

Preventing a troublesome revision process due to misused articles

Jeremy Dean Chapnick

Editorial Office, AME Publishing Company

Correspondence to: Jeremy Dean Chapnick. Editorial Office, AME Publishing Company. Email: amj@amegroups.com.

Abstract: The English articles (a/an/the) are the most commonly used word in the English language; while simultaneously causing the most trouble for foreign writers during the revision and writing process. In the paper, *preventing a troublesome revision process due to misused articles*, it will delve deeper into why articles are essential, how to avoid using the wrong one, and the horrible communication mistakes that happen when misusing them. It will also provide authors with some quick tips and tricks for getting articles correct, and to make sure that submitted articles do not have any article problems.

Keywords: Indefinite article; definite article; zero article; grammar; foreign writing

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Part 1: why is using an article important?

An article is a word that modifies a noun. In the most basic explanation, there are three English articles, and these articles tell the reader so much information about a noun. There is the indefinite article, which is *a* or *an*, the definite article, which is *the*, and the zero article, which is no article at all. Articles are the number one issue for foreign writers in academics, and they cause the most amount of issues for three main reasons. One, the article portrays a specific viewpoint of a noun, and if it does not make sense in the context, the reader will be confused. Two, the reader will use the information provided by the English articles to make an inference and assumption about the specific noun which is modified; if misused, this will leave the reader thinking the author has written something they have not. Three, combining both points one and two, misusing articles could potentially harm an author's entire research.

The revision process is frustrating. There will be times where it will be easy, and an author will not have any issues. Then, there will be other times when the manuscript keeps getting sent back to the author for revisions, over and over, filled with more and more mistakes discovered each time by the editor. Sending a manuscript back for revisions is time-consuming, and it is a waste of time; a waste of time not only for just the team of authors, but also the editor.

Making a mistake with the usage of English articles is

extremely common. Nearly every manuscript sent to the editor for a check of English language usage and editing will be returned with comments noting that the authors have misused articles and must further revise.

The three written articles are the most commonly used words in the English language, so it is critical that a writer must master them. They are essential for four reasons. One, because when the misuse of an article occurs, it can have a significant impact on the meaning of the sentence. Two, articles indicate a particular viewpoint of a noun, so misusing them will leave the readers confused and frustrated, trying to figure out what the author is trying to say. Three, articles are understood by all native English speakers, so when the misuse occurs, an editor will notice. Four, getting articles incorrect, could potentially harm a writer's academic image as an author and it could result in the research work and manuscript not being taken seriously if the mistakes are big enough.

English articles are both simultaneously the most challenging thing to master, yet one of the most important and critical aspects to the usage of the English language. Many foreign writers will overlook the article; they might think that it is not something that is too important, or that missing a few articles will not be a big deal. Any native English speaker editor will disagree entirely; articles are critical to understanding a specific noun. It helps to bring clarity to the specific object, person, place or idea as well as

communicating a specific viewpoint of the noun referred.

For native English speakers, we get much of the information from articles subliminally while we are reading, to learn more about the specific viewpoint of the noun, and to make inferences on the noun accordingly. We use these articles to learn context. For those who know Chinese, an article is like a Chinese measure word. Think of measure words as being synonymous with the English article, *a* and *an*. Imagine how chaotic Chinese would become if there is no use of measure words in some contexts? A lack of clarity about a specific object could cause an enormous amount of confusion in some contexts. In some situations, it would be almost impossible to decipher what the individual is talking about, and English is not any different when it comes to articles.

Furthermore, in specific contexts, using a different article or the wrong article can change the meaning of the sentence entirely, which is a massive issue in a science paper and academic writing where the goal is to be precise and objective.

Consider the following:

| Sentence | Meaning |
|------------------------|------------------------------|
| It is the bomb! | This is awesome! |
| It is a bomb! | This is an explosive device! |
| It _ bombed! | This was horrible! |

In the above chart, we look at the noun, *bomb*. Bomb, just like any noun, can be modified with an article in a given context to make it a noun phrase. In this example above, English articles *the*, *a*, *an*, and *no article* usage is played around with, to manipulate the meaning of the noun, bomb. In the first example, we use the definite article, *the* to clarify the noun *bomb*. When the definite article modifies the noun, the noun is now used to describe something that is awesome, and great. Next, when we use the indefinite article, *a* or *an*, the meaning changes completely. Now the noun *bomb* does not refer to something awesome; it now refers to an explosive device. With just one article change, we have changed the noun, *bomb* from meaning something awesome to an explosive device. The same applies when using no article at all; when there is no article, the bomb is now modified to become an idiomatic expression that describes an event that was horrible. For example, “A movie bombed,” meaning that the movie was not good. It is essential to understand what an article can do to a noun while writing academic work, to avoid communicating the

wrong idea to the readers. Additionally, this will cause the author of the paper a headache as it is a guaranteed that a reviewer will notice a misused article and send it back for further revisions.

As stated, the role of an article is to provide clarity and to reduce the ambiguity of a noun. When there is ambiguity or a lack of clarity, this can confuse the reader. As a result of this impact, an article can have on writing a manuscript, in academic writing, it is critical to master the articles throughout the entire paper.

