

## Is it “the earth” or Earth?

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### Student:

*But each word, I think, should harbour some idea*

### Mephistopheles:

*Yes, yes, indeed, but don't torment yourself too much  
because precisely where no thought is present,  
a word appears in proper time.*

*Words are priceless in an argument,  
Words are building stones of Systems.*

*It's splendid to believe in words;  
from words you cannot rob a single letter.*

— J.W. von Goethe, *Faust*

As a non-English speaker I was taught that when referring to our planet, native speakers say and/or write “the earth.” I wondered why all other planets have capitalised names with no definite article preceding them, but not ours. Moreover, both our satellite and the star have definite articles in front of their names, although their names are capitalised: the Moon and the Sun.

Years later, in the Department of Geosciences in the University of Houston, where I had started my undergraduate education, my good friend Mrs. Irene “Cookie” Jones, a senior graduate student in the same department, asked me why all planet names are capitalised, but not ours. I had no idea. Cookie answered it for me: because all other planets carry proper names; they are names of Greek and Roman gods. Our planet also has a divine name, *Gaia* (Γαῖα), or simply *Ge* (Γῆ) in less poetical form in Greek and *Tellus* or *Terra* in Latin, but we do not use these names except as adjectives: telluric, terrestrial, terran.... Instead, we use for our planet what we also call the regolith and the soil of the land surface. So far, Cookie.

When we started calling our planet “earth,” we did not know that it was a planet in a solar system, let alone that it had also siblings. It was simply where we lived, later tilled it and grew our food in it and in places used it to make our dwellings. Something similar happened with the Sun and the Moon. The word Sun simply comes from the Indo-European root “to shine.” It was what shone to us and thereby enlightening and warming us. So we gave it a descriptive name. The name Moon has also an Indo-European root that it shares with meter (*not* metre; American English unfortunately confuses the *unit*, i.e., *metre* with the *tool*, i.e., *meter*), i.e., “measurer,” because our ancestors used its phases to measure time. So our satellite also has a descriptive name, not a divine one. Both the Sun (the enlightener) and the Moon (the measurer) also have divine names: *Helios* (“Ἥλιος”) in Greek, *Helius* in Latin for the Sun and *Selene* (Σελήνη) in Greek and *Luna* in Latin for the Moon.

Table 1. Names of the planets of the Solar System as gods and goddesses

Hermes	Mercury
Aphrodite	Venus
Gaia (or Ge)	Tellus or Terra
Ares	Mars
Zeus	Jupiter
Kronos	Saturn
Uranus	Uranus
Poseidon	Neptune
Left: Greek; right: Latin (dwarf planets are not listed).	

Recently it has become fashion to write and speak of “Earth” without a definite article and to capitalise it. Using Earth as a planet name in the Solar System violates the time-honoured rules of how we name its planets. In addition, this new fashion has created the necessity of explaining what we are referring to. A plant may grow in the earth or on Earth. This context is not too unclear (but think of exclaiming “where on earth is this plant?”). The meaning is not so clear if we say we walked on the sacred earth or on Sacred Earth. What if Sacred Earth is the proper name of a sacred place and does not refer to our planet? Or just remember the famous phrase, often attributed to the English poet W.H. Auden, but actually first formulated by the British comedian John Foster Hall: “We are all here on earth to help others; what on earth the others are here for, I don't know.” Which earth would you capitalise in this quote? Thus, in many instances, the whole e versus E distinction and the employment or non-employment of a definite article become useless to distinguish different concepts.

If we are so keen to have the name of our home planet capitalised and get rid of the definite article in front of it, we should simply call it *Gaia*. We have already done so when we named our science geology, *Gaia + logos*, and its parent science geography, *Gaia + graphein*. I personally never use earth without a definite article and never capitalise it in my publications. I respect the historical roots of our usage. But if people are unhappy about it, let us switch to *Gaia*.

However, there is a much weightier reason that we should continue calling our planet “the earth” and not “Earth”: it is our abode, not any old planet in the Solar System. If we called our planet *Gaia*, it would be just one of the eight siblings named according to a certain rule, i.e., giving it a divine name, which is fine. It would be one among equals. If we called it Earth, it would be similar. But “the earth” is not the equal of the others: it is where humanity arose to question its origins, its place and its meaning. The rise of humanity is dependent on the planet, its peculiar distance from the Sun, its ability to harbour water and develop soil, i.e., “earth” that feeds us and makes our life and thought possible. When we say and write “the earth” we mean both the planet and signify that it is our home.