Brief Guidelines for Article Usage: a, an, the

In English, articles (a, an, the) are like adjectives. They come before and modify nouns. However, articles do not have clearly defined meanings, like adjectives. Instead, articles simply provide information about the status of the nouns they modify (Lynch, Brizee, & Angeli, 2011).

Notice how the meaning of this sentence changes with the article:

*George said the computer is broken.*

Here, the suggests that George refers to a specific computer, one that the speaker of this sentence, as well as the speaker’s intended audience, recognizes. The broken computer could be a certain one among many computers.

*George said a computer is broken.*

In this sentence, a suggests that the broken computer is any one among many computers that the speaker and audience might know. The computer is nonspecific.

English uses two kinds of articles: definite (the) and indefinite (a, an).

A/an serve the same grammatical purpose. A is used before consonant sounds (*a pie, a green apple, a European vacation*), while an is used before vowel sounds (*an apple, an expensive trip, an hour*).

**Using a/an.**

Use a/an with singular count nouns that are unknown to the audience. (*Count nouns are things that can be counted—one tree, four trees; two instances, seven instances; etc.*)

Use a/an when a noun is nonspecific, or any one among many.

*Yesterday, a truck parked in front of my house.*

This truck is one the audience has not seen before—or, at least, the speaker assumes the audience doesn’t know anything about this truck. It could be any one of many trucks.

*Tending a garden takes dedication.*

The garden is nonspecific. The speaker could also have said, in a more general way, *tending gardens takes dedication.*
Not using a/an.

Do not use a/an before noncount nouns. (Noncount nouns are things that cannot be counted—happiness, hardship, tea, sugar, etc.)

I needed an advice.

Advice cannot be counted, so it does not take an indefinite article.

Using the.

Use the with nouns that are specific, or to refer to a specific member of a group.

Use the with nouns that are known to the audience, in the context of the sentence.

Diana Hacker (2004) states that when nouns are known to an audience, one of the following is usually true:

1. The noun has already been mentioned.
2. Words following the noun restrict its identity.
3. The context clarifies the noun’s identity. (p. 56)

Yesterday, I saw the truck with a dent in its hood.

The speaker refers to a specific truck, one that has a dent in its hood. This information restricts the identity of the truck. Perhaps the speaker has told the audience about this truck before.

He told me I shouldn’t worry about it. I needed the advice.

The speaker refers to a specific piece of advice given to him or her, on a specific occasion. The advice mentioned in the second sentence is defined in the first, so advice is specific, and the is used.

Not using the. Do not use the with plural or noncount nouns (nouns that cannot be counted) to mean “all” or “in general” (Hacker, 2004, p. 57).

In many temperate climates, the wheat is an important grain.

Wheat cannot be counted. The sense of “in general” is suggested without the definite article.
Finer details.

Sometimes noncount nouns (things that cannot be counted) are used in sentences as count nouns (things that can be counted). This often depends on context.

*I drink coffee every day.*

Here, *coffee* is a noncount noun, and does not take an article. The speaker refers to coffee in general.

*I asked for a coffee.*

In this sentence, *coffee* is used as a count noun. The sentence could also be expressed as *I asked for a cup of coffee*, in which *cup* is a count noun.

**Do not use the with singular proper nouns** (names of people, streets, cities, states, continents, most countries, single lakes, single mountains, etc.) (Hacker, 2004, p. 57). For example, it is correct to use the words *Barack Obama, Pennsylvania Avenue, New York City, Virginia, North America, Canada, Lake Tahoe, Mount Rose,* and *Catalina Island* without using the definite article.

However, use *the* before some singular proper nouns naming large regions, deserts, peninsulas, oceans, seas, gulfs, canals, and rivers (Hacker, 2004, p. 57). For example, it is correct to say *the West coast, the Mojave Desert, the Nile, the Gulf of Mexico,* and *the Pacific Ocean.*

**Use the with plural proper nouns.** For example, *the Great Lakes,* *the United States,* *the Rocky Mountains,* *the Falkland Islands.*

**Additional resources**

Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute’s writing center provides an in-depth discussion by John R. Kole of countability and definiteness of nouns. The article also features a list of common noncount nouns and some practice exercises: [http://www.rpi.edu/web/writingcenter/esl.html](http://www.rpi.edu/web/writingcenter/esl.html)

This resource from the writing center at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill includes a flowchart for article usage and is especially useful for visual learners. The author advises that students practice using the flowchart by looking for articles in published writing and consulting the flowchart for clarification: [http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/articles.html](http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/articles.html).

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