DOUGLAS COLLEGE

Learning Centre

EDITING FOR ARTICLES (no exercises)

Articles (*a, an,* and *the*) are one type of determiner. Determiners include many other words like possessives (e.g. my, his, John's), demonstratives (e.g. this, that, those) and quantifiers (e.g. some, many, most, all). This handout just deals with articles, but other determiners can often be used in their place.

Checking your Writing for Articles

Once you have written a draft of a composition, you are ready to begin checking your work for article errors. Follow the steps described in this handout. As you check your work, you may find some cases where you aren't sure what article to include. Mark those for later discussion with your tutor.

The first step is to go through your writing and underline every noun you have used. Then you should follow the steps described below to check each noun for articles.

Article Use with Common Nouns

First, you should consider each common noun (all the nouns that are <u>not</u> capitalized names).

This chart gives the basic rules for article use with common nouns.

	COUNTABLE		UNCOUNTABLE
SPECIFIC	*the*		*the*
GENERAL	SINGULAR	PLURAL	**Ø**
	a/an	**Ø**	

To use this chart, ask yourself these questions to decide on article use for each common noun:

        Is the noun general or specific?
        If it's general, is it countable or uncountable?
        If it's countable, is it singular or plural?
        If it's singular, does the next word begin with a vowel or consonant sound?

If you are unsure about the meaning of these choices, see page below for a discussion of each of these issues.

When you have finished checking all the common nouns in your composition, then you should check the proper nouns (the capitalized names). See page 4 in this handout for information about using articles with proper nouns.

Issues in Choosing Articles for Common Nouns

General vs. Specific

If you are talking about a specific thing, you need to use the article *the*, but if you are talking about a general thing, you do not use *the*.

A general thing uses *a*, *an* or no article. For example, a general use of the word *dogs* is in this sentence:
> *Dogs can be noisy.*

In this sentence, we are talking about dogs in general, not any particular dogs.

Something is specific if you are referring to a specific object. A specific use of the word *dogs* is in this sentence:
> <u>*The*</u> *dogs in that car are noisy.*

In this sentence, we are talking about specific dogs – the ones in that car – so we use *the*.

Usually, when we refer to a thing for the first time, we treat the first mention as general and then later mentions as specific. For example:
> *He bought new shoes on Tuesday. The shoes are black.*

In the first sentence, *shoes* is general. The reader knows nothing about which shoes he bought. In the second sentence, the reader knows that you are talking about the shoes he bought on Tuesday, so *shoes* is specific and uses *the*.

A good question word to use when you check for general or specific is the word *which*. If the reader knows which dogs or which shoes you are talking about, it is a specific use and needs *the*. If the reader does not know which dogs or which shoes you are talking about, it is a general use and does not use *the*.

Countable vs. Uncountable Nouns

Countable nouns are nouns that we can make plural. Uncountable nouns cannot be made plural.

General uncountable nouns do not use an article. For example:
> *Milk is healthy.*

Milk is a uncountable noun and in this sentence it is also general, so we do not use an article.

If you are unsure whether a noun is countable or uncountable, look it up in a good learners' dictionary. A tutor can show you how. The Learning Centre also has a handout on common categories of uncountable nouns.

General countable nouns use various articles depending on whether they are singular or plural.

Singular vs. Plural

General countable nouns can be either singular (you're just talking about one) or plural (you're talking about more than one).

If a general countable noun is singular, you use *a* or *an*. For example, we say:
> *She has <u>a</u> problem.*

If a general countable noun is plural, we do not use an article. For example:
> *She has problem<u>s</u>.*

Begins with a Vowel Sound vs. Begins with a Consonant Sound

General singular nouns can use *a* or *an*; it depends on the sound the next word begins with. If the word begins with a vowel sound, use *an*. If the word begins with a consonant sound, use *a*. For example, we say:
> *She bought <u>an</u> umbrella.*
> *She bought <u>a</u> raincoat.*

Because *umbrella* begins with a vowel sound, it uses *an*. Because *raincoat* begins with a consonant sound, it uses *a*.

Remember that it is the sound, not the letter, that is important. For example, we say:
> *He slept for <u>an</u> hour.*
> *She studied at <u>a</u> university.*

The word *hour* begins with a consonant, but the sound it begins with is a vowel sound, so we use *an*. The word *university* begins with a vowel, but the sound it begins with is a consonant sound, so we use *a*.

We use *an* before vowel sounds to make it easier to say. So, the sound the noun starts with is not always important. Sometimes there is an adjective between the article and the noun. It is the word immediately after the article that is important. For example, we say:
> *She bought <u>an</u> orange sweater*, but we say
> *She bought <u>a</u> red sweater*.

In both these sentences, the noun is *sweater*. However, because adjectives come after the article, it is the adjectives which determine whether *an* or *a* is used.

Articles with Proper Nouns

After you have checked all the common nouns in your work, consider any proper nouns (that is, any capitalized names). **Most proper nouns use no article.** For example, city names, street names and people's names do not use articles.

However, some proper names take the article *the.* Below find rules about when you need *the.*

Rule #1: If the word **of** is part of the name, you need to use *the.*
 For example, we say:
 the University of British Columbia, but we say
 Simon Fraser University.

Rule #2: Place names that are **plural** usually use *the.*
 For example, we say:
 the Philippines, but we say
 Canada.
 We also say:
 the Rocky Mountains, but we say:
 Whistler Mountain.

Rule #3: When a place name includes geographical words like **ocean***,* **sea***,* **gulf***,* **peninsula***, river* and *desert*, we use *the.* However, place names with some other geographical words like *lake, mountain, bay, hill, island* and *park* do not use an article if they are singular.
For example:

Use *the.*	No article
the Pacific Ocean	*Cultus Lake*
the Caspian Sea	*Grouse Mountain*
the Persian Gulf	*English Bay*
the Sinai Peninsula	*Beacon Hill*
the Fraser River	*Vancouver Island*
the Gobi Desert	*Stanley Park*

Rule #4: When a place name is the name of a geographical **region**, we use *the.*
 For example, we say:
 the Middle East
 the Prairies
 the North

Rule #5: Names of **organizations** often need *the.*
 For example, we say:
 the World Health Organization
 the Supreme Court

the *Vancouver Art Gallery*
the *New Westminster Public Library*
the *Coquitlam Chamber of Commerce*
the *National Hockey League*
the *Conservative Party*

Tutor Feedback on Article Use

Articles are difficult to learn in English, especially if your native language does not use articles or uses them differently than we do in English. The rules in this handout will have helped you check for basic article issues, but there may still be mistakes. Get a Learning Centre tutor or other native speaker to check your work for articles.

- First, ask the tutor about the places where you were not sure how to apply the rules. This will help you get better at applying the rules on your own in future.
- Then, have the tutor read over your work and point out any other article errors you have. This will help you recognize where you made mistakes applying the rules. It will also help you learn about article use that is not covered by the rules. Unfortunately, perfect use of the rules does not lead to perfect article use. A lot of article use needs to be learned from noticing article use by native speakers and from others pointing out your article errors.