



Douglas College

Douglas College Learning Centre

EDITING FOR ARTICLES (with exercises and answers) “*a/an*” or “*the*”

Articles in English may look simple but they are a complex part of English grammar to use well. This handout does not explain the grammar of articles in detail. Instead, it gives you strategies for finding article errors in your writing and fixing them.

Most article errors are problems with missing articles. An easy way to find articles you’ve missed is to look for these two things:

- **specific nouns** (as opposed to “general nouns”) because specific nouns need the article “the” or another specific determiner such as “my,” “this,” “those”
- **singular nouns** because the majority of singular nouns, whether general or specific, must have either “a” or “the” in front of them

The opposite of these two rules is that general or non-specific plural and **uncountable** nouns do not need articles. The key concepts to understand, then, are these words: specific, general, singular, plural, uncountable.

These rules are summarized in a chart on page 8 of this handout.

When should you edit for Article Errors?

Don’t worry about complex article rules when you are writing a first draft of a paper because you should focus first on the ideas and organization of your writing, not on the surface grammar. If you worry too much about article errors as you write your first draft, you will lose the flow of your thoughts. So, wait until after you have written a first draft before you go back and start to fix article errors.

How should you edit for article errors?

Once you start checking your writing for article errors, you should use the following steps:

1) Find nouns that are “Specific”

Nouns that are specific need “the”. You need to learn to decide if a noun is being used in a general or specific way.

General means that we do not know which specific object, person, place, or idea is being referred to.

For example, the following sentence uses the word *dogs* in a general way:

Dogs can be noisy.

In other words, we are talking about any dogs in general, not about specific dogs, so no article is used. Notice that the plural word “dogs” takes no article at all. General plural and uncountable nouns should have no article in front. This rule is explained in more detail on page 7 of this handout.

Specific means that we know which specific object, person, place, or idea the speaker/writer is talking about.

The following sentence specifies which *dogs* the writer is writing about:

The *dogs next door are noisy.*

Because we know which dogs are being discussed (the ones that are next door), the noun *dogs* is being used in a specific way.

English uses words called “determiners” to make clear whether something is specific or general. Determiners include words like *this*, *that*, *some* and *many*. Articles are one kind of determiner, and “the” is the determiner that shows a noun is specific.

Exercise 1: General and Specific Uses for Nouns

For the sentences below, decide if the underlined noun is general or specific. Write G for General or S for Specific. The articles have been left out to make it more challenging. So, some of these sentences have article errors.

1. ____ Money in his wallet is from Italy.
2. ____ Money is important in our society.
3. ____ Second picture she took at the party is great.
4. ____ Picture is needed on a passport.
5. ____ Her mother told her to eat apple every day after school.
6. ____ I took apple to school. I put apple on the teacher's desk.
7. ____ Students always need pens and paper.
8. ____ Pen she gave me is pink.

Ways to Identify Specific Nouns

1. **Grammatical Clues:** grammatical clues help you identify nouns that are specific:

A) The words “*which, that, whose, who, whom*”

These words often have the job of specifying a noun. Much like the determiners “*this, these, those,*” words like “*which*” and “*that*” identify which item we are talking about.

The pen that you gave me isn't working. Could you lend me another one?

Because we know which pen the sentence is about, *pen* is specific, so we put “*the*” before it.

- B) Prepositional Phrases that follow a noun, such as “*by the window,*” or “*at 3 p.m. today*” also often help identify a noun that is specific.

*The chair by the window is the best place in the living room for sun.
The meeting at 3 p.m. today is important for students who want to know about student loans.*

C) When only one item fits the description:

- i) For example, there is only one president of the college or of a country, there is only one sun in our solar system, there is only one kitchen in my house, many families have only one car.
the sun the president the kitchen

In each of these kinds of cases, we use the specific article “the” because the writer and the reader know which specific item is being referred to.

- ii) Superlatives such as *worst, best, fastest, slowest, most wonderful, least able* take the specific article “the” because they refer to only one thing. Only one item can be the best; only one item can be the worst, so superlatives make clear that a noun is specific.

*The best experience I have had in Vancouver is . . .
 I think that the hardest assignment I still have to do is the history paper.*

- iii) Ordinal numbers such as *first, second, and third* also make a noun specific because they refer to only one item, so they use the article “the” as well: e.g. *the fourth page*

2. The **second mention** of a noun

A good way to identify specific nouns is to pay attention to whether a noun has been mentioned before or not. Usually, when we use a common noun for the first time, we treat it as general, but the second (and third, fourth, fifth, etc.) mentions as specific. For example:

James bought some shoes. The shoes are made of black leather.

