Brief Guidelines for Article Usage:
a, an, the
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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.
A vs. An

Generally, “an” will only be used before words that start with a vowel (a, e, i, o, u) or word and numbers that sound like they start with a vowel.

I need an apple.
Here “an” is used because the word apple starts with the vowel “a”.

She has an hour for lunch.
Though the word hour starts with the consonant “h”, it is pronounced “au-er”.

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.

When nouns are known to an audience, one of the following is usually true:

1. The object or person is the only one in its category.
2. Previous information given makes the noun already identified/specified.
3. A word before the noun modifies it so that the meaning becomes limited.
4. The noun is assumed to be a shared social experience.
5. Exception for plurals: signaling a group.

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.
Exception for plurals
If an already identified noun is plural, but is being used a single unit, the article “the” can be used to signal that this group is to be thought of as a single unit.

_The dogs were barking all night long._
Here, even though “dogs” is plural, the use of the article “the” before it signifies that these specific dogs are one unit.

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 than 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.
When No Article is Needed: There is No Need for Classification

_The boy went to school by bus._

Notice that there is no article in front of “bus.” Situations like this arise when classifying and/or identifying the noun is not relevant. It is non-relevant if the noun is a single entity or part of a class of objects.

_Having to live in prison would be really boring._

A specific prison or an aforementioned prison is not relevant. The speaker is saying that being in any prison would be boring.

_Some people go to church every Sunday._

What church is being talked about is irrelevant. There is no specificity because the speaker is simply talking about churches as a general concept.

Additional resources

Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute’s writing center provides an in-depth discussion by John R. Kole of accountability 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).

Reference List