Definite and indefinite articles: Linguistic principles of usage

The usage of articles is often unclear and difficult for second-language writers. However, language teachers and linguists find it difficult to analyze or teach, because our linguistic understanding of article usage is incomplete. Grammar books often provide simplistic discussion of articles, as if a few rules would help. In reality, article usage depends on various factors, including writing genre, and nuances that a writer wishes to convey (i.e., sometimes one has a choice, depending on the intended meaning). We have the following articles in English, and in addition, there are article equivalents and substitutes like some, as well as other determiners.

1. *a / an* [indefinite article]
2. *the* [definite article]
3. *Ø* [no article, or “zero article”]

A noun phrase consists of a noun and any articles, determiners, adjectives, or other modifiers with it (such as the book, a cat, or that red bird). The term referent means what entity or item that a noun phrase refers to; e.g., a noun phrase like the book probably refers to a specific book that one has in mind, in contrast to a book, which could refer to any book. The usage of articles depends on the following factors (and this presentation is rather different from how grammar books present it).

**Identifiable**

Depending on the context or writer’s / speaker’s intentions, what the noun refers to may be more clear; e.g., if one says *the car*, it is assumed the reader can more easily identify which car the writer has in mind, as opposed to *a car*.

Identifiability includes factors discussed in grammar books as (1) general versus specific referent, and (2) information status – whether the noun has been mentioned before in the context, i.e., new versus old referent. For example, *a penguin* may not refer to a specific penguin, or may introduce a new penguin to the discourse, while *the penguin* may refer to a specific penguin that one has in mind, or one that has been mentioned before. However, identifiability has a number of complexities that are not discussed in grammar books.

**Semantic class or type of the noun**

Nouns fall into a number of possible subclasses according to type of meaning. Oftentimes, a noun can belong to different semantic categories with different meanings, and thus, different article patterns. For example, *support* can be a concrete (physical, tangible entity (like a bridge support) or abstract (emotional support, financial support).

**Singular or plural**

Singular count (countable) nouns must have an article, or some other determiner, e.g., *a nail, the nail, another nail; that nail, my nail*; the choice of articles for plural count nouns depends on other factors. Sometimes a singular / plural difference is due to a semantic difference, e.g., *coffee* is a substance noun, while *coffees* is a count noun (one drinks coffee, but one can order a coffee or two coffees, meaning a cup or serving of coffee).
Keep in mind that other equivalent determiners may be used in place of articles, with the same functions as above:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>determiners</th>
<th>this, that, these, those</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>possessive determiners</td>
<td>my, your, his, her, its, our, their, one’s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>quantifiers</td>
<td>each, every, both, either, all, some, any, no, none, whatever, much, many, most, enough, few, a little, other, another</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Determiners in a noun phrase follow the following order (the following is from Cowan, 2008).

Adverb + Adjective + Predeterminer + Determiner + Noun

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predeterminers</th>
<th>Central determiners</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Quantifiers (all, both, each)</td>
<td>Quantifiers (any, every, some)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multipliers (double, twice, five times)</td>
<td>Articles (a/an, the)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fractions (three-fourths, two-fifths)</td>
<td>Possessive determiners (my, our, your)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Possessive nouns (John’s, Susan’s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Demonstrative determiners (this, that, these, those)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

E.g.: all the very delicious clementines
twice the price
three-fourths of every worker’s salary

1. Identifiable

\textit{the} + noun

A noun with the can be easily identified by the reader for various reasons. Often it is identifiable if it refers to a specific item that has been mentioned before, or if it can be easily identified from the context. A noun can be made identifiable in other ways, for example, when a speaker implies that it is identifiable, and the reader can easily make the necessary connections by drawing from his/her background knowledge. Sometimes this is used for special rhetorical or literary effects, as well as for highlighting new topics that are being introduced.

1.1. Specific noun, previously mentioned

When the writer uses the noun, the writer or speaker has one specific, unique item or member in mind, which has been mentioned before, or is easily recognized from the context. For example, when one says \textit{the dog is hungry}, one has a specific dog in mind, rather than dogs in general – the dog was mentioned before, or is physically present.
Mr. Smith and other state officials were quite concerned about effects of the coal mine explosion, so the governor held a press conference about the disaster.

1.2. Noun identified by post-modifier

Some nouns are made specific by a following modifier phrase, namely, a prepositional phrase, participle clause or a relative clause, that specifies which item is being referred to, and thus, makes it easily identifiable.

