Grammar Workshop
Article Usage

JOSEPHINE BOYLE
WILLEM OPPERMAN

ACADEMIC SUPPORT AND ACCESS CENTER
AMERICAN UNIVERSITY

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*Sources consulted: Purdue OWL and Grammarly Handbook
What is an Article?

- An article is similar to an adjective. Like adjectives, articles modify nouns.
- Articles define a noun as specific or non-specific.
- English has two articles: “the” and “a/an”
Definite vs. Indefinite Articles

“the” is a definite article

- Definite articles refer to a specific member of a group
  - “I just read the most popular novel in the country.”
    - (there are many novels, but this specific novel is the most popular in the country)

“a/an” is an indefinite article

- Indefinite articles refer to a non-specific member of a group
  - “I would like to read a novel.”
    - (refers to any novel, not one particular novel)
A vs. An

General Rule: If the first letter makes a *vowel-type* sound, you use "an"; if the first letter makes a *consonant-type* sound, you use "a."

- Use “a” before words that begin with *consonants*
  - a book
  - a computer
  - a pencil

- Use “an” before words that begin with *vowels*
  - an apple
  - an orange
  - an egg
A vs. An

Exceptions

- Use "an" before unsounded "h"
  - an honest mistake
  - an honorable person

- Use “a” when "u" makes the same sound as the "y" in "you"
  - a unicorn
  - a university

- Use “a” when "o" makes the same sound as "w" in "won"
  - a one-man show
  - a one-legged animal
Count nouns are possible to count:
- Books, flowers, cheeseburgers, computers

Uncountable nouns are difficult or impossible to count:
- Untouchable things (air, information)
- Liquids (water, juice)
- Things that are too large to count (sand, equipment, wood)
Count and Uncountable Nouns

Do not use “a” or “an” to modify uncountable nouns (“I like to play in a sand”)
- Either change the uncountable noun to a count noun (“I like to play in beach sand”)
- Modify with “the” or “some” (“I like to play in the sand”)

"A/an" can be used only with count nouns
- “I like to drink a cup of coffee in the morning”
- “I like to drink a bottle of water at the gym”

“The” can be used with uncountable nouns, or the article can be omitted
- “I go fishing with my Dad in the water” (a specific body of water); or
- “I go fishing with my dad in water” (any water)
Geographical Places/Proper Nouns

English uses the definite article “the” in front of some geographical/proper names but not in front of others. If in doubt, use a dictionary or online resource to confirm.

**General Guidelines**

**Use “the” before:**
- names of rivers, oceans and seas: the Atlantic, the Sienne
- points on the globe: the South Pole, the Equator
- geographical areas: the Middle East, the West
- deserts, forests, gulfs, and peninsulas: the Sahara, the Persian Gulf, the Black Forest, the Iberian Peninsula
Geographical Places/Proper Nouns

Do not use “the” before:
- names of most countries/territories: Italy, Mexico, Bolivia; however, the Netherlands, the Dominican Republic, the Philippines, the United States
- 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 not use an article for:

- Names of languages and nationalities: Spanish, Chinese, English, Portuguese
  - (unless you are referring to the population of the nation: "The French are known for their delicious cuisine.")

- Names of sports: soccer, football, baseball

- Names of academic subjects: geometry, chemistry, history
Need Additional Help?

- Visit the Academic Support and Access Center: Mary Graydon Center, Room 243, 202-885-3360
  - We recommend that you book an appointment online first:
Need Additional Help?

Helpful Online Resources

- American University Writing Lab Tips: http://www.american.edu/ocl/asac/Writing-Lab-Writing-Tips.cfm
- Purdue Online Writing Lab (Owl): owl.english.purdue.edu
- UNC Writing Center: writingcenter.unc.edu
- The George Mason University Writing Center: http://writingcenter.gmu.edu/