

Using Articles

Indefinite Articles: a and an

"A" and "an" signal that the noun modified is indefinite, referring to *any* member of a group. For example:

- "My daughter really wants **a** dog for Christmas." This refers to *any* dog.
- "Somebody call **a** policeman!" This refers to *any* policeman.

Remember, using a or an depends on the sound that begins the next word. So...

- **a** + singular noun beginning with a consonant: **a** boy; **a** car; **a** bike; **a** zoo; **a** dog
- **an** + singular noun beginning with a vowel: **an** elephant; **an** egg; **an** apple; **an** idiot; **an** orphan
- **a** + singular noun beginning with a consonant sound: **a** user; **a** university; **a** unicycle

Remember, too, that in English, the indefinite articles are used to indicate membership in a group:

- I am **a** teacher. (I am a member of a large group known as teachers.)
- Brian is **an** Irishman. (Brian is a member of the people known as Irish.)

Definite Article: the

The definite article is used before singular and plural nouns when the noun is specific or particular. **The** signals that the noun is definite, that it refers to a particular member of a group. For example:

- "**The** dog that bit me ran away." Here, we're talking about a *specific* dog, the dog that bit me.
- "I was happy to see **the** policeman who saved my cat!" Here, we're talking about a *particular* policeman. Even if we don't know the policeman's name, it's still a particular policeman because it is the one who saved the cat.

Count and Noncount Nouns

The can be used with noncount nouns, or the article can be omitted entirely.

- "I love to sail over **the** water" (some specific body of water) or "I love to sail over water" (any water).
- "He spilled **the** milk all over the floor" (some specific milk, perhaps the milk you bought earlier that day) or "He spilled milk all over the floor" (any milk).

A/an can be used only with count nouns.

- "I need **a** bottle of water."
- "I need **a** new glass of milk."

Most of the time, you can't say, "She wants a water," unless you're implying, say, a bottle of water.

Geographical use of the

Do not use **the** before:

- names of most countries: *Italy, Mexico*; however, *the Philippines, the United States*
- names of cities, towns, or states: *Seoul, Manitoba, Miami*
- names of mountains: *Mount Everest*, except with ranges of mountains like **the Andes** or **the Rockies**
- names of continents (Asia, Europe)
- names of islands (*Easter Island, Maui*) except with island chains like **the Canary Islands**

Do use **the** before:

- names of rivers, oceans and seas: **the Nile, the Pacific**
- points on the globe: **the Equator, the North Pole**
- geographical areas: **the Middle East, the West**
- deserts, forests, gulfs, and peninsulas: **the Sahara, the Black Forest, the Persian Gulf**

Omission of Articles

Some common types of nouns that don't take an article are:

- Names of languages and nationalities: *Chinese, English, Spanish, Russian*

Handout 2.3

- Names of sports: *volleyball, hockey, baseball*
- Names of academic subjects: *mathematics, biology, history, computer science*

<http://owl.english.purdue.edu>

Prepared by: *Dr. M.A. Willis, Chair, DETE*

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