- …parallels between L2 and L1 acquisition can deepen our understanding of the general human ability to acquire language (Ko et al., 2004).
- For the purposes of this paper, we abstract away from the issue of L1-transfer and ask what factors guide L2 acquisition of English articles in the absence of article in the L1… On the basis of our experimental results, we argue that L2 learners’ errors in article choice are not random, but systematically reflect the role of a universal semantic feature… (Ko et al., 2004).
- Visitors to Niagara Falls often prefer the view on the Canadian side.
- Consumers tend to prefer the ones made in Germany.
- They won’t accept the computers that have been outfitted with proprietary systems; they only want AJAX or Apache systems.

Similarly, nouns marked with superlative adjectives or ordinal numerals are considered more uniquely identifiable.

- That was the most successful experiment that our lab ever conducted.
- In this economy, consumers will prefer the cheapest laptops they can find.
- Subjects remained focused on the first stimulus that they were presented with.
- That’s the last time I ever fly that airline.

So-called partitive of-phrases (X of something quantity phrases) usually take the as identifiable items.

- Some of the newly synthesized element decayed immediately.
- Some of the subjects did not complete the study.
- None of the participants answered the question negatively.

Names of theories, techniques, and such modified with a proper name are often marked with the, unless the name is in possessive form (Swales & Feak, 2004).

- the Heisenberg principle
- the Doppler effect
- Einstein’s special theory of relativity
- Kirkoff’s law

Notes on post-modifiers

Note that post-modifiers do not always make the noun definite. The following example was written with a definite article, indicating only one domain that the writers have in mind.
[1a] This paper investigates such L1-L2 parallels in the domain of English article usage, and argues for similarity between L1 and L2 acquisition of article semantics. (Ko et al., 2004).

In a different context, one could have written the following, implying that they chose one of several possible domains or areas of research; this would be equivalent to one domain, i.e., one of several possible domains.

[1b] This paper investigates such L1-L2 parallels in a domain of English article usage, and argues for similarity between L1 and L2 acquisition of article semantics. (Ko et al., 2004).

This depends on whether the post-modifier serves to identify a specific noun, as in [1a], or to merely define a noun, as in [1b]. The second type is purely definitional, or even hypothetical, as seen in the following examples. In [2a] a specific man from a group (probably known from the context) is pointed out and identified; in [2b] a type of man is defined – in this case, a hypothetical case.

[2a] I want the man who knows what love is.
[2b] I want a man who knows what love is.

1.3. Identifiable by association
New items are connected with previously mentioned items in the context, and the writer can assume they are easily identifiable. For example, in the following text about a particular computer, the underlined noun phrases are marked with the, because they are typical computer components, and thus are easily identifiable in the context.

The computer has been constantly malfunctioning. The hard drive had a corrupted boot sector, and the MBR had to be reinstalled. Then the BIOS settings somehow reverted to the factory settings. Then the processor overheated, because the fan was clogged with dust.

1.4. Topic highlighting or prominence
A writer may introduce a new topic – a new noun – with the, if it is an important topic or item that s/he will continue discussing. This draws the reader’s attention to the item, and is a common narrative technique in writing and speaking.

colloquial Did you hear about the fight last night?
Fight? What fight?
The fight between the Mayor Quimby and Mr. Brockman, the reporter!
narrative The campers found what seemed like a perfect spot, and wondered why no one else had taken it. They set up the campsite. Then the mosquitoes came. Swarms of them from all around, stinging and buzzing and running amok. The bugs made the campers so miserable that they had to quickly spray repellant, and scurry to a better spot. No wonder the site had been left alone by other campers.
Hall has been thinking about God, psychiatry, analysis, fairy tales, dreams and the monkey trap. As a boy he saw a picture of a monkey trap in a book, and he used it as a basis for a theory of human behavior. A monkey trap is a hollowed gourd with bait inside. The money reaches in and wraps his fist around the bait but can't remove his hand unless he drops the bait. The monkey never does. (NY Times Magazine, 18 Aug. 1996; cited in Epstein, 2002).

The hemlocks slumped already as if bewailing the branch-loading.

Investigation of parallels between adult second language (L2) and child first language (L1) acquisition has been at the center of intensive research in current acquisition studies... The shared assumption underlying this research program is that parallels between L2 and L1 acquisition can deepen our understanding of the general human ability to acquire language. (Ko et al., 2004).

