Do you ever find it difficult to decide whether to use the, an/an, or no article with a noun? If you do, you’re not alone.

Many speakers of languages other than English find that using articles in English takes practice. You will find it easier if you ask yourself these questions:

1. Is the noun a proper noun?
2. Is it unique, specific, familiar, or previously identified?
3. Is it countable?

Proper nouns begin with a capital letter and name. They include people (Maria), places (Perth), events (Federation), dates (Friday), groups (Australian), languages (English), religious terms (Islam), awards (Bachelor of Arts), brand names (Toyota Camry).

What to do with proper nouns:

- Do not use ‘a’ or ‘an’
- Generally do not use an article with singulars (e.g. Australia), but use an article with plurals (e.g. the United States)
- Check a dictionary (or with a native English speaker) or if you are not sure


Below we look at how our answers to these three questions determine the articles we use.

BB 2.3
If the noun is NOT a proper noun, ask:

2. Is it unique, specific, familiar, or previously identified?

If you answer ‘yes’ to this question, use ‘the’ OR a pronoun such as ‘my,’ your,’ ‘her,’ ‘his,’ ‘its,’ ‘our,’ ‘their,’ ‘this,’ ‘that,’ or ‘those.’

If your answer is ‘no,’ ask yourself:

3. Is it countable?

If the noun is countable, use:

- ‘a,’ ‘an,’ or a singular quantity word (‘each,’ ‘one,’ etc.) for a singular noun
- no article for a plural generalisation
- a plural quantity word (‘several,’ ‘many,’ etc.) for a plural noun

Example: I ate AN APPLE this afternoon. APPLES are delicious. I wish I had SEVERAL APPLES!

If the noun is NOT countable, use:

- no article for a generalisation
- OR an appropriate quantity word (‘a lot of,’ ‘some,’ etc.)

* Non-count nouns include:

Information, pollution, knowledge, honesty, satisfaction, fun, advice, rice, furniture, machinery, equipment, traffic, homework, vocabulary, gravity

Example: Can you give me SOME ADVICE? Sure, ADVICE is free!

Other useful resources:

Books

Websites:
owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/esl/eslart.html
www.rpi.edu/web/writingcenter/esl.html

http://www.studentservices.uwa.edu.au/learning
Email: www.study.smarter@uwa.edu.au
Ph: (08) 6488 2423
Fax: (08) 6488 1119
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