Article Workshop

HOW TO USE DEFINITE AND INDEFINITE ARTICLES

UNG WRITING CENTER
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FALL 2011
Acknowledgements

- Many thanks to the ACT Learning Support and ESL staff for providing the space, the opportunity and valuable feedback for this workshop.

- The example sentences used in this presentation are taken from *Grammar Sense 2*, (1st ed.) as well as the *Purdue University Online Writing Lab* (“OWL”), available at http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl

- As usual, check ung.edu and the campus announcement boards for additional upcoming Writing Center workshops!
What we’ll cover

1. Some basic facts about articles
2. “a” vs. “an”
3. 6 specific rules for “a/an” vs. “the”
4. using articles in general statements
5. Some loose ends
Some Basic Facts About Articles

- Articles *the* and *a* are a specific type of **determiner** - they say something about the noun (=the thing, person, place or idea) and **make the noun more specific**!

- Types of determiners:
  - **Demonstratives** (“this,” “that,” “those” ...)
  - **Possessive det.** (“my,” “your,” “her” ...)
  - **Quantifiers** (“a few/a little,” “many,” “much” ...)
  - **Numbers** (“three,” “two-thousand,” “476” ...)
  - **Articles** (“the,” “a,” “an”)

**IMPORTANT:** except for numbers, NEVER MIX DETERMINERS!

- *This your car is broken.*
- *I ate the a few apples.*
Some Basic Facts About Articles

Confusing *a* and *the* can really change the meaning of a sentence:

*I bought the book last year.* (I bought a *specific* book.)

vs.

*I bought a book last year.* (I read *any* book, not a *specific* one.)

*I bought books all the time.* (I bought this general item.)

The three articles in English are divided into **definite** *(the)* and **indefinite** *(a, an)*

*a* or *an*? Use *an* when...
Some Basic Facts About Articles

- *a* or *an*? Use *an* when...

  ...the article is followed a vowel sound (*a*, *e*, *i*, *o*, *u*, sometimes *h*)
Quick practice for *a* vs. *an*

In the following examples, should we use *a* or *an*?

He arrived ____ hour ago.

The market sold me ____ bad apple. I think that _____ apple should always taste good!

Mother Theresa is often called ____ holy woman.

During the Oscars, the actress said, “It is ____ honor to introduce the next guest!”

“Careful, this is ____ hot plate.” “Okay, I will put it on ____ towel.”
Quick practice for *a* vs. *an*

In the following examples, should we use *a* or *an*?

He arrived **an** hour ago.

The market sold me **a** bad apple. I think that **an** apple should always taste good!

Mother Theresa is often called **a** holy woman.

During the Oscars, the actress said, “It is **an** honor to introduce the next guest!”

“Careful, this is **a** hot plate.” “Okay, I will put it on **a** towel.”
And now, let’s look at specific rules...

→ TWO VERY BASIC RULES
→ WHAT DOES “DEFINITE” MEAN?
→ 4 OF THE MOST IMPORTANT RULES
2 Basic Rules for Article Use

**Rule 1:** All singular, *countable nouns need an article* ("a," "an," or "the"). Choose “a” or “an” if the noun is indefinite, choose “the” if the noun is definite.

*Did you see a little boy walk by half an hour ago?*

*After the show, he found a $20 bill on the floor.*

*The man behind the counter is angry with the customer.*

**Rule 2:** Plural and *non-countable nouns do not need an article unless they are definite.* ("Some" is often used in place of an article.)

*I bought batteries for my camera. The batteries were expensive!*

*A doctor usually asks you to share (some) information.*

*Dogs are nice, but I prefer cats.*

*REMINDER:* “countable” means you can have one, two, or twenty of it!
What Do You Mean, “Definite”?

**Definite** noun = something that is defined, specific and known by the listener and the speaker

**Indefinite** noun = something that is new, not very specific and unknown by listener or speaker
4 Basic Rules for Definite Nouns

There are six rules that will help you determine when a noun is definite and requires “the”. (Tip: The correct use of “the” is a lot trickier than the correct use of “a” / “an”!

I. Use definite article **the** for one of a kind, part of a series, or superlatives:

*He is the best soccer player in all of Brazil.*

*The earth clearly revolves around the sun.*

*The student from Vietnam was the smartest in chemistry class.*

*When I took Biology 101 for the second time, I got an “A”.*
II. Use the definite article the for a noun that has already been introduced – one that the listener or reader is familiar with because it was already mentioned:

“Did you hear? I bought him a sweater and a watch for his birthday!”
“Yes, but the sweater does not fit and the watch does not work!”