1.5. Topic emphasis

Similar to topic highlighting is putting special emphasis on a topic. The first example shows a contrast between two formats discussed, letterbox versus another type of widescreen format.

The decision by FoxVideo to go with a widescreen format doesn't, however, satisfy Gary Reber, editor and publisher of Murrieta, Calif.-based Widescreen Review. “Mohicans,” he said, is a widescreen format, but not the widescreen format – meaning the so-called letterbox format. (LA Times, 12 March 1993; cited in Epstein, 2002)

The second more colloquial example emphasizes the British actor's name – by implication, not some other David Tennant or some other similar person. This emphatic use of the in fact tends to be more common in colloquial English.

Guess who we met? We met David Tennant!
You mean the David Tennant?

1.6. Exemplar

the + singular count noun

Sometimes a writer uses a singular noun with a definite article, referring to a specific entity that has not been identified. This entity is an exemplar, that is, a hypothetical item used as a typical example, rather than a specific entity that one has in mind. For example, in a text about wildcats, one might read:

The cheetah is the fastest land animal, capable of running bursts of up to 120 kph, and can accelerate from 0 to 100 kph in three seconds.

The writer has no specific cat in mind, but uses the cheetah as a rhetorical or descriptive device, where the reader pictures in his/her mind a hypothetical or typical cheetah. This serves as a hypothetical example, as a representation of all cheetahs or of typical, everyday, normal cheetahs. This is similar to generic nouns (see below), but is more vivid
for narrative purposes. This is more common in narratives and sometimes in academic prose, and is less common in spoken English.

A related use of *the*, especially in colloquial English, is for prototypical places and roles. In sentences like these, the speaker seems to assume the listener would understand what s/he is talking about, because s/he is referring to a store, bank, etc., that s/he typically visits, or one that is clearly identifiable from the context. Note that *to the hospital* is North American style, while British say *to hospital*.

I’m going to the store / the doctor / the bank / the park / the beach / the lab.
I’m going to the hospital. (North American English)

1.7. Point of view shifts

The use of *the* can indicate a shift in narrative point of view, or even the narrator’s point of view without regard for the reader’s understanding. This may be used to cause the reader to identify or empathize more with the writer’s point of view. This is a fairly common narrative technique, as in the following opening of a famous novel, and in the next example, a famous poem.

In the late summer of that year we arrived in a house in a village that looked across the river and the plain to the mountains. (Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms*; cited in Epstein, 2002)

Ah, distinctly I remember it was in the bleak December,
And each separate dying ember wrought¹ its ghost upon the floor.
Eagerly I wished the morrow²; - vainly I had sought to borrow
From my books surcease³ of sorrow - sorrow for the lost Lenore -
For the rare and radiant maiden whom the angels named Lenore -
Nameless here for evermore. (Edgar Allan Poe, *The Raven*)

1.8. Common knowledge

Some items are part of everyone’s knowledge of the world, and do not need to be identified, as they can be readily identified with little context. For example, we always speak of *the sun* or *the moon*, because these are readily identifiable – there is only one sun and one moon. However, if we lived on a planet with two moons (like Mars) or two suns (like a planet in a binary star system), we would have to specify which one. Also, when one has a particular wall in mind, one says *the wall*, or likewise, *the floor, the roof, the ceiling*, because these items are readily identifiable from their physical context, or from any context involving a house or building (any mention of a room or building calls up one’s mental concept of buildings, and all buildings have these components). The definite article signals that the item is one that the reader can easily identify from related background knowledge and connected with the rest of the context.

Notes

In cases where the referent is ambiguous, using *the* would be awkward.

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¹ Ember = glowing or smoking fragment of burning wood; wrought = made, caused to happen.
² Morrow = the next day, tomorrow (old style, not a commonly used word today).
³ Surcease = pause, delay (old style, not used today).
There were three females and two males in the focus group. The female usually gave incoherent responses.

In this case, the female is awkward, because the specific female referred to cannot be identified from the context. Instead, a different noun phrase is needed (e.g., one of the females) or an identifying phrase (e.g., the female participant from the art department).

2. Non-identifiable

Two main types of nouns that are not readily identifiable to a reader, and are not marked with the are normal first-mention items, and generic items, i.e., items that one discusses in general terms. However, it is hard to clearly define generic or give simple rules for what nouns are generic (there seem to be different types of generics), and there are some other tricky noun types as well. Sometimes whether a/an or Ø is used also depends on whether the noun is a more concrete or abstract noun (see below).

