

Using *the* appropriately

Use *the* with most nouns whose specific identity is known to the reader.

The definite article *the* is used with most nouns whose identity is known to the reader. Usually the identity will be clear to the reader for one of the following reasons:

- The noun has been previously mentioned.
- A phrase or a clause following the noun restricts its identity.
- A superlative such as *best* or *most intelligent* makes the noun's identity specific.
- The noun describes a unique person, place, or thing.
- The context or situation makes the noun's identity clear.

- ▶ A truck loaded with manure cut in front of our van.

When ^{*the*} truck skidded a few seconds later, we almost hit it.

The noun *truck* is preceded by *A* when it is first mentioned. When the noun is mentioned again, it is preceded by *the* since readers now know the specific truck being discussed.

- ▶ Bob warned me that ^{*the*} platter on the top shelf of the cupboard was cracked.

The phrase *on the top shelf of the cupboard* identifies the specific platter.

- ▶ Our petite daughter dated ^{*the*} tallest boy in her class.

The superlative *tallest* restricts the identity of the noun *boy*.

- ▶ During an eclipse, one should not look directly at ^{*the*} sun.

There is only one sun in our solar system, so its identity is clear.

- ▶ Please don't ^{*the*} slam door when you leave.

Both the speaker and the listener know which door is meant.

Do not use *the* with plural or noncount nouns meaning “all” or “in general”; do not use *the* with most singular proper nouns.

When a plural or a noncount noun means “all” or “in general,” it is not marked with *the*.

- ▶ ~~The~~ ^{*F*} fountains are an expensive element of landscape design.

- ▶ In some parts of the world, ~~the~~ rice is preferred to all other grains.

(continued)

As you probably know, proper nouns — which name specific people, places, or things — are capitalized. Although there are many exceptions, *the* is not used with most singular proper nouns, such as *Judge Hennessey*, *Spring Street*, or *Lake Huron*. However, *the* is used with plural proper nouns, such as *the United Nations*, *the Bahamas*, and *the Finger Lakes*.

Geographical names create problems because there are so many exceptions to the rules. When in doubt, consult the chart below.

Geographical names	
When to omit the	
streets, squares, parks	Ivy Street, Union Square, Denali National Park
cities, states, counties	Miami, Idaho, Bee County
most countries	Italy, Nigeria, China
continents	South America, Africa
bays, single lakes	Tampa Bay, Lake Geneva
single mountains, islands	Mount Everest, Crete
When to use the	
united countries	the United States, the Republic of China
large regions, deserts	the East Coast, the Sahara
peninsulas	the Iberian Peninsula
oceans, seas, gulfs	the Pacific, the Dead Sea, the Persian Gulf
canals and rivers	the Panama Canal, the Amazon
mountain ranges	the Rocky Mountains, the Alps
groups of islands	the Solomon Islands