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.