

quicktips

ARTICLES: Choosing *a/an*, *the*, or nothing (\emptyset) with PROPER NOUNS

Problem

Even after studying articles for years, many non-native speakers of English find it challenging to use articles, especially in formal academic writing in English. This kind of writing uses more nouns than other types of writing¹, and **every noun requires a decision about articles**. In addition, this decision can have an important impact on a noun's meaning, and failure to use articles appropriately can also result in poor readability of a text for an American academic reader. Although native speakers of English have internalized these decisions and rarely have to think about article choice, non-native speakers of English must constantly think about whether to use *a/an*, *the*, or \emptyset . Making an appropriate choice—that is, a choice that does not violate English grammar rules and delivers the writer's intended meaning—can be complicated.

Solutions

It is possible to control a large percentage of your article usage by following the steps below. Basic rules about types of nouns and the articles that can be used with them govern the steps that you follow.

STEP 1: DETERMINE WHETHER EACH NOUN IS PROPER OR COMMON.

A noun is a word that represents a person, place, or thing. Nouns may be divided into two categories:

- A. A **proper noun** is the name of a person, place or thing, and it requires capitalization. Examples: Steven Pinker, Lake Superior, the World Trade Organization (WTO)
- B. A **common noun** is a word that represents a person, place, or thing but is not the name of that person, place, or thing. A common noun does not require capitalization. Examples: man, lake, organization

For each **common noun**, see our quicktips, "Articles: Choosing *a/an*, *the*, or nothing (\emptyset) with common nouns" and "Using an articles chart with common nouns." For each **proper noun**, follow the guidelines that begin with Step 2, below.

STEP 2: DETERMINE WHETHER EACH PROPER NOUN IS SINGULAR OR PLURAL.

Article usage with a **proper noun** is affected by whether the noun uses a singular or plural form:

- A. **Proper nouns** in a **singular form** infrequently use articles. For example, you would not use an article with the following singular proper nouns: Thursday, Geography 1301, Coffman Union
- B. **Proper nouns** in a **plural form** frequently use "the." For example, you would use "the" with the following proper plural nouns: the Girl Scouts, the Minnesota Twins

STEP 3: DETERMINE WHETHER THE NOUN BELONGS TO A CATEGORY THAT TYPICALLY USES \emptyset OR "THE."

Some article usage with proper nouns is not necessarily dependent on whether the noun is plural or singular. This kind of article usage must simply be memorized.²

- A. **The following categories of proper nouns frequently use \emptyset :**
Proper nouns used as possessives (Darwin's Theory of Evolution).
Names of people (Barack Obama).

¹ Biber, Conrad, and Leech 67

² Holt 238-239; Swales and Feak 294

Names of companies (Microsoft).

Names of structures or buildings that contain the word “hall” (Nicholson Hall).

Names of a single mountain, lake, or island (Mount Everest, Lake Calhoun, Harriet Island).

Names of a continent, country, province, state, or city, except for those that contain the words “united” or “union,” or use an “of phrase” (North America, Canada, Quebec, Minnesota, Minneapolis).

Names of a college or university, except for those that contain an “of phrase” (Hamline University, Macalester College).

B. The following categories of proper nouns frequently use “the”:

Family names made plural with an “s” (the Pinkers).

Names of large regions, oceans, or rivers (the Midwest, the Atlantic Ocean, the Mississippi River).

Names of mountain ranges (the Rocky Mountains or the Rockies).

Names of countries that use a plural form or contain the words “united,” “union,” or an “of phrase” (the Bahamas, the United States, the European Union, the Republic of Korea).

Names of most buildings or structures (the Empire State Building).

Names of companies that contain the words “company,” “corporation,” or “foundation,” or that include “the” as part of the registered or official name (the Ford Motor Company, the Unocal Corporation, the Mozilla Foundation, The Nature Conservancy).

Names of theories, effects, devices, scales, etc. modified by a proper noun used as an adjective (the Doppler effect).

STEP 4: TREAT ARTICLE USAGE WITH ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS IN THE SAME WAY AS NOUNS THAT ARE SPELLED OUT. (This is true for proper nouns and common nouns.)

If a noun spelled out takes *a/an*, *the*, or \emptyset , treat the noun’s acronym or abbreviation the same way.

- **The UN [The United Nations]** has played a key role in the stabilization of Haiti after the 2010 earthquake. (singular proper noun)
- **Pocket PCs [personal computers]** are becoming increasingly popular. (plural common noun)
- **An HDTV [a high definition television]** has a clearer picture and better sound than **an SDTV [a standard definition television]**. (singular common noun)

When an acronym or abbreviation is used as an adjective, choose the article according to the noun being modified:

- **The NASA [National Aeronautics and Space Administration] virtual telescope** is currently providing high resolution images of Mars. (The choice of article, in this case “the,” refers to the common noun “virtual telescope,” not the proper noun “NASA.”)
- Microsoft is the current leader in **PC [personal computer] technology**. (The choice of article, in this case \emptyset , refers to the common noun “technology,” not “PC,” which is also a common noun.)

STEP 5: BE PREPARED TO SEEK HELP WITH EXCEPTIONS.

Even though the rules and resources above can help you control a large percentage of your article usage with nouns, there are an unfortunate number of exceptions. Using a good learner’s dictionary such as *The Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*, asking a native-English-speaking friend, analyzing sample texts that use the proper noun(s) under question, and/or working with a writing consultant in Student Writing Support can help you note these exceptions.

LIST OF RESOURCES USED

Biber, Douglas, Susan Conrad, and Geoffrey Leech. *Longman’s Student Grammar of Spoken and Written English*. Harlow, Essex, England: Pearson Education Ltd, 2002. Print.

Hacker, Diana. *A Pocket Style Manual*. 5th ed. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2009. Print.

Holt, Sheryl. *Success with Graduate and Scholarly Writing: A Guide for Non-Native Writers of English*. Burnsville, MN: Aspen, 2004. Print.

Swales, John M., and Christine B. Feak. *Academic Writing for Graduate Students: Essential Tasks and Skills*. 2nd ed. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2004. Print.

Yule, George. *Explaining English Grammar*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998. Print.