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quicktips

ARTICLES: Choosing *a/an*, *the*, or nothing (∅) with COMMON NOUNS

Problem
Even after studying articles for years, many non-native speakers of English find it challenging to use articles, especially in formal academic writing in English. This kind of writing in general uses more nouns than other types of writing[1], and ***every noun requires a decision about articles***. In addition, this decision can have an important impact on a noun's meaning, and failure to use articles appropriately can also result in poor readability of a text for an American academic reader. Although native speakers of English have internalized these decisions and rarely have to think about article choice, non-native speakers of English must constantly think about whether to use *a/an*, *the*, or ∅. Making an appropriate choice—that is, a choice that does not violate English grammar rules and delivers the writer's intended meaning—can be complicated.

Solutions
It is possible to control a large percentage of your article usage by following the steps below. Basic rules about types of nouns and the articles that can be used with them govern the steps that you follow.

STEP 1: DETERMINE WHETHER EACH NOUN IS PROPER OR COMMON.
A noun is a word that represents a person, place, or thing. Nouns may be divided into two categories:
- **A.** A **proper noun** is the name of a person, place or thing and requires capitalization.
  Examples: Steven Pinker, Lake Superior, the World Trade Organization (WTO)
- **B.** A **common noun** is a word that represents a person, place, or thing but is not the name of that person, place, or thing. A common noun does not require capitalization.
  Examples: man, lake, organization

For each **proper noun**, see our quicktip, "Articles: Choosing *a/an*, *the*, or nothing (∅) with proper nouns."
For each **common noun**, see our quicktip, "Using an articles chart with common nouns," and follow the guidelines that begin with Step 2, below. For explanations of the examples, please see Student Writing Support's online self-study module for articles with common nouns.

STEP 2: DETERMINE WHETHER EACH COMMON NOUN IS UNSPECIFIC (also called "general") OR SPECIFIC.
Article usage with common nouns is affected by more than whether the noun uses a singular or plural form. With common nouns, writers also need to consider two things: first, whether the noun is **unspecific (general)** or **specific**, and second, whether the noun is **countable** or **uncountable**:

- **A.** **Unspecific (general)** means one of two things. One possible meaning is that the noun does not have a unique identity. That is, the noun represents all examples or instances of the noun without any reference to a specific member of the category which the noun represents.
  Examples: a man or men; a lake or lakes; an organization or organizations.
  A second possible meaning is that the noun is being mentioned for the first time in the text.
  Example: **A proposal** was made to the committee. The proposal outlined her research study.

- **B.** **Specific** means that the noun has a defined identity, which can happen for a variety of reasons. Examples include (1) the noun has already been mentioned in the text, (2) the noun is followed by modifying information that makes it specific, or (3) the noun is a unique person, place, or thing.
  Examples: (1) A proposal was made to the committee. **The proposal** outlined her research

[1] Biber, Douglas, Susan Conrad, and Geoffrey Leech. *Longman's Student Grammar of Spoken and Written English.* Harlow, Essex, England: Pearson Education Ltd, 2002. Print. 67.

study. (2) **The academic advisor** in the Office of Student Affairs outlined the courses she needed to take during her first year. (3) **The organization** responsible for rules of trade between nations is called the World Trade Organization (WTO).

STEP 3: LOOK AT EACH UNSPECIFIC (general) COMMON NOUN; DETERMINE WHETHER THAT NOUN IS COUNTABLE OR UNCOUNTABLE (which depends on your intended meaning or the context in which you are writing—for example, general vs. field-specific academic writing).

    A.   **Countable** means that the unspecific noun can be marked as singular or plural. Some examples of unspecific countable nouns are research study (one research study, two research studies…), proposal (one proposal, two proposals…), model (one model, two models), etc.
        1. If the unspecific noun is countable, then decide if the noun is singular or plural.
        2. If the unspecific noun is countable and singular, then use a or an.
            Example: I wanted to see **an academic advisor.**
        3. If the unspecific noun is countable and plural, then use ∅.
            Example: **Laptops** have become commonplace in **schools**.

    B.   **Uncountable** means that the unspecific noun can only be marked as singular, not plural.
        Examples: equipment, water, oxygen, chalk, English, engineering, research.
        1. If the unspecific noun is uncountable, use ∅.
            Example: He is seeking **information** about web design.

STEP 4: LOOK AT EACH SPECIFIC COMMON NOUN.

    A.   If the specific common noun is a specific reference, add "the."
        Example: She enrolled in **the nearest community college**.

STEP 5: EDIT YOUR TEXT BY PAYING ATTENTION TO TYPICAL PATTERNS OF ARTICLE USAGE ERROR.
We have found in our work with non-native speakers of English and their writing, both at the undergraduate and graduate level, that they experience two typical patterns of article usage error with common nouns:

- **Many writers neglect to provide *a/an* or *the* (or some other noun marker, such as "this" or "my") with singular, countable nouns.** Singular, countable nouns (whether unspecific or specific) should never stand alone; consequently, it is incorrect to say, "I wanted to see **academic advisor**."

- **Many writers neglect to provide *the* with nouns that are followed by an "of" phrase.** Most nouns that have been made specific by modifying information (as by an "of" phrase) use *the*; consequently, it is incorrect to say, "she was admitted to **college of her choice**."

We have found that when students edit by paying attention to these two patterns of error, they usually successfully edit most of their article errors with common nouns.

STEP 6: BE PREPARED TO SEEK HELP WITH EXCEPTIONS.
Even though the rules and resources above can help you control a large percentage of your article usage with common nouns, there are an unfortunate number of exceptions. Using a good learner's dictionary such as *The Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*, asking a native-English-speaking friend, and/or working with a writing consultant in Student Writing Support can help you note these exceptions.