Choosing the appropriate article can have an important impact on a noun’s meaning, and can also affect the readability of your writing. Every noun requires a decision about article usage — whether to use *a/an*, *the*, or *none* (*Ø*). This handout describes how to choose the appropriate article with common nouns.

A **common noun** is a generic noun -- it represents a person, place, or thing, but is not the name of a specific person, place, or thing.

*Examples of common nouns*: woman, dog, organization

**Two easy steps to help determine the correct usage of articles with common nouns:**

**STEP 1.** Determine whether each common noun is **specific** or **unspecific**.

- A **specific noun** is a noun with a previously defined identity. For example, it has already been mentioned in the text, it is unique, or it is followed by modifying information that makes it specific.

**Rule:** Specific nouns are preceded by *the*.

- An **unspecific noun** is a noun that does not have a unique identity. Additionally, it could be a noun that is being mentioned for the first time in the text.

**STEP 2.** Determine whether the unspecific noun is **countable** or **uncountable**.

[Refer to the Noun Classes Tutorial for more information.]

- A **countable unspecific noun** is a noun that can be classified as singular or plural.

**Rule:** Unspecific, countable singular nouns are preceded by *a* or *an*.

**Rule:** Unspecific, countable plural nouns are not preceded by an article.

- An **uncountable unspecific noun** is a noun that can only be classified as singular.

**Rule:** Unspecific, uncountable nouns are not preceded by an article.
Flow chart describing how to choose the correct article

Summary of rules and examples

Rule: Specific nouns are preceded by the.
Examples:
She presented her proposal to her committee. The proposal outlined her research.
The wine that I bought is on the table.
The sun rises in the east and sets in the west.
It took me three hours to finish the assigned reading for class today.

Rule: Unspecific, countable singular nouns are preceded by a or an.
Examples:
I need to buy a dress for the fancy party.
I swerved my car to avoid hitting an animal in the road.
He got lost when he made a wrong turn.

Rule: Unspecific, countable plural nouns are not preceded by an article.
Examples:
Dogs can be trained to act in movies.
Tornadoes can attain wind speeds of more than 300 miles per hour.
You should always wear a seatbelt when riding in automobiles.

Rule: Unspecific, uncountable nouns are not preceded by an article.
Examples:
I gained knowledge about the government during my internship at the White House.
Success is often determined by wealth.
Additional examples:

Making money is important to many parents in their 30s.

She drove to work.

Barack Obama was re-elected president in 2012.

I enjoy drinking soda more than I enjoy drinking water.

Practice examples:

Fill in the correct article: a/an, the, or none (Ø).

My sister is ___ dentist and my brother is ___ acrobat.

You need ___ passport to travel out of ___ country.

We went to ___ movie yesterday because it got ___ good reviews.

Mercury is ___ closest planet to ___ sun.

Exercise for Practice: Fill in the articles!

Yesterday when we went into ___ courtyard of our building for lunch, we saw ___ owl in ___ tree. We had never seen ___ owl before! This particular owl was pretty big and seemed to be sleepy – he had eaten ___ mouse and was feeling full. Even though there are lots of ___ mice and ___ birds in ___ courtyard, I doubt he will return – we disturbed ___ naptime too much! Still, I hope ___ big, sleepy owl might visit again. If he doesn't, I might go to ___ zoo to see ___ owl up close.

Sources and Further Reading/Practice:

http://www.englishpage.com/articles/index.htm
http://writing.umn.edu/sws/assets/pdf/quicktips/articleschart.pdf
http://esl.fis.edu/grammar/rules/article.htm
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