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 countable and non-countable 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: countable and non-countable nouns.

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

Non-countable nouns are usually mass nouns (butter, oil, water, air) or abstract nouns (honesty, love) that we don’t usually count. Non-countable nouns are always singular.

Indefinite Articles

“A” or “an” is used before a singular countable noun. The indefinite article may mean one, or it may mean an unspecified person or thing. A singular countable noun always takes an article or an adjective. “A” “or” “an” is not used with a non-countable noun or with a plural count noun. “A” is used before a singular countable noun that begins with a consonant sound. “An” is used before a singular countable 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 countable 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 non-countable nouns. However, non-countable nouns, like countable 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)
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. (The Leland Speed Library)
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)

This handout is adapted from Indiana University Writing Center Website. Only the format has been changed.