Tips for Successful Article Use

What is an article?:
English has two articles: the; a/an.
the = definite article
a/an = indefinite article

Let’s read the book.
Let’s read a book.

Tips on article use:
- Use “the” with something which has already been mentioned so that both the speaker and listener know what is being talked about.
  A man came up to a police officer and asked her question. The police officer didn’t understand the question, so she asked the man to repeat it.

- Use “the” before superlatives and ordinal numbers.
  The tallest student in the class is 2 meters tall.
  Please read the fourth paragraph on page 3.
  Today is the most important day in his life.

- Use “the” to refer to things that are unique.
  The earth revolves around the sun once every 365 days (Kohl).

- Use “the” before musical instruments.
  the piano; the violin; the saxophone; the erhu

- Use “the” in sentences or clauses where we identify a specific person or object.
The context or situation makes the noun’s identity clear.
  Close the door;
  I’m going to the library.

Use of articles with proper nouns:
- Proper nouns are names of particular people, places, and things.
  John F. Kennedy; New York City; Notre Dame Cathedral

- The definite article is not used with most singular proper nouns.
  X The George and I went to a movie last night.
  ✓ George and I went to a movie last night.
  Exceptions:
  When you want to be emphatic:
  the Elizabeth Taylor
  When you are actually using the name as a common noun:
  the George that I introduced you to last night
Use “the” with a surname in its plural form to refer to members in the family.

the Johnsons; the Greens

Careful!

-Singular geographical names are very irregular with respect to article usage.

Asia; Africa; Mount Fuji; San Francisco Bay; the Crimea; the Sahara

Examples of irregularities (Kohl):

State Street; the Empire State Building; Great Britain; the Soviet Union;
the University of Virginia; Bowling Green State University;
the United Nations (the U.N.); the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (but
“OPEC,” not “the OPEC”)

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*Adapted from:

*Adapted by Xiaodong Liu for the Writing Center.