In the first sentence, *shoes* is general. The reader does not know which shoes James bought. However, by the second sentence, the reader knows which shoes we are talking about, *the shoes that James bought yesterday*, so *shoes* is now specific and requires the article “the.”

Sometimes the previous mention of something is not very direct. Look at this example:

My friend rented a new apartment. It's nice, but the kitchen is very small.

In this example, *kitchen* is specific even though it was not mentioned before. However, if we use a *which* question (“Which kitchen is it?”), it’s clear that we know *which kitchen* is being discussed – *the kitchen in the new apartment*.

Exercise 2: Choosing Articles in a Paragraph

To practice paying attention to the difference between “specific” and “general” nouns, write *a*, *an*, *the*, or \emptyset (\emptyset = no article needed) in the blanks in the following paragraph.

When ____ car behind me gets too close to my rear bumper, I get angry. This kind of driving too closely to ____ car in front of you is called “tailgating” in English. Tailgating annoys me for several reasons. First of all, if ____ car tailgates me, I sometimes get angry and do something stupid. One time when ____ car was tailgating me, I stepped hard on ____ brakes just to scare ____ man who was driving ____ car behind me. This could easily have caused ____ accident. Also, ____ tailgaters make me so nervous that I don’t always watch ____ road in front of me carefully enough. ____ friend of mine has ____ same problem. One day, he was watching ____ tailgating car in ____ rearview mirror. ____ car was so close that it was almost touching his rear bumper. Because he wasn’t watching where he was going, he rear ended ____ car in front of him. ____ most important reason that ____ tailgating annoys me is that ____ tailgater could easily rear end me. One morning last year, my sister was driving down ____ busy road. She had to stop suddenly, and ____ tailgating car crashed into ____ back of her car. ____ accident gave my sister whiplash. If tailgating wasn’t so dangerous, it wouldn’t bother me so much.

3. Substituting Articles with other Specific Determiners

One strategy for checking for and fixing article errors on specific nouns is to substitute other specific determiners for the article “the.” Determiners that specify include possessives (e.g. *my*, *his*, *John’s*) and demonstratives (e.g. *this*, *that*, *those*). You can see how this works in the following examples:

He bought shoes on Tuesday. The new shoes are black.
He bought shoes on Tuesday. His new shoes are black.
He bought shoes on Tuesday. These new shoes are black.

“*His*” and “*These*” do the same job as “*the*” to specify whose shoes we are talking about, so if you are not sure if a noun needs an article, or which article to choose for a noun, sometimes you can simply decide not to use an article and try to use another determiner (like “his” or “these” or “this”) instead. If you can use a specific determiner, you can probably use “the”.

II) Check that all Singular Nouns have Articles

The following exercise will help you see why you need to pay special attention to singular nouns when you are editing your writing for article errors.

Exercise 3: Singular or Plural

For each of the underlined nouns, write **1** for Singular and **P** for Plural.

1. I saw a cat under a tree.
2. Children usually love to eat candies.
3. The table in the kitchen is a better place to study than the table in the dining room.
4. In Vancouver, you'll need to own an umbrella.
5. She bought a loaf of bread and a kilo of potatoes.
6. A dog has ears.
7. She ate an apple.
8. The price for the textbook for this course went up this term.

Now, look at the singular and plural nouns in the exercise above and answer these questions:

Some nouns have no articles in front of them. Are these nouns singular or plural?

Which singular nouns have no article in front of them?

As the exercise above shows, singular nouns are very important nouns to notice in your writing because they all have articles in front of them.

When you edit your writing, look for any singular nouns that do not have an article; each of those nouns must have an article or a determiner.

If a singular noun is general, you must use “a” or “an.” Look at the following example:

Wrong: *She is taking course at Douglas College.*

Correct: *She is taking a course at Douglas College.*

If a singular noun is specific, it must have the article “the” (or another specific determiner like *this* or *that*) in front of it, such as in the following example:

The price of the textbook for this course went up this term.

III) Ignore Plural and Uncountable Nouns that are “General” (or non-specific)

Unlike the first two rules (that all “specific” nouns need articles and that all “singular” nouns need articles), all “general” nouns that are “plural” or “uncountable” do not take articles. These two concepts are explained briefly below.

General plural nouns do not need articles; only specific plural nouns need the article “the”.

What is the difference in the way the writer refers to “courses” in the two example sentences below?

She is taking several courses.

The accounting courses that she is taking at Douglas College are transferable to other universities.

In the first example above, we don’t know which courses she is taking, so there is no article; however, as soon as we specify which courses she is taking in the second example, the specific article “the” must be added.