2.1. First mention: New (novel) items

- a / an + singular count noun
- Ø + singular non-count noun
- Ø + plural noun
determiner like some + plural noun

When a specific item is mentioned for the first time (and makes no assumptions about the reader's background knowledge or point of view), and when the writer may continue to discuss it, it is introduced with a/an in the singular, or in the plural with a zero article, some or other modifier. For example:

- Drawing on a well-established observation about child L1 acquisition, we argue that partitivity also plays a significant role in L1 acquisition… (Ko et al., 2004).
- Epsilon Eridani is located 10.5 light years away, and apparently has a gas giant planet orbiting it.

In the above passage, the underlined nouns are mentioned for the first time, and may be mentioned again later; the other nouns have no articles because they are abstract terms. In the following example, new nouns are introduced with the indefinite article (or another singular quantifier like another), or in the plural, with no articles.

The Caves of the Daemons are five in number. A broad pathway leads up to the first cave, which is a finely arched cavern at the foot of the mountain, the entrance being beautifully carved and decorated. In it resides the Daemon of Selfishness. Back of this is another cavern inhabited by the Daemon of Envy. The cave of the Daemon of Hatred is next in order, and through this one passes to the home of the Daemon of Malice – situated in a dark and fearful cave in the very heart of the mountain. I do not know what lies beyond this. Some say there are terrible pitfalls leading to death and destruction, and this may very well be true. (A Kidnapped Santa Claus, L. Frank Baum)

Notice that a dark and fearful cave is treated as new, because the writer is highlighting it as a new, specific cave, and how it is different from the other caves.
2.2. Generic

Ø + plural count noun (collective generic)
Ø + singular abstract noun
a/an + singular count noun

The plural with no article is used as a general, collective reference to all members of a group; the writer or speaker does not have one particular item in mind, but a group as a generic whole; the writer or speaker is thinking of the kind, type, species, or whole group. The specific referents are unknown to the reader, or are not important. Such generics are common in abstract or theoretical discourse, or when making generalizations or statements of general facts. Thus, these may often be in present tense, which is used for general statements.

Mother birds often regurgitate food to feed their young. Penguins can travel great distances to bring food and regurgitate it for their young.

Note the difference between “a penguin regurgitates food for is young” as a general statement, versus “a penguin regurgitated food for its young” – a specific entity introduced for the first time in a narrative.

2.3. Definitions

Definitions and examples tend to use singular nouns, with a/an plus count nouns or Ø plus non-count nouns (this is a special type of generic usage). Articles are not used with names of fields of study (Swales & Freak, 2004).

- Silicon is an element below carbon on the periodic chart, and because of its similar electron shell configuration, Si is a good candidate as a basis for alternative non-organic forms of life.
- I want a man who knows what love is.
- Phonology is the study of the sound system of language.

2.4. Special uses

Generics are used in some prepositional phrases without articles, where the main meaning is not the noun itself, but the focus is on a more general meaning. Phrases with by + noun focus on the type of means of transport or means by which something is done, not a specific vehicle. In phrases with prepositions of location (e.g., to + noun, in + noun), the meaning is the type of institution, location or place, not the specific location. This kind of construction is common with common with places that are culturally commonplace, or commonplace in a particular field, and inferrable from context.

I'm going by car / bus / boat / plane / hovercraft / ferry / spaceship.
I'm going to school / church.
I'm going to hospital. (British)
Those in government / in education should reconsider this policy.
The satellite is still in orbit.
3. Semantic noun class

3.1. Mass versus count nouns

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{mass} & + & \text{count noun} \\
\ O & + & \text{mass noun} \\
\ a / \ the & + & \text{count noun}
\end{align*}
\]

Grammar books typically discuss the distinction between mass nouns and count nouns in regard to articles. Count nouns are individual objects or items that can be counted, while mass nouns refer to masses – substances, materials, or non-countable things.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>count</th>
<th>count [plural]</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>coffee</td>
<td>a / the mug</td>
<td>(the) mugs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>support</td>
<td>a / the helper</td>
<td>(the) helpers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>computing</td>
<td>a / the computer</td>
<td>(the) computers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>math(^4)</td>
<td>mathematician</td>
<td>(the) mathematicians</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>school</td>
<td>a / the student</td>
<td>(the) students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>paper</td>
<td>a / the document</td>
<td>(the) documents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>religion</td>
<td>a / the church</td>
<td>(the) churches</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>food</td>
<td>a / the rice roll</td>
<td>(the) rice rolls</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>flora</td>
<td>a / the plant</td>
<td>(the) plants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fauna</td>
<td>a / the animal</td>
<td>(the) animals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>plumage</td>
<td>a / the feather</td>
<td>(the) feathers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

However, this distinction becomes complicated in some cases. A following modifier phrase can make a mass noun more specific or concrete (e.g., a particular type or instance of flora), and can thus take the.  

