

## 16. If English is not your native language, check for common ESL problems.

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This section of *A Pocket Style Manual* has a special audience: speakers of English as a second language (ESL) who have learned English but continue to have difficulty with a few troublesome features of the language.

### 16a. Articles

The definite article *the* and the indefinite articles *a* and *an* signal that a noun is about to appear. The noun may follow the article immediately or modifiers may intervene.

*the cat, the black cat*

*a sunset, a spectacular sunset*

*an apple, an appetizing apple*

**When to use a (or an).** Use *a* or *an* with singular count nouns whose specific identity is not known to the reader. Count nouns refer to persons, places, or things that can be counted: *one girl, two girls; one city, three cities*.

▶ Mary Beth arrived in <sup>a</sup>limousine.

▶ We are looking for <sup>an</sup>apartment close to the lake.

A (or *an*) usually means "one among many" but can also mean "any one."

**NOTE:** *A* is used before a consonant sound: *a banana, a happy child*. *An* is used before a vowel sound: *an eggplant, an honorable person*. See the Glossary of Usage.

**When not to use a (or an).** *A* (or *an*) is not used to mark noncount nouns. Noncount nouns refer to entities or abstractions that cannot be counted: *water, silver, sugar, furniture, patience*. (See below for a fuller list.)

► Claudia asked her mother for ~~an~~ advice.

If you want to express an amount of something designated by a noncount noun, you can often add a quantifier in front of it: *a quart of milk, an ounce of gold, a piece of furniture*.

**NOTE:** A few noncount nouns may also be used as count nouns: *Bill loves lemonade; Bill offered me a lemonade*.

#### COMMONLY USED NONCOUNT NOUNS

*Food and drink:* bacon, beef, bread, broccoli, butter, cabbage, candy, cauliflower, celery, cereal, cheese, chicken, chocolate, coffee, corn, cream, fish, flour, fruit, ice cream, lemonade, lettuce, meat, milk, oil, pasta, rice, salt, spinach, sugar, tea, water, wine, yogurt

*Nonfood substances:* air, cement, coal, dirt, gasoline, gold, paper, petroleum, plastic, rain, silver, snow, soap, steel, wood, wool

*Abstract nouns:* advice, anger, beauty, confidence, courage, employment, fun, happiness, health, honesty, information, intelligence, knowledge, love, poverty, satisfaction, truth, wealth

*Other:* biology (and other areas of study), clothing, equipment, furniture, homework, jewelry, luggage, lumber, machinery, mail, money, news, poetry, pollution, research, scenery, traffic, transportation, violence, weather, work

**When to use the.** Use the definite article *the* with most nouns whose specific identity is known to the reader. Usually the identity will be clear for one of these reasons:

1. The noun has been previously mentioned.
2. A word group following the noun restricts its identity.
3. The context or situation makes the noun's identity clear.

- ▶ A truck loaded with dynamite cut in front of our van.  
When <sup>the</sup> truck skidded a few seconds later, we almost  
^  
plowed into it.

The noun *truck* is preceded by *A* when it is first mentioned. When the noun is mentioned again, it is preceded by *the* since readers now know the specific truck being discussed.

- ▶ Bob warned me that <sup>the</sup> gun on the top shelf of the cup-  
^  
board was loaded.

The phrase *on the top shelf of the cupboard* identifies the specific gun.

- ▶ Please don't slam <sup>the</sup> door when you leave.  
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Both the speaker and the listener know which door is meant.

**When not to use *the*.** Do not use *the* with plural or noncount nouns meaning "all" or "in general."

- ▶ <sup>F</sup> The fountains are an expensive element of landscape design.
- ▶ In some parts of the world, ~~the~~ rice is preferred to all other grains.

Although there are many exceptions, do not use *the* with most singular proper nouns: names of persons (Jessica Webner); names of streets, squares, parks, cities, and states (Prospect Street, Union Square, Denali National Park, Miami, Idaho); names of continents and most countries (South America, Italy); and names of bays and single lakes, mountains, and islands (Tampa Bay, Lake Geneva, Mount Everest, Crete).

Exceptions to this rule include names of large regions, deserts, and peninsulas (the East Coast, the Sahara, the Iberian Peninsula) and names of oceans, seas, gulfs, canals, and rivers (the Pacific, the Dead Sea, the Persian Gulf, the Panama Canal, the Amazon).

**NOTE:** *The* is used to mark plural proper nouns: the United Nations, the Finger Lakes, the Andes, the Bahamas.

Hacker, Diana (1993) *A Pocket Style Manual*, Boston: Bedford Books of St. Martin's Press pgs. 41 - 43