

DEFINITELY

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When I studied algebra, I studied ALGEBRA. When I studied geometry, I studied GEOMETRY. But when I studied calculus, I was informed -- in no uncertain terms -- the subject was THE CALCULUS. I may not know how to integrate any more, but I'm a whiz at differentiating THE use of THE definite article.

In a dictionary there is little point in showing the definite article with each noun. Even the branch of mathematics which I call calculus appears in Webster's Second and Third Unabridged Dictionaries with no reference to THE CALCULUS.

The question then arises, are there any dictionary entries that use the definite article? There are innumerable instances in Webster's Third of phrases using THE, as in PAY THE PIPER. But how about nouns preceded by THE? Or, even more broadly, by the definite article in any language?

Webster's Third has seen fit to include as adjectives, "usually capitalized", many geographical names, under the excuse they may be used to describe something "of or from . . . of the kind or style prevalent in" the place. Hence we find such entries as EL PASO, the step, LA PAZ, the peace, and LOS ANGELES, the angels. Not very interesting.

Places have given their names to related or associated things. For example, a locality in southern Iraq is the derivation of the adjectival term for an early Bronze Age culture in Mesopotamia, known as UBAID. Not to be found in normal alphabetical order in Webster's Third is the alternate AL 'UBAID, given along with UBAID.

The Arabic for the road is AL SIRAT. This has come to mean the bridge connecting this world with paradise, spanning the chasm of hell. Also from Arabic is EL DEBAB, meaning the flies. This is used as a name for a disease of camels, transmitted by flies.

From the Spanish we have LA BAMBBA, the bamba, for a ballroom dance.

The French contribute LA FLÈCHE for a domestic fowl named for a commune in France. And there is LA FRANCE PINK for a color, also called debutante pink, from the rose variety LA FRANCE, the France.

From the Greeks there is HOI POLLOI, the many. This is a good term not to use: it means the masses and not the rabble, and never should be preceded by the redundant THE.

Still in Webster's Third, hidden out of alphabetical order (on purpose!) is MCCOY. We find the definition terminates with the admonition "...used with the definite article." But no boldface entry!

Disgusted with Webster's Third, we turn to Webster's Second. Mindful of the trouble we had in finding AL 'UBAID and MCCOY out of alphabetical order in The Third, we cleverly ignore the massive Main Body, and turn directly to the New Words Section.

There, under the F's we find FÜHRER also DER FÜHRER. Having learned our lesson well, we didn't even consider looking for DER FÜHRER under the D's! The Germans have come through for us with the leader.

Finally, just as hope was fading fast for finding an English THE, our eye spots the boldface entry: MCCOY, THE also THE REAL MCCOY.

THE END (or END, THE?)