Articles

The indefinite article

- The article a (an before a vowel—an apple, an ear, an Italian, an orange, an umbrella) means one, without emphasis. Therefore, it can be used only with countable nouns:
    A man turned on *a* light.
    She ate *an* apple.
    A woman had *a* book on US social policy.

    No specific light, apple, or book is identified.

- *A* can not be used with non-count nouns such as *water, equipment, information*, nor with a noun that has already been defined (through previous mention). *A* is usually used with singular count nouns that are not definite, identified, or limited in number:
    an experiment, *a* participant, *a* city, *a* forest, *a* research paper.

- Because it means "one," *a* has no plural. Sometimes no article or adjective is used with indefinite plural nouns:
    Do you have books on US social policy?

    At other times, the words *some* or *any* are used:
    I have *som*e books.
    I don't have *any* books.

The definite article

- Once the indefinite noun has been introduced, it is afterward referred to as *the:* (the experiment, the participant, etc.):
    A man turned on a light. *The* man, John Smith, then sat down.

    This is also true with plural nouns and, usually, with non-count nouns:

    We conducted *experiments* on recombinant DNA. The results of *the* experiments…
    News has reached us from the battlefield, and *the* news is not good.

- However, persons and unique things or ideas are defined by their names. They will take either no article (usually, names of people, cities, continents, countries, lakes, parks, streets) or *the* (buildings, geographical regions, oceans, rivers, seas):
    the Atlantic Ocean, *the* Empire State Building, *the* Mississippi River.
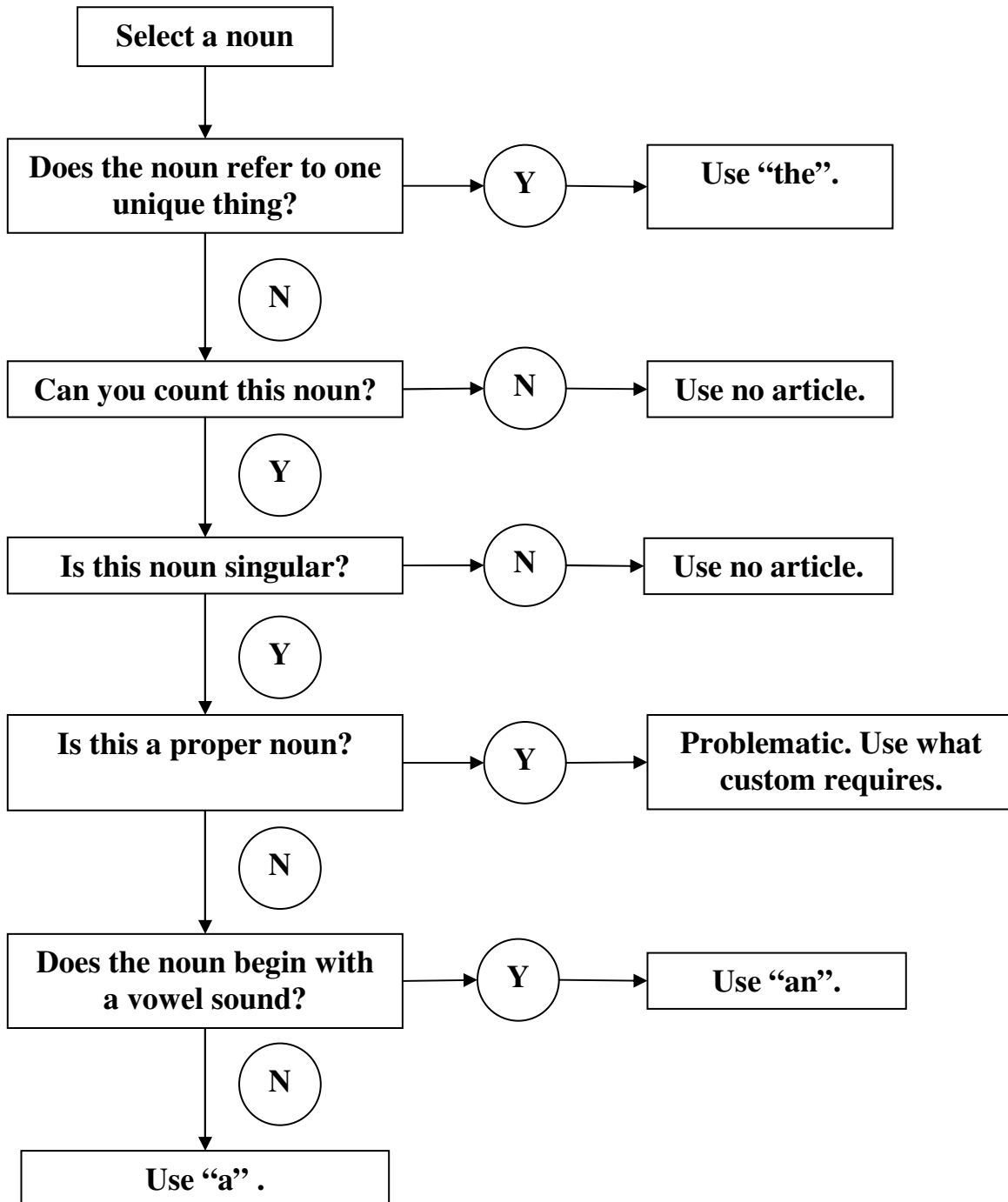
    Also, *the* can be used with a generic noun:
    "*the* Mexican," meaning Mexicans as a group.
    "*the* automobile," referring to all automobiles.

