The Use and Non-Use of Articles

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Grahpics for this handout were produced by Michelle Hansard.

Definition of articles

English has two types of articles: definite (*the*) and indefinite (*a, an*.) The use of these articles depends mainly on whether you are referring to any member of a group, or to a specific member of a group:

1. Indefinite Articles: *a* and *an*

A and *an* signal that the noun modified is indefinite, referring to *any* member of a group. These indefinite articles are used with singular nouns when the noun is general; the corresponding indefinite quantity word *some* is used for plural general nouns. The rule is:

- **a** + singular noun beginning with a consonant: *a* *b*oy
- **an** + singular noun beginning with a vowel: *an* *e*lephant
- **a** + singular noun beginning with a consonant sound: *a* *u*ser (sounds like '**yoo**-zer,' i.e. begins with a consonant 'y' sound, so 'a' is used)
- **some** + plural noun: *some* girls

If the noun is modified by an adjective, the choice between *a* and *an* depends on the initial sound of the adjective that immediately follows the article:

- *a* **b**roken egg
- *an* **u**nusual problem
- *a* **Eur**opean country (sounds like '**yer**-o-pi-an,' i.e. begins with consonant 'y' sound)

Note also that in English, the indefinite articles are used to indicate membership in a profession, nation, or religion.

- I am *a* teacher.
- Brian is *an* Irishman.
- Seiko is *a* practicing Buddhist.

2. Definite Article: *the*

The definite article is used before singular and plural nouns when the noun is particular or specific. *The* signals that the noun is definite, that it refers to a *particular* member of a group. Compare the indefinite and definite articles in the following examples:

	Indefinite (*a* or *an*)	Definite (*the*)
Singular	*a* dog (any dog) *an* apple (any apple)	*the* dog (that specific dog) *the* apple (that specific apple)
Plural	*some* dogs (any dogs) *some* apples (any apples)	*the* dogs (those specific dogs) *the* apples (those specific apples)

The is not used with noncountable nouns referring to something in a general sense:

[no article] Coffee is a popular drink.
[no article] Japanese was his native language.
[no article] Intelligence is difficult to quantify.

The is used with noncountable nouns that are made more specific by a limiting modifying phrase or clause:

The coffee in my cup is too hot to drink.
The Japanese he speaks is often heard in the countryside.
The intelligence of animals is variable but undeniable.

The is also used when a noun refers to something unique:

the White House
the theory of relativity

the 1999 federal budget

Note: Geographical uses of *the*

Do not use *the* before:

- names of countries (Italy, Mexico, Bolivia) **except** the Netherlands and the US
- names of cities, towns, or states (Seoul, Manitoba, Miami)
- names of streets (Washington Blvd., Main St.)
- names of lakes and bays (Lake Titicaca, Lake Erie) **except** with a group of lakes like the Great Lakes
- names of mountains (Mount Everest, Mount Fuji) **except** with ranges of mountains like the Andes or the Rockies or unusual names like the Matterhorn
- names of continents (Asia, Europe)
- names of islands (Easter Island, Maui, Key West) **except** with island chains like the Aleutians, the Hebrides, or 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 Persian Gulf, the Black Forest, the Iberian Peninsula)

Further Uses of Articles

In addition, use of *a, an,* and *the* also depends on whether the noun following the article possesses one of these paired qualities:

- Countable vs. noncountable
- First vs. subsequent mention
- General vs. specific

1. Countable vs. Noncountable

A and *an* are used if the noun can be counted.

I stepped in *a* puddle. (How many puddles did you step in? Just one. Therefore, use *a* .)	
I drank *a* glass of milk. (*Glasses of milk* can be counted)	
I saw *an* apple tree. (*Apple trees* can be counted)	

The must be used when the noun cannot be counted.

I dove into *the* water. (How many waters did you dive into? The question doesn't make any sense because *water* is noncountable. Therefore, use *the* .)	
I saw *the* milk spill. (How many milks? *Milk* cannot be counted)	
I admired *the* foliage. (How many foliages? *Foliage* cannot be counted)	

2. First vs. Subsequent Mention

A or *an* is used to introduce a noun when it is mentioned for the first time in a piece of writing. *The* is used

afterward each time you mention that same noun.

> ***An*** awards ceremony at the Kremlin would not normally have attracted so much attention. But when it was leaked that Soviet President Konstantin Chernenko would be presenting medals to three cosmonauts, interest in ***the*** ceremony intensified. *Time* , Sept. 17, 1984.

Note: ***There is*** and ***there are*** can be used to introduce an indefinite noun at the beginning of a paragraph or essay.

> ***There is a*** robin in the tree outside my window. When my cat jumps up on the desk, ***the*** robin flies away.

3. General vs. Specific

A , *an* , and *the* can all be used to indicate that a noun refers to the whole class to which individual countable nouns belong. This use of articles is called *generic* , from the Latin word meaning "class."

> ***A*** tiger is a dangerous animal. (any individual tiger)
> ***The*** tiger is a dangerous animal. (all tigers: *tiger* as a generic category)

The difference between the indefinite *a* and *an* and the generic *a* and *an* is that the former means any one member of a class while the latter means all of the members of a class.

The omission of articles also expresses a generic (or general) meaning:

> no article with a plural noun: **Tigers** are dangerous animals. (all tigers)
> no article with a noncountable noun: **Anger** is a destructive emotion. (any kind of anger)

Omission of Articles

While some nouns combine with one article or the other based on whether they are countable or noncountable, others simply never take either article. Some common types of nouns that don't take an article are:

1. Names of languages and nationalities

- Chinese
- English
- Spanish
- Russian

2. Names of sports

- volleyball
- hockey
- baseball

3. Names of academic subjects

- mathematics
- biology
- history
- computer science

After reviewing this handout, try some exercises:

Exercise #1 at http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/print/esl/eslartEX1.html

Exercise #2 at http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/print/esl/eslartEX2.html

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