Article Fundamentals: A/An and The

Articles are small words that occur with nouns. Despite their size, they can create challenges for writers because they occur frequently, and the principles that guide their use are not obvious. However, there are some steps you can follow to make article choices easier.

First, determine which type of noun it is. There are two basic categories of nouns, common nouns and proper nouns. Common nouns are words we use for classes of things. Examples of common nouns are “state,” “author,” and “race.” Proper nouns are names we give to particular items within a class of nouns. Examples of proper nouns are “Indiana,” “Kurt Vonnegut,” and “The Indianapolis 500.”

Articles and Common Nouns. If the noun is common, consider which type of common noun it is. The choice depends on two factors: countability and definiteness. Countability refers to whether a noun can be counted or not. For example, in English, a book can be counted, but knowledge cannot. The word “book” is a count noun and the word “knowledge” is a noncount noun. There are both plural and singular count nouns but only one form of noncount nouns. Definiteness refers to whether or not the noun is viewed as unique by BOTH the writer and reader. If the noun can be any one of the items with that name, it is indefinite. If both you and the reader understand the noun is a specific one, it is definite. Nouns are definite due one of the following conditions:

1) general knowledge or particular shared knowledge of a subject.
   • The universe is an ever-unfolding mystery. (general knowledge of the world)
   • I finished the first draft. (particular shared knowledge of a multiple draft requirement)

2) prior mention of a noun or association with a previously-mentioned noun.
   • A student who needs help with a writing assignment should visit a campus writing center. At the center, the student can review the assignment with a tutor. The tutor …
   • I just finished a great book. The title is … (“title” is associated with “book”)  

3) an adjectival word/phrase/clause that comes before or after the noun and makes it unique.
   • The best advice for students is to eat healthfully. (limiting word)
   • The title of my first book will be Tutoring Tales. (limiting phrase)
   • The student who lives next door is loud. (limiting clause)

4) its prototypical nature.
   The definite article signals “uniqueness” to the reader. Therefore, the definite article can be used to indicate a noun’s prototype. A prototype is the standard or conceptual form of a noun.
   • The summary-response essay requires effective reading as well as effective writing.

Countability, number and definiteness. The concepts of countability and definiteness influence article use. Specifically, singular indefinite count nouns require indefinite articles (a/an), while plural indefinite nouns and indefinite noncount nouns do not require articles.
   • I have an idea. (singular indefinite noun)
   • (o) Words are (o) deeds. (plural count nouns)
   • (o) Knowledge is (o) power. (noncount nouns)
How to use articles with common nouns: When deciding whether an article is appropriate with a common noun, ask yourself the following three questions, and then use the chart below:

1) Is the noun a count or noncount noun?
2) If it is a count noun, is it plural or singular?
3) Is the noun made specific by one of the following: general or particular knowledge or prior mention of or association with something mentioned previously, an accompanying word/phrase/clause; its prototypical nature?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Noun and Number</th>
<th>Nonspecific</th>
<th>Specific</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Count singular</td>
<td>a/an</td>
<td>the</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Count plural</td>
<td>no article (ø)</td>
<td>the</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Noncount</td>
<td>no article (ø)</td>
<td>the</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Articles and Proper Nouns. Proper nouns are nouns with specific names. They frequently occur with definite articles depending on whether or not they fall into certain categories.

DO NOT use the definite article with the following proper noun categories:

- peoples’ names (Mahatma Ghandi)
- cities (Indianapolis)
- counties (Marion County)
- states (Indiana)
- countries (Saudi Arabia)
- continents (Asia)
- months (April)
- days (Monday)
- streets (University Avenue)
- churches (St. Paul’s Cathedral)
- lakes (Lake Michigan)
- mountains (Mount Ranier)
- parks (Eagle Creek Park)
- languages (English, Mandarin)

DO use the definite article with the following proper noun categories:

- historical periods (the Stone Age, the 60s)
- “of” expressions (the City of Chicago, the Wizard of Oz)
- parts of a country (the West Coast)
- collective place names (the United Arab Emirates, the Philippines)
- bridges (the Golden Gate Bridge)
- buildings (the Sears Tower)
- music venues (the Louvre)
- historical periods (the Stone Age, the 60s)
- rivers/seas/oceans (the Nile, the Black Sea)
- deserts (the Painted Desert)

SOME SPECIAL USES OF ARTICLES

- With certain modes of transportation e.g. “I took the bus” but “I took a plane.”
- With certain forms of media e.g. “I heard it on the radio” but “I saw it on TV.”
- With common illnesses e.g. “She has the flu” but “She has insomnia.” Also, some illnesses are countable e.g. “She has a cold” or “She has a headache.”
- With certain expressions e.g. “He gave the wrong answer” (although more than one wrong answer exists); “He’s a regular Superman” (although there is only one Superman)
- With rate expressions, “I visit the Writing Center three times a week.”
- With positive few/little expressions e.g. “I have a few resources” vs. “I have few resources.”

i Any mention of nouns in this handout can be extended to noun phrases.
ii The rules of countability are not consistent across languages. For example, in some languages the words “homework” and “research” are countable. Also, words can change their meanings depending on whether they are used in a count or noncount way. For example, the expression, “practice makes perfect” refers to the general concept of practice. But the expression “best practices” refers to a collection of individual behaviors.