General uncountable nouns do not need articles; only specific uncountable nouns need “the”.

Uncountable nouns are materials, concepts, or categories that are not counted in English. The Learning Centre has a handout (GR1.40) which lists many of the uncountable nouns in English.

Do the following exercises to get a sense of what we mean by “uncountable” in English.

Exercise 4: Uncountable Nouns

Look at the following sentences. Underline the uncountable nouns. Ask yourself, “Can I count this thing?”

1. Presents made from gold are highly valued in almost any culture.
2. He asked me to buy salt at a grocery store.
3. Wind can be a serious problem for small boats.
4. She bought shampoo and a pencil at a drugstore.
5. We had soup at the restaurant down the street.
6. Most people love music.
7. Swimming is a very healthy activity.
8. Find as much information as you can in the library.

If you are unsure about the difference between countable and uncountable nouns, you can use an English learners’ dictionary to look up each noun that you are not sure about. A tutor can show you how to do this. Or, instead of using a dictionary, you can ask a native speaker.

Because uncountable nouns can so easily be confused with singular nouns, it is important for you to learn to recognize the difference between countable and uncountable nouns.

Summary of Article Rules

The following chart summarizes the basic rules for article use.

	COUNTABLE		UNCOUNTABLE
SPECIFIC	<i>The</i>		<i>The</i>
GENERAL	SINGULAR	PLURAL	\emptyset
	<i>a/an</i>	\emptyset	

This chart can be simplified to two main questions that you can ask yourself while editing for article errors:

- 1) Is this noun **specific**? If your answer is “yes,” it needs “*the*”.
- 2) Is this noun **singular**? If your answer is “yes”, it either needs “*a*” or “*an*” if it is general, or it needs “*the*” if it is specific.

Practice**Exercise 5:**

Use *a*, *an*, *the*, or Ø in the blanks below. Note that street names do not take articles.

On October 12, Jim Parks, _____ Douglas College student, had _____ motorcycle accident near _____ corner of 8th Avenue and Queens Street. At 3:00 p.m., he was driving down Queens Street by himself in _____ heavy rain. At _____ 8th Avenue intersection with Queens Street, his motorcycle suddenly skidded on _____ wet pavement. First, he hit _____ car that was parked there. Then he knocked over two pedestrians, Gary and Tamara Smith, who were walking on _____ sidewalk. At 3:04, _____ officers from the New Westminster Police Department arrived. Jim Parks reported that he and Gary Smith were not injured, but Tamara told _____ officers that her arm hurt. _____ police took Tamara to the Royal Columbian Hospital for _____ examination. Mr. Parks’ motorcycle was dented, but he was able to drive home.

Exercise 6:

Use the editing principles in this handout to fill in the blanks with *a*, *an*, *the* or \emptyset

According to Paul James, five members of Canada's national soccer team took ____ fifteen thousand dollars in ____ bribes to lose ____ tournament in 1986. During ____ card game, four of Canada's players, David Norman, Chris Cheuden, Hector Marinaro, and Igor Vrablic, asked James to help them lose ____ game against North Korea. ____ game was ____ semi-final. James was surprised to learn that ____ men had already accepted ____ bribes from bookmakers to lose ____ games in ____ competition. At ____ card table, James agreed to help ____ other four players lose ____ game against North Korea. Before ____ game, Vrablic distributed \$1,500 to each player. After ____ loss, he distributed ____ same amount to each player again. James accepted ____ money, but he said that later his conscience bothered him. He gave ____ money back to ____ others and told Randy Ragan, ____ teammate, who in turn informed Bruce Wilson, ____ captain of ____ team.

Exercise 7:

Write *a*, *an*, *the* or \emptyset in the blanks.

1. ____ chair you are sitting on is not very comfortable.
2. There is ____ pencil on the desk.
3. ____ fish is very high in protein.
4. ____ dogs and ____ cats are popular pets.
5. ____ medicine that you gave me really helped my cough.
6. ____ igloo is ____ house made of ____ ice.
7. He wants to buy ____ warm winter coat.
8. ____ children next door got dressed up last night.
9. ____ coffee isn't very good for you.
10. She had ____ accident.

The Importance of Native-Speaker Feedback on Article Use

Because articles are difficult to learn in English, you will likely miss some of the errors in your writing. Get a Learning Centre tutor or other native speaker to help you check your work for articles.

- First, ask the tutor about the nouns 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, ask the tutor to 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 specific article uses that are not covered by the basic rules.

