

Articles

(taken from Grammar Troublespots: An Editing Guide for Students 2nd Edition by Ann Raimes
New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992)

Other languages do not use articles the way that English does, so some second-language writers find articles to be troublesome. Although there are rules to help you, there are also a lot of exceptions and a lot of fine distinctions to be made. Do not expect to learn a rule, apply it, and then never make another error again. Learning to use articles correctly takes a long time. You need to read a lot, notice how articles are used, and make notes. You should also study and refer to the explanations, examples, and charts in this troublespot.

A. Type of Noun

The article you use depends on the noun it modifies, so you must begin by looking at the noun and making the following distinctions (see also Troublespot 12, "Nouns and Quality Words"):

1. Is it a *common* or a *proper* noun? A proper noun is the name of a specific person, place, or thing (e.g., James Raimes, Hunter College, England). All proper nouns begin with a capital letter. Other nouns are common nouns (e.g. man, school, country). For the most part, singular proper nouns are not preceded by an article (however, see item D). Plural nouns are preceded by *the*, as in *the Great Lakes* and *the Alps*.

2. If the noun is a common noun, is it *countable* or *uncountable* in the sentence in which you want to use it? Here are some examples of countable nouns:

chair	(a chair, two chairs)
meal	(one meal, three meals)
machine	(a machine, some machines)

The following are uncountable, or mass and abstract, nouns:

furniture	information	honesty
rice	gravity	fun
machinery	pollution	vocabulary
equipment	satisfaction	traffic
advice	knowledge	homework

(See also items B and C in Troublespot 12, "Nouns and Quantity Words.")

Difficulty with articles occurs with common nouns because what is considered countable and uncountable varies from language to language. In Spanish, for example, the equivalent of *furniture* is a countable word; in English, *furniture* is always uncountable. It has no plural form, and we cannot say **a furniture*.

Most grammar books list nouns that are regularly uncountable in English. However, someone else's list is never as useful as your own. As you continue to read and write in English, keep a list of any uncountable nouns that you come across.

B. Specific or Nonspecific Reference

Next decide whether a noun, in your sentence context, has a specific or a nonspecific reference for the writer and the reader.

1. A *specific* reference is known by the writer and by the reader as something unique, specific, familiar, or previously identified to the reader.

(a) My daughter is looking after *the dog* this week.

The writer here expects the reader to know precisely which dog is meant, the family's dog or a dog that the writer has previously identified and perhaps described.

(b) My neighbor bought *a dog*. My daughter is looking after *the dog* this week.

Here the dog is identified as the specific dog that the neighbor bought.

(c) *The dogs* that belong to the night guard have been trained to attack.

The reader knows specifically which dogs: the ones that belong to the night guard.

2. A *nonspecific* reference is not identified by the writer and by the reader as something known, unique, or familiar.

(a) My daughter is looking after *a dog* this week.

Here the writer does not expect the reader to know the dog in question. It could be any dog—a neighbor’s dog, a schoolmate’s dog, a poodle, a spaniel, or a sheepdog.

(b) *Dogs* are friendly animals.

Here the writer is making a generalization about all dogs everywhere.

(c) *Some dogs* can be trained to be attack *dogs*.

Here the writer is not making a generalization about all dogs but is limiting the statement with a quantity word.

C. General Rules for Articles

Once you have made these distinctions about the noun in the context of the meaning of your sentence, you can apply some general rules about article use. But beware! Article use is complex. The accompanying table offers only general guidelines to help you decide which articles to use with common nouns.

Articles with Common Nouns

<i>Reference for writer and reader</i>		
Type of noun	Specific	Nonspecific
Countable singular	the	a/an
Countable plural	the	Quantity words (<i>some, a few, many, etc.</i>). See p. 82 in Troublespot 12, “Nouns and Quantity Words.” OR No article with a generalization.
Uncountable	the	Quantity words (<i>some, a little, etc.</i>). See p.82 in Troublespot 12, “Nouns and Quantity Words.” OR No article with a generalization.

There are many cases that you just have to learn one by one. So whenever you find an exception to a rule, write it down.

Note: There are three important points to remember as you work with the table:

1. A countable singular noun must have an article (*a/an or the*) or some other determiner (*this, her, every*) in front of it. A countable singular noun *never stands alone*; for example, in a sentence, *book* by itself is not possible. You must write:

- a book
- the book
- this/that book
- my/his/etc. book
- every/each book

2. Uncountable nouns or countable nouns plural nouns are *never* used with *a/an*. Therefore, forms such as **a furniture, *an advice, and *a cars* are not possible. (Expressions such as *a few, a little, and a lot of* can, however, occur with these nouns.) To express the concept of amounts of uncountable nouns, we have to use expressions such as *two pieces of furniture, several types of food, three teaspoons of sugar, some items of information, or a piece of equipment*. (See also Troublespot 12, “Nouns and Quantity Words.”)

3. Some nouns can be determined as countable or uncountable only in the context of the sentence in which they are used.

Life can be hard when you are old. (Here *life* is generic and uncountable; the writer is making a generalization.)

My grandmother lived *a happy life*. (Here *life* is countable; the writer sees different types of lives: *a happy life, an unhappy life, a useful life, etc.*)

So what you intend as you write determines the category of countable or uncountable. Only occasionally is it fixed by the word itself.

