The Use of Articles with Common Nouns

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*.  

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*COMMON NOUN*

**UNSPECIFIC**

- countable singular
  - *a or an*
- countable plural
  - *
- uncountable
  - *

**SPECIFIC**

- *the*
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 **a** dentist and my brother is **an** acrobat.

You need **the** passport to travel out of **the** country.

We went to **a** movie yesterday because it got **no** good reviews.

**Mercury** is **the** closest planet to **the** sun.

Exercise for Practice: Fill in the articles!

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