**Handout Topic: Articles**

### What is an article?

There are two types of articles in the English language: the indefinite article *a* or *an* and the definite article *the*. Articles are one specific class of determiners. Determiners always immediately precede nouns, and thus act as useful markers indicating the presence of a noun. Besides the articles, other examples of determiners include: *some, many, one, my, their, this,* and *these.*

A noun is considered indefinite if neither the reader nor the writer has a specific noun in mind. A noun is considered definite if the writer and reader both know which specific noun is being referred to. The definite article can therefore be used anytime: the writer has used the noun previously; the writer identifies the noun immediately before or after using it (usually with an adjective or clause); or the noun is unique.

**e.g.** A dog ran across the street at rush hour today. The dog was not injured, but it caused a small traffic jam. (noun has been mentioned previously)

**e.g.** My 1993 Toyota Corolla was the best car I ever owned. (noun is identified as a particular kind: "best")

**e.g.** I'm going to check the weather. (*weather* is unique)

The three main types of nouns (for the purpose of using articles) are proper nouns, count nouns, and non-count nouns. Proper nouns always start with a capital letter and name a person, place or thing. Count nouns are nouns that can be counted, and can therefore take on a plural form. Non-count nouns are not normally countable in English, and do not have a plural form.

**e.g.** March, Mount Saint Vincent, Toyota, Halifax, Fred. (proper nouns)

**e.g.** apple, bicycle, umbrella, woman. (count nouns)

**e.g.** wine, snow, information, fear, work, meat. (non-count nouns)

Proper nouns never appear with an indefinite article (*a* or *an*). *The* does not usually precede proper nouns either, but in certain cases (the names of oceans, rivers, mountain ranges, regions, and some countries) it can be used correctly.

  **e.g.** The Middle East is an area of concern for the United States, said the president.

  For a singular count noun, *a* or *an* is used if the noun is indefinite. For all plural count nouns and non-count nouns, no article is used if the noun is indefinite. For singular count nouns, plural count nouns, and non-count nouns, the article *the* is used if the noun is definite. The table below summarizes the use of articles with different noun types.

| Noun type | Indefinite | definite |
|---|---|---|
| Singular count | *a* or *an* | *the* |
| Plural count | No article | *the* |
| Non-count | No article | *the* |

Some types of nouns NEVER take articles. These include the names of languages (e.g. English, French, Portugese); the names of sports (baseball, hockey, soccer); and the names of academic subjects (e.g. mathematics, history).

**Exercises**: Fill in the blank with the appropriate article (*the* or *a/an*), or leave blank if no article is required.
1. _____ hour passed before I realized that Sandra was missing.
2. _____ Rocky Mountains are spectacular!
3. Can you help me find _____ lucky pencil I always use for my exams?
4. I fell off the dock and into _____ water.
5. All my favorite restaurants serve _____ pasta.