



Managing Article Madness

You've come across a **noun** (a person, place, or thing). Now you need to decide whether to use **a/an, the, or no article**. There are exceptions to the following rules, but this information can help you to manage a lot of the frustrations that articles create.

First, ask whether the **noun** is a...

Proper noun – a noun used for a specific person, place, or thing (e.g., President Obama, California, Santa Clara University, England)

or a

Common noun – a noun that is not used for a specific person, place, or thing and does not require capitalization (e.g., professor, assignment, education.)

Dealing with Proper Nouns

If the noun is a **proper noun**, is it **singular** or **plural**?

Proper + singular = no article

Examples: They were excited to visit **Santa Clara University**. Neither of them had been to **California** before. We met up at the fountain near **Benson Memorial Union**.

Proper + plural = definite article "the"

Examples: **the Broncos, the United Nations, the Golden State Warriors**

Dealing with Common Nouns

If the noun is a **common noun**, check whether it is **specific** (a noun that stands for a particular person, place, or thing):

Common + specific = definite article "the"

Examples: We have tickets to **the game** on Sunday. I have to pick up **the new textbook** for my class at **the bookstore**. We are taking **the freeway** because it will take less time.

If it's **common noun** but also **unspecific** (a noun that does not stand for a particular person, place, or thing), check whether it is **uncountable** or **countable**:

Common + unspecific + uncountable = no article

If it is unspecific and uncountable (i.e., a noun that takes the singular, even in mass form or quantity), it will not take an article (e.g., **advice**, **homework**).

Common + unspecific + countable = article

If it is unspecific and countable (i.e., a noun that can take the singular or plural form), it will often take an article (e.g., **the road(s)**, **a lab report**, **an apple**, **the photographs**).

To complicate matters further, check whether the **common + unspecific + countable noun is singular or plural**:

Common + unspecific + countable + singular = indefinite article "a/an"

Examples: **a professor**; **an advisor**

Common + unspecific + countable + plural = no article

Examples: We use **computers** all the time. **People** are always looking at **screens**. They traveled many **roads** in order to get here.

Key reminders:

- Specific, singular, countable nouns should always take an article or another determiner (e.g., **our**, **their**, **my**, **your**, **its**).
- Nouns that have been made more specific via modifiers will take the definite article (e.g., **the left arm of the patient**; **the trip of a lifetime**; **the hopes of many**).

