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 <u>this</u> course*," or "*I'm enjoying <u>the</u> course*," or "*I'm enjoying <u>my</u> 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.

	COUNTABLE		UNCOUNTABLE
SPECIFIC	*The*		*The*
GENERAL	SINGULAR	PLURAL	
	a/an	Ø	Ø

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 <u>must</u> 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 <u>cat</u> under a <u>tree</u>.
2. <u>Children</u> usually love to eat <u>candies</u>.
3. The <u>table</u> in the <u>kitchen</u> is a better <u>place</u> to study than the <u>table</u> in the <u>dining room</u>.
4. In Vancouver, you'll need to own an <u>umbrella</u>.
5. She bought a <u>loaf</u> of bread and a <u>kilo</u> of <u>potatoes</u>.
6. A <u>cat</u> has sharp <u>claws</u>.
7. She ate an <u>apple</u>.

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)

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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 <u>any</u> 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 <u>that is next door)</u>, 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 <u>that you gave me</u> 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 <u>by the window</u> has the best view.*
    > *The meeting <u>at 3 p.m.</u> 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 <u>the</u> 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 <u>first</u> time, we treat it as general, but for the <u>second</u> (and third, fourth, fifth, etc.) mention, we treat it as specific. For example:
    > *James just bought new work shoes. He needed <u>the</u> 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 <u>the</u> 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*.

Exercise 2: General and Specific Uses for Nouns

Label each of the underlined nouns with **G** for General or **S** for Specific. Some of these sentences have article errors since the articles have been left out

1. _____ <u>Money</u> in his wallet is from Italy.
2. _____ <u>Money</u> is important in our society.
3. _____ Second <u>picture</u> she took at the party is great.
4. _____ <u>Picture</u> is needed on a passport.
5. _____ Her mother told her to eat <u>apple</u> every day after school.
6. _____ I took apple to school. I put <u>apple</u> on the teacher's desk.
7. _____ Students always need <u>pens</u> and paper.
8. _____ <u>Pen</u> she gave me is pink.

Answers to Exercise 2:   1. S, 2. G, 3. S, 4. G, 5. G, 6. S, 7. G, 8. S

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 cours<u>es</u>.

<u>*The*</u> *accounting cours<u>es</u> 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 <u>no</u> 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 <u>Stanley Park</u>, not at <u>the Fraser River</u> <u>Park</u>.

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 <u>the</u>.

<u>the</u> University <u>of</u> British Columbia and *Simon Fraser University*

Rule #2: Place names that are **plural** use <u>the</u>.

<u>the</u> Philippine<u>s</u> (plural) -- *Canada (singular)*

<u>the</u> Rocky Mountain<u>s</u> *(plural)* -- Whistler Mountain *(singular)*

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

Use *the*	No article
The Pacific **Ocean**	Cultus **Lake**
The Caspian **Sea**	Grouse **Mountain**
The Persian **Gulf**	English **Bay**
The Fraser **River**	Vancouver **Island**
The Gobi **Desert**	Stanley **Park**

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

<u>the</u> *Middle East*

<u>the</u> *Prairies*

<u>the</u> *North*

Rule #5: Names of **organizations** often need <u>the</u>.

<u>the</u> *World Health Organization*

<u>the</u> *Coquitlam Chamber of Commerce*

<u>the</u> *National Hockey League*

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