A dog came running out of the house, but after a while, the dog decided to leave the man alone.
Practice “a/an” vs. “the”

Practice: choose “a” vs. “the”

___ man wearing red socks and a purple hat got on a bus going downtown. ___ bus was very crowded, and it often carries people from Little Five Points to the downtown area. ___ man sat next to ___ woman who also wore ____ purple hat. ___ man turned to ____ woman and asked her where she got her purple hat. ____ woman said, “It’s ____ store close to where I live. I will tell you where I got my hat, but only if you tell me where you got hose red socks!” ____ man became silent, and looked at ____ child next to him.
Practice “a/an” vs. “the”

Practice: choose “a” vs. “the”

A man wearing red socks and a purple hat got on a bus going downtown. The bus was very crowded, and it often carries people from Little Five Points to the downtown area. The man sat next to a woman who also wore a purple hat. The man turned to the woman and asked her where she got her purple hat. The woman said, “It’s a store close to where I live. I will tell you where I got my hat, but only if you tell me where you got those red socks!” The man became silent, and looked at a child next to him.
III. Use the definite article when you and the listener/reader are talking about something you and the listener/reader are both familiar with (even though you may not have talked about it for a while), or something that is actually near or around you:

“Oh no, the copy machine is broken again!”
“Again? How annoying.”
Can you pass the butter please?
There must be a fire, I can hear the sirens.

This is very similar to rule nr. II: Use “the” when the listener/reader has already heard, read, seen, or used the noun you are using!
IV. Use definite article “the” with certain everyday nouns (bank, store, doctor, hospital, bank, TV, Internet, park) that are familiar to you and everybody else in everyday life, or if there is only one of its kind:

I’m going to the store, do you need anything? Mrs. Stephens is on the phone with Jon, he is in the hospital.

The earth revolves around the sun.

The Internet can be a dangerous place for young children.

Tokyo is the capital of Japan.
Special Uses of the Definite Article “the”

- ARTICLES IN GENERAL STATEMENTS
- SOME “LOOSE ENDS”
What is the difference between these sentences?

*Students* often do not get enough sleep.

**vs.**

*The students* often don’t get enough sleep.

*The plants* usually need much light and water.

**vs.**

*Plants* usually need much light and water.
Especially in college writing, we often make general statements about an entire category or group of things – to make a statement, give advice or state an opinion about things, people, places or ideas that are not specific:

*Recycling programs* are expensive, *but citizens* usually like them.

*Chocolate* is made from *cocoa seeds.*
Rules for using articles in general statements

I. Use *a/an* for singular count nouns to make a general statement, and **no article with plural count and non-count nouns**:

Singular count noun:

*A cheetah can run very fast.*

Plural count noun:

*Cheetahs can run very fast.*

Non-count noun:

*Oxygen is necessary for our survival.*
II. You will also see *the* before singular count nouns, especially when talking about plants, animals, machines, and musical instruments:

*The giant panda* is an endangered animal.  
*The F-16 jet engine* is incredibly powerful.  
*It is difficult to play the violin.*
Let’s practice, shall we?

____ (Ø/The) biologists study the most interesting things! Here is ____ (an/the) example:
The Venus fly trap is ____ (a/some) famous carnivorous plant that grows in North and South Carolina. ____ (Ø/The) entire plant is about one foot tall. In spring, it has ____ (Ø/the) small white flowers. But the most interesting parts of ____ (a/the) plant are its leaves.

____ (Ø/The) leaves grow in ____ (a/some) circle around the bottom of ____ (Ø/the) plant. Each leaf opens into two halves. On ____ (Ø/the) surface of the leaves, there are ____ (some/the) short hairs. They are called ____ (Ø/some) trigger hairs. If ____ (an/the) insect lands on one of ____ (Ø/the) leaves and touches ____ (a/the) trigger hairs in a certain way, ____ (the/some) two halves close tightly around ____ (an/the) insect.

To find more information about ____ (Ø/the) carnivorous plants, look in ____ (Ø/the) plant guides, ____ (an/Ø) encyclopedia, or on ____ (Ø/the) Internet. It can be very interesting to study ____ (Ø/the) plants!
Ø biologists study the most interesting things! Here is an example:
The Venus fly trap a famous carnivorous plant that grows in North and South Carolina. The entire plant is about one foot tall. In spring, it has Ø small white flowers. But the most interesting parts of the plant are its leaves. The leaves grow in a circle around the bottom of the plant. Each leaf opens into two halves. On the surface of the leaves, there are some short hairs. They are called Ø trigger hairs. If an insect lands on one of the leaves and touches the trigger hairs in a certain way, the two halves close tightly around the insect.
To find more information about Ø carnivorous plants, look in Ø plant guides, an encyclopedia, or on the Internet. It can be very interesting to study Ø plants!
Some loose ends

1. “there is/are” is often used with a/an:

   *There is a big soccer field by the park.*

   (BUT: Avoid “there is/are” in academic writing!)

2. Do not use *the* in front of the names of languages or countries:

   *I like to speak French, but I have never been to France.*

3. Do not use *the* in front of the names of meals:

   *Dinner is in the evening, breakfast is the first meal of the day.*

4. Do not use *the* in front of the people’s titles or professions:

   *President Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas.*
THANK YOU FOR ATTENDING!

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