

## 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<sup>1</sup> police officer and asked her a<sup>2</sup> question. The<sup>1</sup> police officer didn't understand the<sup>2</sup> 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.*

J *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*

## Articles

-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:

Kohl, John R. Article Usage. 11 September 2007. Online posting. <<http://www.wecc.rpi.edu>>.

\*Adapted by Xiaodong Liu for the Writing Center.

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