- In addition, *the* is used in comparisons:
  > Between those two students, Sara is **the** better writer.
  > Janice is **the** best writer in the school.

  The reason is uniqueness. There can be only one "best" writer, and between two writers, only one can be "the better."

- Persons or things are often identified at the time they are introduced, and *the* again becomes appropriate. The italicized words in the following examples show identifying terms:
  > The **only** newspaper I have is two days old.
  > The woman **with** Ms. Staples is our instructor.
  > The keyboard **of** computer #3 is cracked.

- In some instances, the need for *the* is not clear. Native English speakers say "the post office" even in a city where there are many post offices. Somewhat indefinite nouns will also take *the*:
  > **The** point is to leave now.
  > With **the** assistance of the police, I recovered my car.

- Most often, *the* indicates an understanding between writer and reader (or speaker and listener) that the person, place, thing, or idea is already known, or will be identified immediately.

How to choose articles

Select a noun

↓

Does the noun refer to one unique thing? → (Y) → Use "the".

↓ (N)

Can you count this noun? → (N) → Use no article.

↓ (Y)

Is this noun singular? → (N) → Use no article.

↓ (Y)

Is this a proper noun? → (Y) → **Problematic. Use what custom requires.**

↓ (N)

Does the noun begin with a vowel sound? → (Y) → Use "an".

↓ (N)

Use "a".

Adapted from a chart in *English for Science and Technology for Non-Native Speakers* by Thomas N. Huckin and Leslie A. Olsen (1988).

Tips on choosing articles

What makes a noun refer to one unique thing?

- It refers to something previously mentioned:
  > *The* reading you did for today's class
- It stands for all other items of its type:
  > Bell Labs invented *the* transistor.
- It is identified by a special marker adjective, such as
  > a superlative*:*
  > > *the biggest* test of the semester, *the most* important point
  > a particular (ordinal) number**:**
  > > *the second* semester, *the 50th* anniversary
  > a proper or distinctive name (usually):
  > > *The* United States (but Canada), *the* registrar's office, *the* Pentium 4 chip
- It refers to a time or place we treat as a collective unit:
  > *the* eighties, *the* earth, *the* golden years
- It is followed by modifiers, especially relative clauses or "of" phrases:
  > *the* dean who wrote the letter, *the* office in charge of admissions
- It refers to knowledge the writer/speaker and audience share:
  > *the* group project, *the* next home game
- It refers to a particular object, even if the reader doesn't yet know it's particular:
  > Plug *the* mouse into *the* socket on *the* back of *the* computer.

What makes a noun something you can count?

- It is readily found in plurals:
  > memos, students, tests, **but not** researches, waters
- It occurs readily with numbers:
  > five class meetings, 238 casualties, 48,500 workers
- It occurs after words that suggest numbers:
  > few drawbacks, most classes, many jobs

What makes a noun something you can NOT count?

- It refers to physical masses without distinct form or shape:
  > water, ROM, sand, fat, neon
- It refers to an abstract concept:
  > gravity, information, justice, satisfaction, apartheid
- It refers to ongoing processes:
  > research, growth, pollution, communication, tutoring
- It refers to a field of study or endeavor:
  > engineering, optics, materials, science, baseball

Using articles with proper nouns

Use *a(n)* with proper nouns when
- The proper noun is used to indicate characteristics of the named person:
  - He's *a* real Rambo in negotiations, isn't he?
- the noun means "a certain person whose name is":
  - "*An* Albert Gore called last night.

Use *the* with proper nouns when

- The proper noun refers to surnames in the plural:
  - The Martinezes are moving.
- You are distinguishing between people with the same name:
  - The Shaquille O'Neal I know isn't the athlete Shaquille O'Neal.

Use caution with proper nouns when

- The noun is part of an accepted geographical name (there's no reason, just custom, to most of these—check the examples as well as the definition in your dictionary):
  - the Philippines, the Bronx, the University of Virginia, the Red Sea, the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, the West, the Mississippi, the Great Lakes, the continent, the Alps
- The article is part of an accepted proper name, such as a ship, newspaper, desert, group or organization, hotel (you may have to check a dictionary or print example for these):
  - the Hilton, The Beatles, The New York Times, the Titanic, the United Nations
  - the Super Bowl, the Sahara, The Supremes

- The word is an acronym whose letters are separately pronounced (but watch those tricky exceptions):
  - the UN, The USA, the FBI, the INS,
  - **But:**
  - IBM, UPS, AT&T, UCLA, MIT, RCA, GM

Do NOT use a proper noun when

- the noun is a common noun used as a term of address: Father, Reverend, Professor
- the noun is an acronym that you pronounce as a word: NATO, UNIX, DOS