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

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

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