The Use and Non-Use of Articles*

Use of the articles *a*, *an*, and *the* can depend on any of four paired noun qualities: countable vs. non-countable, definite vs. indefinite, first vs. subsequent mention, and general vs. specific:

**Countable vs. Non-countable**

A and *an* are used if the noun can be counted.
- I ran into a post. (How many posts did you run into? Just one. Therefore, use *a*.)
- I ate a piece of cake.
- I saw an eagle.

*The* is used when the noun cannot be counted.
- I ran into the water. (How many waters did you run into? The question doesn’t make any sense because water is non-countable. Therefore, use *the*.)
- I ate the rice.
- I saw the milk spill.

**Indefinite Articles: *a* and *an***

*An* and *an* signal that the noun modified is indefinite, referring to any member of a group. These indefinite articles are used with singular nouns when the noun is general; the corresponding indefinite quantity word *some* is used for plural general nouns. The rule is:
- *a* + a singular noun beginning with a consonant: a boy
- *an* + a singular noun beginning with a vowel: an elephant
- *some* + a plural noun: some girls

Note that in English, the indefinite articles are used to indicate membership in a profession, nationality status, or religion.
- I am a teacher.
- Brian is an Irishman.
- Seiko is a practicing Buddhist.

**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; it refers to a particular member of a group. Compare the indefinite and definite articles in the following pairs:
- A dog (any dog)
- The dog (that specific dog)

*The* is used with both singular and plural nouns:
- the book, the cat
- the books, the cats

*The* is not used with non-countable nouns referring to something in a general sense:
- [no article] Coffee is a popular drink.
- [no article] Japanese was his native language.
- [no article] Intelligence is difficult to quantify.

* From The Purdue University Online Writing Lab, http://owl.english.purdue.edu
The is used with non-countable nouns that are made more specific by a limiting modifying phrase or clause:

- The coffee in my cup is too hot to drink.
- The Japanese he speaks is often heard in the countryside.
- The intelligence of animals is variable but undeniable.

The is also used when a noun refers to something unique:

- the White House
- the theory of relativity
- the 1999 federal budget

**Geographical Uses of the**

DO NOT use the before:

- names of countries, except the Netherlands and the US (Italy, Mexico, Bolivia)
- names of cities, towns, or states (Seoul, Manitoba, Miami)
- names of streets (Washington Blvd., Main St.)
- names of lakes and bays, except with a group of lakes like the Great Lakes (Lake Titicaca, Lake Erie)
- names of mountains, except with ranges of mountains like the Andes or the Rockies or unusual names like the Matterhorn (Mount Everest, Mount Fuji)
- names of continents (Asia, Europe)
- names of islands except with island chains like the Aleutians, the Hebrides, or the Canary Islands (Easter Island, Maui, Key West)

DO use the before:

- names of rivers, oceans and seas (the Nile, the Pacific, the Sea of Japan)
- points on the globe (the Equator, the North Pole)
- geographical areas (the Middle East, the West)
- deserts, forests, gulfs, and peninsulas (the Sahara, the Persian Gulf, the Black Forest, the Iberian Peninsula)

**First vs. Subsequent Motion**

*An* awards ceremony at the Kremlin would not normally have attracted so much attention. But when it was leaked that Soviet President Konstantin Chernenko would be presenting medals to three cosmonauts, interest in the ceremony intensified. Time, Sept. 17, 1984.

**Note:** *There is* and *there are* can be used to introduce an indefinite noun at the beginning of a paragraph or essay.

**General vs. Specific**

*An* and *the* can both be used to indicate that a noun refers to the whole class to which individual countable nouns belong. This use of articles is called generic, from the Latin word meaning "class."

- A tiger is a dangerous animal. (any individual tiger)
- The tiger is a dangerous animal. (all tigers: tiger as a generic category)

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

The omission of articles also expresses a generic (or general) meaning:

- no article with a plural noun: Tigers are dangerous animals. (all tigers)
- no article with a non-countable noun: Anger is a destructive emotion. (any kind of anger)

**Omission of Articles**

While some nouns combine with one article or the other based on whether they are countable or non-countable, others simply never take either article. Some common types of nouns that don't take an article are:

- Names of languages and nationalities: Chinese, English, Spanish, Russian
- Names of sports: volleyball, hockey, baseball
- Names of academic subjects: mathematics, biology, history, computer science