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Center for
Communication
Practices

At Rensselaer

(Formerly The Writing Center)
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Using Articles with Proper Nouns

Introduction

Another handout discusses rules for using articles with common nouns only. The rules for proper nouns are more complex.

Proper nouns are names of particular people, places, and things (John F. Kennedy, New York City, Notre Dame Cathedral), and for that reason they are inherently definite.

- Nevertheless, the definite article is not used with most **singular** proper nouns.

For example, if you are referring to your friend George, you would NOT say: “*The* George and I went to a movie last night.”

Exceptions

The only times “the” is used with a name like this are:

- when you want to be emphatic, as in “*the* Elizabeth Taylor” (to emphasize that you are talking about the famous actress, and not about another woman with the same name), and
- when you are actually using the name as a common noun, as in “*the* George that I introduced you to last night” (the real meaning of this phrase is *the man named* George...”).

Plural names, on the other hand, are always preceded by “the”: the Johnsons, the Bahamas, etc.

Singular geographical names are very irregular with respect to article usage. For example:

- Singular names of continents

(Asia, Africa), mountains (Mount Fuji), and bays (San Francisco Bay) do not take the article “the.”

- Specific regions (the Crimea), deserts (the Sahara), and other geographical entities do.

The use of articles with singular proper nouns is complex and, therefore, difficult to learn, as indicated by the examples below. For this reason, the best thing to do is to memorize whether the proper nouns that you use frequently are used with or without “the.”

Examples:

- State Street
- the Empire State Building
- Delaware County
- Great Britain
- the Soviet Union
- the University of Virginia
- Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute
- the United Nations (the U.N.)
- the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (but “OPEC,” not “the OPEC”)

“A” Versus “An”

This last topic is undoubtedly the easiest, because most non-native speakers already know about the difference between “a” and “an.” They are simply two variations of the **indefinite article**. “A” is used before words that begin with consonant sounds (a rock, a large park), and “an” is used before vowel sounds (an interesting subject, an apple).

However, note that the choice of “a” or “an” depends on pronunciation, not spelling. Many words that begin with the vowel *-u-* are preceded by “a” instead of “an” because the *-u-* spelling is often pronounced *-yu-*, as in *useful* (“a useful idea”) and *uranium* (“a uranium isotope”).

In addition, in a few words that were borrowed from French, the initial consonant -

h- is not pronounced: “an heir to the throne,” “an hour-long lecture,” “an honorable agreement,” etc.

A Strategy For Success

In the future, whenever you write in English, you will need to proofread your writing carefully and to apply the rules for article usage very deliberately. Then come to the **Center for Communication Practices** (formerly called “The Writing Center”), and ask a consultant specifically to help you to learn about any remaining errors in your article usage. With practice, you can learn to use articles correctly!