Other Exercises and Resources

For more information about or practice with using articles, see:

Learning Centre Handouts:

- | | |
|--------|----------------------------|
| GR1.21 | Articles with Proper Nouns |
| GR1.40 | Non-count Nouns |

Exercises in Books in the Learning Centre:

G1.08 Asher, A. (1993). *Think about editing: A grammar editing guide for ESL writers*. "Unit Five: Determiners." Boston: Heinle and Heinle.

G2.08 Cole, T. (1997). *The article book*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall Regents.

G2.02 Maurer, J. (2000). *Focus on grammar (advanced)*. Unit 6 "Count and Non-count Nouns" and Unit 7 "Definite and Indefinite Articles" White Plains, NY: Longman. **A computer program** for this is also available on the computers in the Learning Centre.

G1.13 Azar, B.S. (1992). *Fundamentals of English grammar*. (2nd ed.). Chapter 8 "Count/Nouncount Nouns and Articles." Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall Regents.

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EDITING FOR ARTICLE ERRORS – ANSWER KEY

“a/an” or “the”

Exercise 1: General and Specific Uses for Nouns

1. S Money in his wallet is from Italy.
2. G Money is important in our society.
3. S Second picture she took at the party is great.
4. G Picture is needed on a passport.
5. G Her mother told her to eat apple every day after school.
6. S I took apple to school. I put apple on the teacher’s desk.
7. G Students always need pens and paper.
8. S Pen she gave me is pink.

Exercise 2: Choosing Articles in a Paragraph

When **the** car behind me gets too close to my rear bumper, I get angry. This kind of driving too closely to **a** car in front of you is called “tailgating” in English. Tailgating annoys me for several reasons. First of all, if **a** car tailgates me, I sometimes get angry and do something stupid. One time when **a** car was tailgating me, I stepped hard on **the** brakes just to scare **the** man who was driving **the** car behind me. This could easily have caused **an** accident. Also, **Ø** tailgaters make me so nervous that I don’t always watch **the** road in front of me carefully enough. **A** friend of mine has **the** same problem. One day, he was watching **a** tailgating car in **the** rearview mirror. **The** car was so close that it was almost touching his rear bumper. Because he wasn’t watching where he was going, he rear ended **the** car in front of him. **The** most important reason that **Ø** tailgating annoys me is that **a** tailgater could easily rear end me. One morning last year, my sister was driving down **a** busy road. She had to stop suddenly, and **the** tailgating car crashed into **the** back of her car. **The** accident gave my sister whiplash. If tailgating wasn’t so dangerous, it wouldn’t bother me so much.

Exercise 3: Singular or Plural

1. I saw a cat (1) under a tree (1).
2. Children (P) usually love to eat candies (P).
3. The table (1) in the kitchen (1) is a better place (1) to study than the table (1) in the dining room (1).
4. In Vancouver, you'll need to own an umbrella (1).
5. She bought a loaf (1) of bread and a kilo (1) of potatoes (P).
6. A dog (1) has ears (P).
7. She ate an apple (1).
8. The price (1) for the textbook (1) for this course went up this term.

Exercise 4: Uncountable Nouns

1. Presents made from gold are highly valued in almost any culture.
2. He asked me to buy salt at a grocery store.
3. Wind can be a serious problem for small boats.
4. She bought shampoo and a pencil at a drugstore.
5. We had soup at the restaurant down the street.
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7. Swimming is a very healthy activity.
8. Find as much information as you can in the library.

Exercise 5:

On October 12, Jim Parks, a Douglas College student, had a motorcycle accident near the corner of 8th Avenue and Queens Street. At 3:00 p.m., he was driving down Queens Street by himself in Ø heavy rain. At the 8th Avenue intersection with Queens Street, his motorcycle suddenly skidded on the wet pavement. First, he hit a car that was parked there. Then he knocked over two pedestrians, Gary and Tamara Smith, who were walking on the sidewalk. At 3:04, Ø officers from the New Westminster Police Department arrived. Jim Parks reported that he and Gary Smith were not injured, but Tamara told the officers that her arm hurt. The police took Tamara to the Royal Columbian Hospital for an examination. Mr. Parks' motorcycle was dented, but he was able to drive home.

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Exercise 7:

1. The chair you are sitting on is not very comfortable.
2. There is a pencil on the desk.
3. Ø Fish is very high in protein.
4. Ø Dogs and Ø cats are popular pets.
5. The medicine that you gave me really helped my cough.
6. An igloo is a house made of Ø ice.
7. He wants to buy a warm winter coat.
8. The children next door got dressed up last night.
9. Ø Coffee isn't very good for you.
10. She had an accident.