

## UMD ARC/Writing & Reading Center

### Articles and Determiners

**Articles** are the little words **a**, **an**, and **the**. There are two types of articles in English: **definite** and **indefinite**. The use of these articles depends mainly on whether the writer is referring to any member of a group or to a specific member of a group. Article usage often depends upon the context of the entire work.

#### I. Indefinite Articles: **a** and **an**

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

- **a** + singular noun with a consonant: **a** boy
- **an** + singular noun beginning with a vowel: **an** elephant
- **a** + singular noun beginning with a consonant sound: **a** user (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** broken egg
- **an** unusual problem

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

- I am **a** doctor.
- Patrick is **an** Irishman.
- Liatsu is **a** practicing Buddhist.

#### II. 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. **The** is not used with noncountable nouns referring to something in a general sense:

- [no article] Coffee is a popular drink.
- [no article] Portuguese is his native language.
- [no article] Intelligence is hard 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 Portuguese **he speaks** is a dialect of the Açores.
- The intelligence **of animals** is variable but undeniable.

**The** is also used when a noun refers to certain well-known locations, events or ideas:

- **The** White House
- **The** theory of relativity
- **The** 2003 fall collection

### III. Geographical Uses of “the”

Do not use **the** before:

- Names of countries **except** the Netherlands and the United States
- Names of cities, towns, or states (Boston, Dartmouth, Massachusetts)
- Names of streets
- Names of lakes and bays **except** with a group of lakes like the Finger Lakes or the Great Lakes
- Names of mountains (Mount Everest) **except** with ranges of mountains like the Andes or the Appalachians or unusual names like the Matterhorn
- Names of islands (Martha’s Vineyard, Nantucket) **except** island chains like the Aleutians or the Canary Islands
- Names of continents (Asia, Europe)

Do use **the** before:

- Names of oceans or rivers (the Atlantic, the Mississippi)
- Points on the globe (the Equator, the North Pole)
- Geographical areas (the Middle East, the South)
- Deserts, forests, gulfs, and peninsulas (the Sahara, the Persian Gulf, the Black Forest, the Iberian Peninsula)  
\* for an extensive list of countries, refer to the last page of this handout.

### VI. Further Uses of Articles

The 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

#### a) Countable vs. Noncountable

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

- I asked for **a** cup of coffee. (*cups can be counted*)
- **The** is used when the noun cannot be counted.
- I saw **the** coffee spill. (*how many coffees? Coffee cannot be counted. The amount – how much – can be determined, but not the number or how many*)

#### **b) First vs. Subsequent Motion**

**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 each time the same noun is mentioned afterwards. **There is** or **there are** may also be used to introduce an indefinite noun at the beginning of a paragraph or an essay.

- There is **a** raccoon in the garden outside my window. When I tap on the window, **the** raccoon runs away.

#### **c) General vs. Specific**

**A**, **an**, or **the** can be used to indicate that a noun refers to the whole class to which an individual countable noun belongs.

- **A** rabbit is soft and cuddly. (any individual rabbit)
- **The** rabbit is soft and cuddly. (all rabbits: *rabbit* as a generic category)

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

Note: The **omission** of articles also expresses a general meaning:

- **Rabbits** are soft and cuddly. (all rabbits)

#### **Further Omissions**

Names of sports: volleyball, tennis, baseball, football, hockey, gymnastics

Names of academic subjects: mathematics, biology, art, history, computer science.

Names of languages and nationalities: Chinese, English, French, Spanish, Creole, Russian.

*Compiled by: Heather Ouellette  
UMD Writing and Reading Center Tutor, 2003*