

Definite and Indefinite Forms

In Norwegian, nouns have two forms: indefinite and definite. There are clear rules for choosing between them, but three key ideas can also help us decide:

These are:

- New information vs. known information
- General vs. specific
- One among many vs. unique

Let's start by understanding these basic rules.

ALWAYS IN THE INDEFINITE FORM:

Behind possessive pronouns or any possessive expressions, we need to use the definite form of the noun in Norwegian:

- Det er min sykkel.
- Det er Maries sykkel.
- Oslos beste hotell.

After mange, mye, ingen, and usually after numbers:

- Hun drikker mye kaffe og spiser mye kake.
- Han har ingen barnebarn.
- Jeg så 3 filmer denne helgen.

After hver and hvilken:

- Hun prøver å lese hver kveld.
- Hvilken serie er din favoritt?

ALWAYS IN THE DEFINITE FORM:

In front of a possessive pronoun or an expression of possession:

- Det er sykkelen min.
- Det er sykkelen til Marie.

After den/denne, det/dette and de/disse:

- Jeg vil ha den hatten
- Dette er ullsokker.

After mange av, mye av, ingen av and numbers + av:

- Hun drakk mye av teen og spiste mange av pærene.
- Ingen av barna var der.
- Han så 2 av filmene.

NEW VS KNOWN INFORMATION:

When we're introducing something for the first time, we use the indefinite form. Then, once we've mentioned it, we switch to the definite form.

For example:

Anna har en hund. Hunden er søt. Hun liker å gå på tur med hunden.

Peter har også en hund. Den er også søt. Hundene er vennlige.

Here, we start by talking about a dog (en hund), which is new information, so we use the indefinite form. Then, when we refer back to the dog, the reader already knows which one we're talking about, so we use the definite form.

After "Det er..." we typically use the indefinite form because it introduces new information:

- Det er en dame på kontoret. Damen heter Elsa.
- Er det en ball eller en ballong? Jeg tror det er en ball.

However, "Det er..." doesn't always bring up a new noun. Sometimes, an adjective provides new information about the noun. In such cases, we still use the indefinite form even if the noun itself isn't new:

- Mia har en hund. Det er en stor hund.

GENERAL VS. SPECIFIC:

The definite form refers to something specific, while the indefinite form refers to something in general.

For example:

- Barn liker ikke skol. (all children and school in general)
- Barna liker ikke regn. (specific children and school in general)
- Barna liker ikke skolene. (specific children and a specific school)

An important question when deciding which form of the noun to use, is: When we decide which form of a word to use, we ask: "Does the reader know which car/bike/book... I'm talking about?" If yes, we use the definite form. Let's say we're discussing Marie's bike. We talk about it clearly at the start, so the reader knows which bike we mean.

But sometimes, we rely on context to guide the reader. For example, imagine your friend gives you two books. One is a comedy and the other is a romance novel. The next time you speak to her, you thank her and say, "Takk for bøkene. Selv om jeg vanligvis ikke leser bøker, likte jeg romantikkboken veldig godt."

From context, your friend understand what you mean. When you say, "Selv om jeg vanligvis ikke leser bøker," she knows you are talking about books in general. She also understands that you're not referring to the books she gave you. You later clarify that you really enjoyed reading the romance novel in particular. That's why you use the definite form.

Mentioning a specific place indicates that we're referring to a particular example of something. Therefore, we frequently use the definite form with a location specification:

- Gater i New York er nydelige. (streets specifically in New York)
- Blomstene i hagen er vakre. (flowers specifically in the garden)
- Vinduene på skolen er grønne. (windows specifically at the school)

ONE AMONG MANY VS. UNIQUE:

We use the definite form when we talk about something unique. For example:

- Månen er vakker. (We only have one moon.)
- Jeg har vondt i hodet. (I only have one head.)

An adjective can provide new details about a "unique" noun. In such cases, we should use the indefinite form if the adjective comes before the noun:

- Han har en sterk mage.

The definite form usually indicates "there's only one of this," while the indefinite form often suggests "one among many":

- Oslo er en by i Norge. (Oslo is one of many Norwegian cities.)
- Oslo er byen i Norge. (There is only one Norwegian city: Oslo.)

As there are numerous cities in Oslo, we would use the indefinite form to be correct: Oslo er en by i Norge.

WHEN THERE ARE MORE THAN ONE DISTINGUISHING FACTORS:

Sometimes, it gets tricky. We might start by talking about something that is both "new information" and "specific". In cases like this, the list of priorities usually goes like this:

1. One among many vs. unique
2. General vs. specific
3. New information vs. known information

For example, if I were to tell you that I work at a particular hospital, it's both new information and specific, considering the list of priorities above, we would use the definite form:

- Jeg jobber på sykehuset. Det heter Trondheim helsesenter.

Because of these priorities, we need to use the indefinite form in the example "Oslo er en by i Norge." Even though we mention it's in Norway (i Norge), Oslo is just one of many cities, so that's more important than its location.

IDIOMATIC EXPRESSIONS

In some expressions, we use the indefinite form even if it doesn't follow the usual rules.

For example:

- gå på skole/ferie/jobben (go to school/on vacation/to work)
- være på kafé/kino/restaurant (go/be at a café/cinema/restaurant)
- reise med buss/fly/tog (travel by bus/plane/train)
- kjøre bil/spille gitar/piano/tromme (drive a car/play guitar/piano/drums)
- ha tid til frokost/lunsj/middag (have time for breakfast/lunch/dinner)

In other expressions, we usually use the definite form:

- gå på skolen/i barnehagen
- studere/jobbe på universitetet
- gå/være i kirken
- en gang i uka/månedet/året

TIME EXPRESSIONS:

Here are two common time expressions, one with the indefinite form and one with the definite form:

- om vinteren (hver vinter)
- i vinter (denne vinteren)

FAMOUS SITES:

We use the indefinite form in the names of many famous sites.

Here's why it matters:

- Den røde plass (Cremlin Square in Moscow)
- Den røde plassen (a place that is red in color)

- Det hvite hus (The White House in the USA)
- Det hvite huset (a house that is white)



Lenoo

✉ post@lenoo.no

☎ +47 940 69 999