

Article Usage Guidelines

This system can be used with common nouns only; it does not apply to proper nouns. The system is one based on the principle of successive elimination. Five questions must be asked in the proper sequence in order for the elimination process to occur.

There are two kinds of articles, definite and indefinite. There are also cases in which the zero article (i.e., no article) is applicable. Following are examples of all types.

DEFINITE ARTICLE (The)

First, identify the referent(s) (person(s), object(s), idea(s), or quality(ies) which a noun refers to or represents in the context). Then, ask the following questions:

1. Is the referent of the noun identified by a descriptive word or phrase that separates one referent (or group of referents) from all others?

If yes, use *the*.

The streets of Manhattan scare most drivers.

OR

The sound of dentists' drills makes many people wince.

If no, go to question 2.

2. Is the referent of the noun unique?

If yes, use *the*.

I want to see *the* White House some day.

OR

The sun is blinding to look at.

If no, go to question 3.

3. Has the referent of the noun been previously identified or can it be uniquely identified from the context?

If yes, use *the*.

Remove *the* lid from *the* pot when it has cooled.

If no, go to question 4.

INDEFINITE ARTICLES (A/An)

If no referents for the noun can be identified in context, choose between *a* or *an*.

4. Is the noun count (has singular and plural forms) singular?

If yes, use *a* (before words beginning with a consonant)

I have *a* test tomorrow.

or *an* (before words beginning with a vowel or vowel sound).

OR

I can only eat *an* apple right now.

If no, go to question 5.

ZERO ARTICLE/NO ARTICLE

5. Is the noun noncount (no plural form) or plural?

If yes, do not use an article.

I enjoy *cheese*, *coffee*, *cookies* and *green apples*. (She ate *a* green apple and *an* oatmeal cookie.)

In this world, nothing is certain but *death* and *taxes*.

- Benjamin Franklin

* This system was adapted from Barbara A. Mallett and Betty S. Sutton, The Ohio State University, 1980.