

Using Articles in Seminary Papers

Using articles correctly is very difficult for ESL students. However, I want to impress upon you that

- a change in article sometimes changes meaning in important ways, and
- ESL students **can** successfully learn the rules.

First, I want to talk about the principles involved with some examples. Then, I'll give a list of count and non-count nouns.

Principles:

#1. A and an are called **indefinite** articles. If you use **a** or **an**, it means that either the reader doesn't know which thing the writer is talking about and there is more than one, or that it doesn't matter which one.

Examples:

If I say, "I read a theology book yesterday," I don't think you know which book I mean.

If I say, "I read an interesting article about Iraq in the newspaper today," I don't think you know which article, but I do think you know which newspaper, since most people in L.A. subscribe to the L.A. Times.

If I say, "I visited a Korean church yesterday," it might mean that there are lots of different Korean churches and the exact one is not important to the discussion.

The first time you mention something, if it's a count noun and not plural, you need to put a or an. The second time you mention it, you use *the*, since now the reader or listener knows which one you are talking about.

#2. The is a **definite** article. If you use **the**, it means either that the reader knows which one the writer is talking about, or that there is only one in existence.

Examples:

Jesus is the messiah. = There is only one messiah.

(If you say Jesus is a messiah, then you think there is more than one.)

The Holy Spirit, the Gospel, the Last Supper, the Lord's Prayer, the Pharisees, the Trinity, the Bible, the internet, the world

#3. If you place a prepositional phrase or relative clause after a noun, and that phrase or clause explains which thing you are writing about, then the reader now knows which you mean, it is definite, and the definite article **the** is used. **The** is used in this case even if no article would have been used without the prepositional or relative clause.

Examples:

The Methodist church on the corner of Indian Hill and Baseline is the one I visited.

Writing *on the corner of Indian Hill and Baseline* lets the reader know which one and makes it definite.

In Exodus, God calls himself the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob when talking to Moses.

The love of God is immeasurable. *Of God* tells which love and makes the noun definite, so one must write **the**. (But note: *Love is immeasurable* is perfectly correct as a generalization about an uncountable noun.)

#4. All singular count nouns in English have to have an article (or other determiner). They can never stand alone.

Example:

*I read book.

This is incorrect. It must be either *I read the book*, *I read a book*, or *I read that book*.

#5. When a noun is used to represent a type, group or class, **a** is used with singular nouns and **no article** is used with plural or non-count nouns. This happens very frequently in seminary papers, because students are often making generalizations or describing what is generally true.

Examples:

A pastor must learn to simply be present to grieving and suffering church members instead of offering theological explanations for their bereavement and suffering.

“A pastor” here means all pastors or any pastor, so **a** is required. “Grieving and suffering church members” and “theological explanations” are plural and represent any or all church members and explanations, so no article is used.

I recommend using plurals for generalizations, because a) no article is required, which is easier for ESL students, and b) sexist language is thereby avoided.

Example:

A caregiver should listen carefully to his/her care seeker.

Caregivers should listen carefully to their care seekers.

Both are correct, but if you stick with using plurals when making generalizations using count nouns, it's easier.

#6. Indefinite articles are not used with proper nouns or uncountable nouns.

*A homework, a advice, and an information are all incorrect. All three are uncountable and can't take **a** or **an**.

I have too much homework, too much advice, and too much information to cope with.

#7: There are special rules about using articles with geographical terms.

Do not use **the** before:

- names of countries (Israel, Judah, Galilee, Edom)
- names of cities, towns, or states (Jerusalem, Bethlehem)
- names of streets (Indian Hill, College Avenue)
- names of lakes and bays
- names of mountains (Mt. Sinai, Mt. Olive)
- names of continents (Europe, Asia, Africa)

- names of islands (Cyprus, Crete)
- Heaven

Do use **the** before:

- names of rivers, oceans, and seas (the sea of Galilee, the Dead Sea, the River of Jordan, the Red Sea)
- geographical areas or mountain ranges (the Middle East, the Alps)
- deserts, forests, gulfs, and peninsulas (the Negev, the Gulf of Suez, the Sinai Peninsula)

#8. Some common types of nouns don't take an article:

- Names of languages and nationalities (Hebrew, Greek, Korean)
(However, there could be a article if these are used as adjectives, for example, *the Hebrew language* , *a Roman centurion*, *a Korean pastor*.)
- Names of sports (I play soccer every Saturday.)
- Names of academic subjects (I study theology and pastoral counseling.)

#9. There are many idiomatic expressions which violate the regular rules.

Common examples are:

Locations: at home, at school, at seminary, on campus

Destinations: go home, go to church, go to college, go to work

Time expressions: all the time, most of the time, on time, at night

#10. Definite articles are used with superlatives.

Example:

He is the most effective religious educator I've met.

Count nouns that are commonly used in seminary papers:

church

Noncount nouns that are commonly used in seminary papers (note: many are abstract):

worship love truth salvation grace advice atonement faith forgiveness guilt holiness hope
praise redemption sanctification freedom understanding anger confidence knowledge
justice help peace abundance

Affliction Awe Communion Consolation Courage Darkness Death Deceit Distress
Divinity Dominion Education Envy Favoritism Fellowship Forgiveness Gladness
Glory Guilt Honor Hope Information Intelligence Judgment Justice Law Mercy
Mourning Music Persecution Power Pride Prosperity Rapture Reconciliation Refuge
Religion Righteousness Sorrow Strength Terror Trouble Truth Violence Wisdom

Some nouns can be both countable and uncountable depending on the meaning.

sin prayer revelation behavior

