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Little Words—Big problems: Articles a, an, the

Articles in English can be problematic for students whose first language does not contain articles. This handout discusses guidelines explaining article usage, but it is also wise to ask a native English speaker. Checking for correct article use is a late stage in the revision process. Student writers should concentrate on meeting assignment requirements and on content in early drafting stages.

Before getting into the guidelines for articles, let's review some information about nouns, especially count and noncount nouns. A noun may be a person, a place, an object, an activity, an idea or emotion, or a quality. A noun may be concrete (physical or tangible) or abstract (nonphysical or intangible). Both concrete and abstract nouns can be classified into two types: count and noncount nouns.

Count nouns are nouns that may be counted (cars, benches, babies, etc.). They have both singular and plural forms. Most count nouns are concrete; however, some are abstract. Example: **Experience** is a good teacher. She had many good **experiences** while on her trip to Africa.

Noncount nouns are usually mass nouns (butter, oil, water, air) or abstract nouns (honesty, love) that we don't usually count. Noncount nouns are always singular.

Indefinite Articles

A or *an* is used before a singular count noun. The indefinite article may mean *one*, or it may mean an unspecified person or thing. A singular count noun always takes an article or an adjective. *A* or *an* is not used with a noncount noun or with a plural count noun. *A* is used before a singular count noun that begins with a consonant sound. *An* is used before a singular count noun that begins with a vowel sound. Examples: a sailor, a house, a European, an island, an hour.

The Definite Article

The is used before a singular or plural count noun when that noun is specifically identified or its identity is already understood. Example: They bought *a* boat, but *the* boat sank. *The* is often used when a noun is identified by a prepositional phrase or an adjective clause. If the noun is used in a more general way, i.e., no specific noun is referred to, *the* is not used. Articles are not normally used with noncount nouns. However, noncount nouns, like count nouns, may be preceded by *the* when the noun is specifically identified. Example: **Pepper** was an important spice to Europeans. *The* **pepper** from India was treasured.

Quantifiers such as *all*, *most*, *some*, and *enough* can be used as pronouns followed by prepositional phrases. These phrases use *the* or another determiner such as *these* or *those*. When the quantifier is used as an adjective, *the* is omitted in most cases.

The with Proper Nouns and Other Expressions

1. *The is not used* with names of planets, continents, countries, states, provinces, counties, cities, and streets.
2. *The is used* when the class of noun (republic, state, etc.) comes before the name.
3. *The is used* with most names or regions. (The Midwest, The Arctic Circle)
4. *The is not used* with singular islands, lakes, bays, and mountains.
5. *The is used* with plural islands, lakes, and mountains. (The Great Lakes)
6. *The is used* with names of oceans, seas, rivers, canals, deserts, jungles, forests, and bridges. (The Sahara Desert, The Pacific Ocean)
7. *The is not used* when the name of a college or university comes before the word college or university. (Boston University, Carleton College)
8. *The is used* when the word college, university, or school comes before the name. (The University of Massachusetts, The Ohio State University)
9. *The is not used* with names of languages. (Chinese, French)
10. *The is used* with the word language. (The Chinese language)
11. *The is used* with adjectives or nationality and other adjectives that function as nouns. (The Chinese people, the rich)
12. *The is not used* with official titles when the person's name is given. (President Bush, Professor Mahoney)
13. *The is used* when only the title is given. (The President, the professor)
14. *The is used* with names of museums, monuments, and libraries.
15. *The is normally used* with the names of ships and planes. (The Enterprise, the USS Merrimack)
16. *The is not used* with dates when the month begins the phrase. (May 6)
17. *The is used* when the number comes before the months and before the day. (The sixth of May)
18. *The is occasionally used* after the month and before the day. (May the sixth)
19. *The is not used* with specific years. (1985, 2008)
20. *The is used* with decades, centuries, and eras. (The 50s [1950s], the 1900s, the Dark Ages)

Practice with Articles

In the paragraph below put in articles, *a*, *an*, *the*, where they are needed. Use an X if no article is needed.

In _____ Japan, there are two types of marriage: _____ so-called love marriage and _____ arranged marriage. _____ love marriage is _____ type we are familiar with in _____ West, where _____ couple meet independently without _____ assistance of _____ go-between or matchmaker. Although _____ arranged marriage was predominant in _____ past, _____ majority of _____ Japanese marriages today are love marriage. Estimates vary, placing _____ proportion of arranged marriages at anywhere from 25 to 50 percent.

Information:

Werner, Patricia K., and John P. Nelson. *Mosaic Two: A Content-Based Grammar*. Boston: McGraw Hill, 1996.

Exercise Paragraph:

Ediger, Anne, and Cheryl Pavlik. *Reading Connections*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.

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