The flora of the Nepali plains  
The food that domesticated swine are most likely to eat

Some nouns have different meanings as more abstract mass nouns, or as count nouns.

I drink a cup / three cups of coffee every morning.  [mass]  
I’d like to order a coffee / three coffees to go.  [count]  
We need your support for this project to succeed.  [mass]  
The ship crashed into the bridge support, causing part of it to collapse.  [count]

The category of count nouns is somewhat clearer, and will be described as object nouns below. The category of mass nouns is clear when referring to names of substances. However, more abstract nouns are trickier, due to different possible nuances. The following sections will make more detailed distinctions among object nouns, mass nouns, and different types of abstract nouns, such as event / activity nouns, state / property nouns, which can vary, depending on the type of meaning.

\(^4\) In British English, maths is used for mathematics.
3.2. Object (count) nouns

These refer to physical items and objects – specific, individual, identifiable entities, as opposed to substances or abstract ideas, and are thus countable nouns. These include physical objects, persons, other living entities, and specific locations. In the singular, such count nouns require an article (definite or indefinite) or other determiner. In the plural they take an article (or other determiner), unless they are used generically.

the ball, the dog, the sister / my sister, the woodcutter, a cat, a rhododendron, a computer, the speakers, some pencils, the bus stop, the province,

Note some of the following specialized cases.

1. Geographical place names where the main noun is often a specific entity noun or a specific referent (especially if the first part like ‘East’ is adjectival).
   • the East Sea, the Sahara [Desert]
   However, oftentimes a noun modifier takes no article – a proper noun (see below) place name that is a compound noun.
   • Sunset Lake, Thunder Island, Thunder Bay, St. James Lake

2. Public institutions, facilities, groups, newspapers – if the main noun or the referent is a specific entity, they take an article.
   • the Student Union, the Sheraton [Hotel], the White House, the Washington Post

3. Pluralized names in collective geographic terms, families, teams – these are based on plural count nouns.
   • the Netherlands, the Bahamas, the Alps, the Smiths, the Wombats (team name)

3.3. Mass nouns (substance, non-count nouns)

These refer to substances, or otherwise non-individual masses – not individual entities. These take no indefinite articles on first mention, but later mentions of these nouns may be marked with the; and these are singular.

Ø water, Ø coffee, Ø atmosphere, Ø glue, Ø carbon, Ø air, Ø plasma, Ø dirt, Ø paper
the water, the coffee, the atmosphere, the glue, the carbon, the air, the plasma, the dirt, the paper

However, many of these can take on different meanings as count (entity) nouns; they may be marked with the when referring to a specific type or quantity of something (e.g., the water of Mars, the coffee that we ordered, or when ordering ‘a coffee’ means a particular amount of coffee, such as a cup of coffee). The word tape can be a mass noun (like packing tape) or a count noun (like a cassette tape).

• a water (a glass or bottle of water)
• an atmosphere (a specific atmosphere or type of atmosphere, like the atmosphere of Mars)
• a glue (a bottle of glue, or a particular type of glue that the speaker has in mind)
3.4. Abstract nouns
You may have learned that abstract nouns take no articles, but the reality is more complicated. What we call abstract nouns by default have no articles, and are most often singular. However, the same nouns can take on less abstract meanings with articles or as plural nouns.

These nouns tend to fall in the following subcategories (though these may overlap somewhat – some nouns could easily belong to more than one of these subgroups, so it is not important that we be able to classify a noun into any of these subgroups).

