Editing for Article Errors: “a/an” or “the”

This resource provides clear rules that can help you edit your writing for article errors.

Articles in English may look simple, but they are a complex part of the English language. Articles (a, an, and the) belong to a larger category of words called determiners. Determiners include demonstratives (this, that, those), possessives (my, his, John’s), and quantifiers (some, many, most, all). This resource focuses only on articles, but other determiners can often be used in the place of articles (for example, “I’m enjoying this course,” or “I’m enjoying the course,” or “I’m enjoying my course”).

An article error usually means an article is missing. The chart below summarizes the main grammar principles and choices to make when checking which nouns need articles.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COUNTABLE</th>
<th>UNCOUNTABLE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SPECIFIC</td>
<td>The</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GENERAL</td>
<td>SINGULAR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a/an</td>
<td>Ø</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

This chart can be simplified to two main questions to ask yourself while editing for articles:
1) Is this noun singular? If your answer is yes, it needs “a/an” or “the.”
2) Is this noun specific? If your answer is yes, it needs “the.”

This chart also shows that the only nouns with no articles (Ø)* are plural and uncountable general nouns. Use the steps below to help you decide which nouns need articles.

*Proper nouns like people’s names also usually do not take articles, but to see the rules for proper nouns, please skip down to Step 4. Is the noun a proper noun? for more information.

1. Is the noun singular?
   All singular nouns must have articles.

   **Exercise 1: Singular or Plural**
   Label each of the underlined nouns with 1 for Singular and P for Plural.
   1. I saw a cat under a tree.
   2. Children usually love to eat candies.
   3. The table in the kitchen is a better place to study than the table in the dining room.
   4. In Vancouver, you’ll need to own an umbrella.
   5. She bought a loaf of bread and a kilo of potatoes.
   6. A cat has sharp claws.
   7. She ate an apple.

   Answers to Exercise 1: 1. cat (1) tree (1), 2. Children (P) candies (P), 3. table (1) kitchen (1) place (1) table (1) dining room (1), 4. umbrella (1), 5. loaf (1) bread (1) kilo (1) potatoes (P), 6. cat (1) claws (P), 7. apple (1)
2. Is the noun general or specific?

General nouns

“General” means we are not referring to a specific person, place, thing, or concept. We are talking “in general.”

For example, the following sentence uses the words dog and friend in a general way:

_ A dog can be a good friend._

In other words, we are talking about any dog in general, not about a specific dog in particular.

Specific nouns

“Specific” means we are referring to a specific object, person, place, or idea.

The following sentence specifies which dog the writer is writing about:

_ The dog next door is very friendly._

Because we know which dog is being discussed (the one that is next door), the noun dog is being used in a specific way.

There are several strategies for identifying specific nouns:

**Grammatical clues help you identify nouns that are specific**

1. The words “which, that, whose, who, whom”

_ The pen that you gave me isn’t working. Could you lend me another one?_

2. Prepositional Phrases that follow a noun also often help identify a specific noun.

_ The chair by the window has the best view._

_ The meeting at 3 p.m. today is about student loans._

**When only one item fits the description**

1. For example, there is only one president of the college, there is only one sun in our solar system, there is one kitchen in my house, and many families have only one car.

_ the sun the president the kitchen the car_

2. Superlatives such as worst, best, fastest, and slowest take the specific article “the” because they refer to only one thing. Only one item can be the best;

_ The best experience I have had in Vancouver is . . . _

_ I think that the hardest assignment I still have to do is the history paper._

3. Ordinal numbers such as first, second, and third also make a noun specific

_ the fourth page_

**The second mention of a noun**

1. When we use a general noun for the first time, we treat it as general, but for the second (and third, fourth, fifth, etc.) mention, we treat it as specific. For example:

_ James just bought new work shoes. He needed the shoes for a new job._

In the first sentence, shoes is general. However, by the second sentence, the reader knows which shoes we are talking about (the shoes that James just bought), so shoes is now specific and requires the article “the.”

2. Sometimes the previous mention of something is implied. Look at this example:

_ My friend rented a new apartment. It’s nice, but the kitchen is very small._

In this example, kitchen is specific even though it was not mentioned before because we know which kitchen is being discussed – the kitchen in the new apartment.
3. Is the noun general plural or general uncountable?

General plural nouns do not need articles.

Note the difference in the way the writer refers to “courses” here:

She is taking several courses.

The accounting courses that she is taking at Douglas College are transferable to other universities.

The first example sentence above refers to courses in general, so there is no article; however, the second example sentence specifies “accounting courses at Douglas College,” so the specific article “the” must be added.

General uncountable nouns do not need articles.

Uncountable nouns are materials, concepts, or categories that are not counted in English. For example, water, socialism, and information are not countable in English. Use an online English learners’ dictionary to check whether a noun is countable or uncountable.

Exercise 3: Uncountable Nouns

Underline the uncountable nouns. Ask yourself, “Can I count this?”

1. Presents made from gold are highly valued in almost any culture.
2. He asked me to buy salt at the grocery store.
3. Wind can be a serious problem for small boats.
4. She bought shampoo and a pencil at a drugstore.
5. It is important to include evidence in academic essays.
6. Most people love music.
7. Swimming is a very healthy activity.
8. Find as much information as you can in the library.

Answers to Exercise 3: 1. gold, 2. salt, 3. Wind, 4. shampoo, 5. evidence, 6. music, 7. swimming, 8. information
4. Is the noun a proper noun?

The distinction between common and proper nouns is important when you edit for articles because, in most cases, proper nouns do not need articles.

**Common nouns** are nouns that are not formal names, such as girl, ideology, school, city, and superhero.

**Proper nouns** are names of people, places, things, and ideas, such as *Mary, Confucianism, Douglas College, Vancouver, and Superman.*

However, sometimes proper nouns take articles, as in the second park name below.

Jennifer and Mary decided to meet at *Stanley Park*, not at the *Fraser River Park*.

Below are rules that help identify which proper nouns must take the article “*the.*”

**Rule #1:** If the word *of* is in the name, use *the*.

- *the University of British Columbia* and *Simon Fraser University*

**Rule #2:** Place names that are plural use *the*.

- *the Philippines* (plural) — *Canada* (singular)
- *the Rocky Mountains* (plural) — *Whistler Mountain* (singular)

**Rule #3:** When a place name includes *geographical words* like ocean, sea, gulf, peninsula, river and desert, we use *the*. However, place names with words like lake, mountain, bay, hill, island and park do not use an article.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Use the</th>
<th>No article</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>The Pacific Ocean</em></td>
<td><em>Cultus Lake</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The Caspian Sea</em></td>
<td><em>Grouse Mountain</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The Persian Gulf</em></td>
<td><em>English Bay</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The Fraser River</em></td>
<td><em>Vancouver Island</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The Gobi Desert</em></td>
<td><em>Stanley Park</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Rule #4:** When a place name is the name of a geographical *region*, we use *the*.

- *the Middle East*
- *the Prairies*
- *the North*

**Rule #5:** Names of *organizations* often need *the*.

- *the World Health Organization*
- *the Coquitlam Chamber of Commerce*
- *the National Hockey League*