

Article Usage—Tips for Multilingual Writers

Articles (a, an, the) come with a complicated set of rules. You will acquire the nuances of article usage slowly, though extensive reading and writing and living with English, but there are a few rules you can keep in your editing tool box to help you with this difficult point in your writing.

The first thing to know is that articles are always used with nouns, so it is helpful to think of article usage in terms of the various kinds of nouns they accompany. This handout will outline two categories of nouns: proper and common nouns.

Most of the nouns in the first category do not need articles.

Proper Nouns

1. Proper nouns that fall into certain categories rarely need an article:

Category of Proper Nouns	Example
People's Names	Justin Bieber
Cities and Provinces	Vancouver, British Columbia
Countries and Continents	Canada, Asia
Months and Days of the Week	November, Friday
Streets	Granville Street, Yukon Street
Mountains	Mount Toby, Mount Baker
Parks	Stanley Park, Central Park
Religious Buildings	Chartres Cathedral, Temple Sholom

2. Some proper nouns require the definite article, "the": A/an is rarely used with proper nouns.

Category of Proper Noun	Example
Museums and Art Galleries	The Vancouver Art Gallery, The Museum of Modern Art
Buildings	the Kuala Lumpur Tower, the Space Needle
Highways	The Trans-Canada Highway, the Coquihalla Highway
Seas and Oceans	The Pacific Ocean
Rivers	the Fraser River
Deserts	the Black Rock Desert, the Sahara Desert

Periods and Events in Hisoty	the Renaissance, the Second World War
Bridges	the Lions Gate Bridge

Common Nouns

Common nouns can be classified in two categories: countable and uncountable. A countable noun refers to something that can be counted and therefore can be made plural. For example, one chair, two chairs. Singular, countable nouns must have an article or other determiner. For example, a chair, the chair, or one chair. Plural countable nouns may or may not have an article.

Uncountable nouns represent things which cannot be counted and therefore cannot be made plural, such as "rice," "fun," or "furniture." Uncountable nouns never use a/an (since a/an mean "one.")

Articles with Common Nouns

Type of Noun	Specific Reference	Nonspecific or General Reference
Countable Singular	the	a/an
Countable Plural	the	(no article)
Uncountable	the	(no article)

Singular Countable Nouns

The indefinite "a/an" is used with a singular countable noun that is not specific.

Ex: A storm is approaching.

The definite article "the" is used with a singular count noun that has a specific referent.

Ex: A storm is approaching. The storm should hit Vancouver around midnight. (Because "storm" has been mentioned in the previous sentence, it is a specific reference in the second sentence, thus requiring the use of "the.")

Plural Countable Nouns:

Plural countable nouns with no specific reference need no article:

Ex: In the Pacific Northwest, storms are frequent in winter.

Countable nouns with a specific reference require the definite article, "the."

Ex: The storms that hit Vancouver last winter were fierce. (Because “storms” refers to a specific set of storms that were in Vancouver last year, the reference is specific, requiring “the.”)

Uncountable nouns function similarly. When non-specific, use no article.

Ex: John went to his advisor for advice. (Here, advice is non-specific, so no article is used.)

When an uncountable noun has a specific reference, “the” is used.

Ex: The advice John received from his advisor was helpful.