(a) Events and activities
These are nouns that refer to events and activities. As such, they can often be described as having a beginning and an endpoint. Often these refer to specific instances and are marked with *a/an* or *the* (“the meeting began at 7pm and ended at 10pm”), versus a general activity or type of activity with no article (“Ø meeting the boss can be rather unpleasant”).

meeting, excavation, occurrence, running, fall, collapse, summer, deletion, swimming, bungee jumping

(b) States, conditions, properties
These nouns refer to states or conditions, or refer to properties or characteristics of things. One could speak generally (“existence is hard to define”) or more specifically, i.e., of a particular instance or type of the condition or property (“my existence / the existence of humanity”).

redness, absence, dominance, existence, loneliness, shyness, reticence, status

(c) Mental states, feelings, and events
These related to psychological, emotional, or cognitive states, and can be general and abstract (“hope is alive”) or a specific instance or type (“the love of money”).

realization, thought, perception, hatred, love, anger, endearment, pleasure, happiness, hope

(d) “Propositional” or conceptual nouns
Many of these abstract nouns can be called propositional, because these imply “X does Y” – a proposition or statement, in logic terminology. This is especially the case if they are derived from or related to verbs or other words. For example, *belief* implies a proposition that “X believes Y” or “someone believes something”. This subcategory naturally overlaps with others – many nouns can belong to this and the other subgroups above.

hope, existence, determination, finding, causation, ontology, imposition,

These are singular with no article if they denote a general or abstract activity, states, or concepts. They can become specific when referring to a specific instance or type, e.g., with a post-modifier phrase.

We need help / support / energy / insight for this to succeed.
We need the help of all contributors for this to succeed.
Philosophers have debated ontology and epistemology for centuries. Sometimes they even debate things like causality. A starting point of discussion may be the ontology and epistemology of Plato.

4. Abstract versus less abstract uses

Such nouns can be abstract, e.g., when referring to general activities, states, conditions, properties, mental states, or (propositional) concepts, without articles. They can be used with more concrete or more specific meanings with articles and/or plural forms, e.g., when referring to specific instances, events, examples, or types.

- **Fishing** is popular here. [general activity]
- The fishing at this lake is often good. [specific event or type]

- Bungee jumping is a great catharsis. [general activity]
- I did a bungee jump last week. [specific event]
- The bungee jumps were quite enjoyable. [specific event]

- **Time** is a progression of events in a physical universe. [state, property, or condition]
- I don’t have time for this. [state, property, or condition]
- I had a really good time. [specific instance]
- That was the time when we missed a deadline. [specific instance]

- Thinking is a necessary part of consciousness. [mental state]
- I just had a strange thought. [a mental process, i.e., event]

Also: his existence, a solitary existence, the finding(s), my/the determination, the ontology, the realization, the pleasure...

- This shows great insight into the problem. [general state or concept]
- The / These / Their insights were most helpful. [specific type or instance]

- **Communism** has proven to be a failed experiment. [general concept]
- The communism of North Korea is an unorthodox mixture of Marxism and other influences. [specific type]

As discussed in a previous section, a following modifier phrase can make it more specific, by referring to a particular instance of something, or a particular kind of something.

- The support of the staff was crucial in the project’s success.
- The love of a child can sometimes be the most rewarding thing for parents.
- The existence of aliens at this point rather begs belief.
- The imposition upon my time was unbearable.
5. Notes

1. Another type of “number” besides singular and plural might be collective nouns, such as collective plural nouns, which act as generic or regular count nouns. In British English these are more common, and can be used with plural verbs.

   The people are restless.
   The government are considering a revised immigration policy. [British]
   The team are practicing for the championship match. [British]

2. Style and genre are another consideration. Sometimes articles are dropped in colloquial situations, or when the referent is very familiar to the speaker and listener. In the examples below, the government agencies are treated as familiar, almost personal, entities.

   Did (the) FBI talk to you?
   We got busted by (the) EPA / by (the) FBI.

   There is also a sort of official genre, often for saving space in print, or to be more terse, where articles and auxiliary verbs are omitted. This is common in public signs, notices, newspaper headlines, instructions, and official announcements. The words in parentheses below would be omitted.

   No running allowed near (the) pool.
   (An) airplane crashes on (a/the) runway; (there are/were) numerous casualties

3. Place names: Note some of the following specialized cases of proper nouns in place names.

   • Geographical place names where the main noun is often a specific entity noun or a specific referent (especially if the first part like ‘East’ is adjectival):
     the East Sea, the Sahara [Desert]

   • However, oftentimes a noun modifier takes no article – a proper noun (see below) place name that is a compound noun.
     Sunset Lake, Thunder Island, Thunder Bay, St. James Lake

   • Public institutions, facilities, groups, newspapers – if the main noun or the referent is a specific entity, they take an article:
     the Student Union, the Sheraton [Hotel], the White House; the Washington Post

   • Pluralized names in collective geographic terms, families, teams – these are based on plural count nouns:
     the Netherlands, the Bahamas, the Alps, the Smiths, the Wombats (team name)
6. References