ARTICLES

The **article** is an important type of adjective. This handout will discuss the two different types of articles, their purpose, and how they can be used properly in English writing.

A and *an* are **indefinite articles** and refer to any member of a general group. *A* is used before singular words that start with consonant sounds. *An* is used before singular words starting with a vowel sound. Note: The choice between *a* and *an* depends on sound, not on spelling! Hence one would write "*a* European" and "*an* honor." If there is an adjective between the article and the noun, the beginning sound of the adjective determines whether a or an is used. Note also that plural words cannot take *a* or *an*.

The is a **definite article** and refers to something specific.

Rules for Using Articles

Do not use an article with non-countable nouns (like air or love):

- *Would you like water?* (Note: If one wrote "a water" it would imply a bottle of water, which, like a drop or a glass of water, is countable. Water itself, like all liquids, is not countable.)
- *French is his first language.*
- *Violence is a terrible thing.*
- *Organic chemistry was my least favorite subject.*

The definite article (*the*) is used with non-countable nouns which have modifying phrases or clauses which limit (and thereby make more specific) the non-countable noun.

- *Would you like the water in my water bottle?*
- *The French that he speaks is characterized by a Parisian accent.*
- *The violence in the Middle East is a source of constant worry.*
- *The organic chemistry I learned last summer made me sure I did not want to be a doctor.*

Do NOT use the definite article (*the*) before:

- names of countries (Italy; Mexico; Bolivia) **except** countries that are groups of islands (the Bahamas), that have "the' in their political title (the United Kingdom), or that people commonly refer to with "the" (the Netherlands).
- names of cities, towns, or states (New York; Waltham, Massachusetts)
- names of streets (Moody Street; Massachusetts Avenue)

- names of lakes and bays (Lake Titicaca; Lake Erie) **except** with a group of lakes (the Great Lakes)
- names of mountains (Mount Everest; Mount Kilimanjaro) **except** with ranges of mountains (the Alps; the Himalayas) or unusual names (the Matterhorn)
- names of continents (North America; Australia)
- names of islands (Easter Island; Nantucket; Key West) **except** with the Isle of Man and with island chains (the Aleutians; the Canary Islands)

DO use the definite article (the) before:

- names of rivers, oceans and seas (the Nile; the Atlantic; the Baltic Sea)
- points on the globe (the Equator; the North Pole)
- geographical/cultural areas (the Middle East; the West)
- deserts, forests, gulfs, straits, and peninsulas (the Sahara; the Black Forest; the Persian Gulf; the Strait of Gibraltar; the Iberian Peninsula)

Exercises

Determine if the empty space should have an article or not. If the space needs an article, fill in *a*, *an*, or *the* in accordance with article rules.

1. I earned (blank) honorable mention on my essay.
2. My friend sent me postcards from (blank) Italy, (blank) Germany, and (blank) Netherlands.
3. John Lennon told us that (blank) love is the answer.
4. From sailing across (blank) Pacific Ocean and living in (blank) Middle East, I have learned that one must have (blank) courage to stick to their convictions.
5. Ava works for (blank) Egyptian company that specializes in (blank) information technology.
6. I am taking classes to learn (blank) Spanish so that I can kayak (blank) Amazon River.
7. My cousin wants to be (blank) Youtuber when he grows up.
8. (blank) Sahara is the biggest desert in the world.

Answers: 1, an; 2, blank, blank, the; 3, blank; 4, the, the, the; 5, an, blank; 6, blank, the; 7, a; 8, The.

Credit: Adapted from the Online Writing Lab at Purdue, and from Lydia Fash, University Writing Program, 2020.