sugar cookies, gingerbread cookies, and one chocolate chip cookie.

The first sentence speaks of a particular (or definite) cookie:

Give me the chocolate chip cookie.

The second sentence speaks of any of a number of cookies (or an indefinite cookie):

Give me a cookie, please.

The difference between the definite and indefinite articles is the difference between talking about a specific cookie, or any old cookie at all.

In English, the definite article is the word “the” regardless of whether the noun it introduces is singular or plural.

In Spanish, the definite article has 4 forms, depending on whether the noun is masculine, feminine, singular or plural.

el gato .................... the male cat
los gatos .................. the male cats
la gata .................... the female cat
las gatas ................... the female cats

NOTE: The masculine plural definite and indefinite articles (los, unos) are also used to indicate a group of mixed sex. Thus, “los gatos” could refer to a group of 10 male cats, or it could refer to a group of 9 female cats and one male cat.

The 4 forms of the definite article are:

el ............................ masculine singular
la ............................ feminine singular
los ............................ masculine plural
las ............................ feminine plural

In English, the indefinite article is the word “a,” “an,” or “some.”

a cookie
an apple
some books

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In Spanish, the indefinite article has 4 forms, depending on whether the noun is masculine, feminine, singular or plural.

- un gato .................... a male cat
- unos gatos ............... some male cats
- una gata .................. a female cat
- unas gatas ............... some female cats

**NOTE:** Remember, as long as the group of creatures has at least one male member, the masculine plural article is used. Thus, “unos gatos” could refer to a group of 10 male cats, or it could refer to a group of 9 female cats and one male cat.

The 4 forms of the indefinite article are:

- un ....................... masculine singular
- una ...................... feminine singular
- unos ..................... masculine plural
- unas ..................... feminine plural

Here are the definite and indefinite articles together:

- el, un ..................... masculine singular
- la, una ................... feminine singular
- los, unos ................. masculine plural
- las, unas ................ feminine plural

Each of the following has a different meaning:

- el gato .................... the male cat
- los gatos ................. the male cats (or a mixed group)
- la gata ..................... the female cat
- las gatas ................. the female cats
- un gato .................... a male cat
- unos gatos ............... some male cats (or a mixed group)
- una gata .................. a female cat
- unas gatas ............... some female cats

“Un” and “una” can mean “one,” “a,” or “an.”

- un libro .................... one book, a book
- una pluma ................ one pen, a pen
- una manzana ............ one apple, an apple