

Articles!

A Worksheet for ESL Students and Writing Consultants

Learning to use articles such as “the,” “a,” or “an” is difficult for many ESL students, especially if their native languages do not have articles or have different rules for using them. In fact, some non-native English speaking researchers live in the US for 20 or 30 years and still have friends help them put in articles!

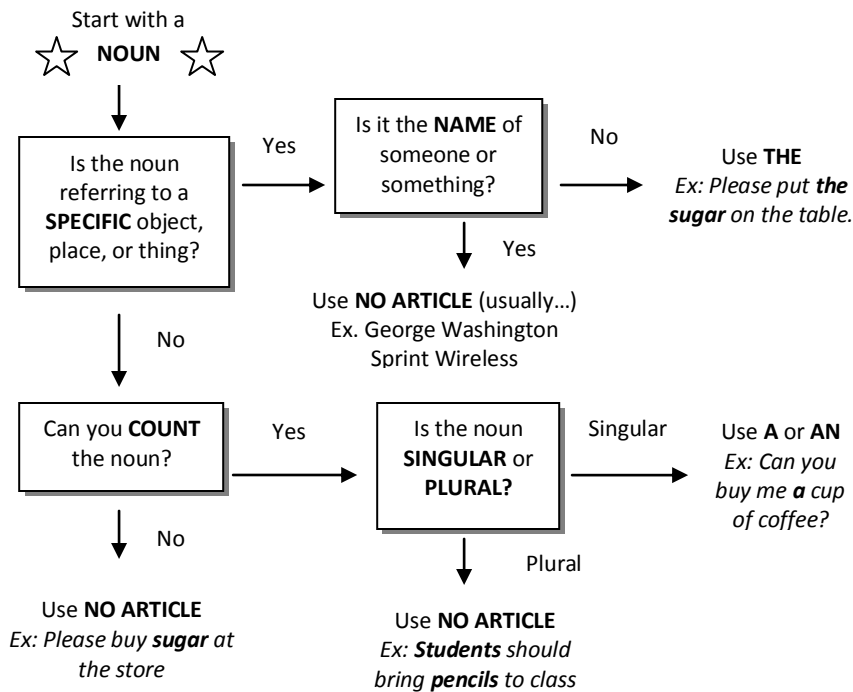
Articles can also be very difficult for many native English speaking writing consultants to explain to ESL students. Many English speakers are so used to using articles they don’t know *why* they use them where they do. Often, a sentence either *sounds right* or *sounds wrong*.

Both ESL students and writing consultants should remember that while articles are a common problem spot for ESL writers, they are not *as* important as other issues, such as organization and clarity. Even a paper with *no* articles is understandable. However, ESL writers might still want to work on articles, because it is something native English speaking readers notice right away.

This worksheet is designed to help writing consultants and ESL writers talk about articles in their conference. While the diagram provided below is not perfect, it is a good starting point for a discussion about article usage.

Article Flow Chart

The diagram below shows a series of questions ESL students and writing consultants can ask when deciding which article to use. On the back of this sheet is more information about this diagram and about *exceptions* to the rules.



Example

Can you buy me ___ cup of coffee at Starbucks?

Q. Are you referring to a **specific** cup of coffee?

A. NO. Any cup of coffee at Starbucks will work.

Q. Can you **count** the noun?

A. One cup, two cups... Yes, you can!

Q. Is the noun **singular or plural**?

A. Singular. Please. Or else I will never sleep!

Because the noun “cup” starts with a consonant sound—“c”—use “A.”

Can you buy me a cup of coffee at Starbucks?

Using the Flow Chart

Unfortunately, there are *a lot* of exceptions with articles. You can expect this diagram to work about 80% of the time. Still, the diagram points out three important ideas used to determine which article to use:

- Definite vs. indefinite nouns (i.e., *Is the noun referring to a **specific** object, place, or thing?*)
- Countability
- Singular vs. plural nouns

Below are a few **trouble spots** that ESL writers and writing consultants might want to discuss:

Definite and Indefinite Nouns: It is sometimes difficult to determine whether a noun is definite or indefinite, as it often depends on the situation. The sentence, “Please get ___ cup from the cupboard,” could work with “a” or “the,” depending on whether the listener knows which cup the speaker might want, or depending on how many cups the speaker has in his cupboard. It is not unusual for an ESL writer to place indefinite articles (“A” and “An”) correctly, but to have trouble using definite articles (“The”).

Proper Names: Names of people (“George Washington”) don’t get articles, though titles often do (“the President”). Proper names for places sometimes use a definite article (“the”) and sometimes use no article. For example, “the Grand Canyon” has an article, but “Niagara Falls” does not. There is no rule for this. When in doubt, type the name into **Google** and see if “the” is typically used.

Count Nouns: Whether a noun can be counted depends on the situation. For example, “sugar” is *usually* not a countable noun. (No one would say, “Can you sweep up 40,000 sugars?”) However, in a restaurant, someone might ask you to “pass a sugar.” Here, the speaker *really* means to “pass a *packet of* sugar.” Also, someone might ask you if you want to “get a coffee.” Though “coffee” is not usually a countable noun, because the speaker is talking about a specific *unit* of coffee—“a *cup of* coffee”—an article is used.

Multiple Correct Answers: Sometimes, when deciding between articles, you might find that there is more than one correct answer! For example, one can say, “We stopped the car so **the ducks** could cross the road,” or “We stopped the car so **ducks** could cross the road.”

Sample Sentences

ESL writers and writing consultants can practice using the article diagram together with these sentences. The answers are at the bottom of the page.

1. Dr. Weatherspoon provides ___ interesting perspective on article use in ___ English language.
2. Peter says he likes watching ___ movies, but he always falls asleep!
3. President Obama looked all over ___ White House for ___ coffee.

1. “an,” “the” 2. “no article” 3. “the,” three possible answers: “a,” “the,” and “no article”