D. Problematic Terms

The following word groups can cause difficulties.

Unique objects: *the earth, the sun, the moon*, but *Earth*

Places: *France, Central Park, San Francisco, Mount Vesuvius, McDonald's*, but *the United States of America, the United Kingdom, the Sahara, The Hague, the Statue of Liberty*

Oceans, rivers, seas, and lakes: *the Pacific, the Amazon, the Mediterranean, the Great Lakes*, but *Lake Superior*

Diseases and ailments: *a cold, a headache, the flu*, but *pneumonia, cancer*,

Destination: *to go to the store, to go to the post office, to go to the bank, to go to school, to go to church, to go to bed, to go home*

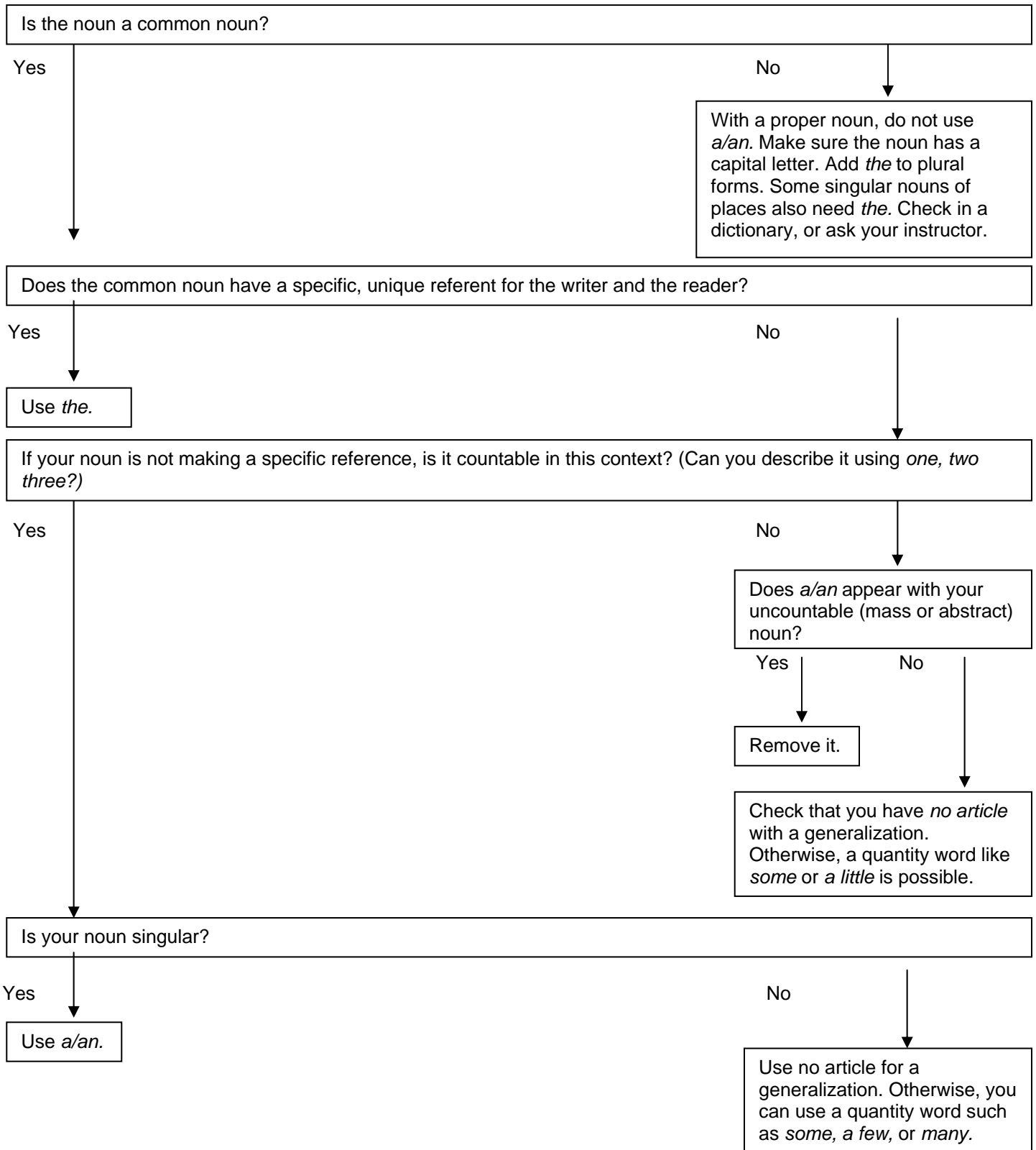
Locations: *at home, in bed, in school, in college*

Expressions of time: *in the morning, in the evening*, (but *at night*), *all the time, most of the time* (but *sometimes, in time, on time*)

When trying to decide whether to use an article, ask for help if you need it. Every time you learn a new use of an article, write it down.

Editing Advice

If you have problems deciding on *a/an*, *the*, or no article at all, look at each troublesome noun phrase and ask the following questions:



*For more practice, try this interactive grammar exercise: www.diane hacker.com/bedhandbook/subpages/gm_menu.asp