However, there is one specific part of a manuscript, that is the most important for an author to pay attention to the usage of English articles when writing, and that is the abstract section. Paying attention to the abstract section is for two reasons; one, the abstract section is the first thing that will be read by any reader. It will give them the first impressions of the manuscript. It will tell the reader what the paper is about and to give them an idea and a foundation for what the research the authors are conducting. Misusing articles here could impact the reader’s first impression of the paper before they even read it. Two, the abstract section has a word limit, and it is imperative that this section of the manuscript be written and constructed in a particular and precise way. It is vital for the writer to be precise and short in explaining their entire manuscript. As a result, it is crucial not to omit articles, and use the correct ones when it is needed. Just like point number one, using the wrong articles here will give the impression of a different idea for the paper than what is originally intended.

The articles used, provide a reader much information that might not be noticeable at first. Please consider the following example from the abstract objective section and how using different articles can change the meaning completely (1):

*“Sepsis is characterized by systemic inflammation where oxidative damage plays a key role in organ failure. This study was designed to imagine **the** impact of **the** antioxidant metallothionein (MT) on **the** lipopolysaccharide (LPS)-induced cardiac contractile and intracellular Ca²⁺ dysfunction.” (1)*

To start, when the article *a* is used to describe “...*a* key role in organ failure,” it is expressing that oxidative damage plays one of the key roles in this process and that there are other roles which characterize a sepsis diagnosis. In this paper, we will be discussing this specific type of damage. When using, *the* after “*the* impact of *the* antioxidant MT on *the* LPS-induced...” is it describing that the study is referring to

precisely the impact of MT on specifically the LPS induced cardiac contractile and intracellular Ca²⁺ dysfunction.

Next, let us use the same abstract objective section, but change the articles only to see what the meaning becomes:

*“Sepsis is characterized by systemic inflammation where oxidative damage plays **the** key role in organ failure. This study was designed to imagine **an** impact of **an** antioxidant metallothionein (MT) on **(no article)** lipopolysaccharide (LPS)-induced cardiac contractile and intracellular Ca²⁺ dysfunction.” (1)*

The meaning of this abstract objective sentence has changed completely. For one, now the stated action by the writer is that the most significant cause of organ failure in sepsis is oxidative damage. If a reader is a doctor, they would know this to be not true or that they might already disagree, thinking that some other aspect causes organ failure in sepsis besides oxidative damage. Next, if using the article *an* when describing the impact of the antioxidant MT on LPS induced cardiac contractile and intracellular Ca²⁺ dysfunction, it means that the information in the manuscript will look at some antioxidant, which is awkward sounding and does not make sense for the context. Furthermore, the readers do not have any information to be sure exactly what kind of interaction this with the antioxidant and do not have any information about what and how this study will analyze it. Lastly, if there is no article for the LPS induced cardiac contractile and intracellular Ca²⁺ dysfunction, that indicates that this paper will be looking at specifically how LPS-induced dysfunction will impact MT.

By just changing the articles alone in that sentence, the meaning of the objective statement has completely changed. As authors and researchers should know, the abstract might be the only thing that a doctor or researcher will be able to read, especially if the article is behind a paywall and they are only looking at the abstract before they justify themselves to purchase it. The reader will never be able to get the chance to learn that there is a mistake and that the author intends to communicate something utterly different from what the reader had read based on the abstract. If an author has communicated the wrong idea about what the topic of the research is in the abstract, that could spell the end of the research. It is essential to learn articles in general, but it is imperative for an individual to learn articles especially for their usage in the abstract section of a paper.

Let's see some further examples of why articles can create confusion for the editor, and reader by playing with the articles in a sentence (2):

| Sentence | Meaning |
|--|---|
| “with a focus on growth rates.” (2) | The focus of this is only on growth rates |
| “with the focus on growth rates.” | This focuses on many things, and one of them is growth rates |
| “with focus on growth rates. (no article)” | (Grammatically incorrect) Many other focuses are looked at, but we looked seriously at growth rates |

| Sentence | Meaning |
|---|---|
| “ An injection was sourced from Beijing University.” (2) | Some injection, the source or type of injection is unknown to the reader, was sourced |
| “ The injection was sourced from Beijing University.” | Some specific injection, the specific injection like a medicine, or brand that the reader has already been introduced to, was sourced |
| “Injection was sourced from Beijing University.” | This sentence is a bit awkward sounding and confusing. It implies that the patients went to Beijing University to get the injection or it could mean that someone went to Beijing University and he or she had provided them with some injections (that we do not know the what the kind of injection is) |

When an editor sees something that they do not think is correct, or that they do not understand the meaning or are unclear about the meaning of a sentence, they will mark it up and sent it back for revisions. A longer than expected revision process causes a frustrating process for both the author or authors and the editor or editors.

To conclude, the English articles are critical to master for three main reasons. One, the article portrays a specific viewpoint of a noun, and if it does not make sense in the context, the reader will be confused. Two, the reader will use this information provided by articles to make inferences and assumptions about the modified specific noun, which might leave the reader thinking the author said something that they did not. Three, combining both one and two, getting articles wrong could potentially harm the entire research project through misuses in critical parts of the paper like the abstract. It is essential to master the usage of English articles, to avoid these mistakes to bring the manuscript to its full, real potential. Therefore, this section about articles

has been divided up into five main parts, which will take the reader step by step through learning how to master English articles to use in future manuscripts.

Part 2: the indefinite article *a* and *an*

Articles function as a kind of adjective that can help us understand a noun, like a discussed person place thing or idea. As articles usage is complicated for foreign writers, and non-native English speakers these rules can be challenging to learn. The usage of English articles can be a bit unique to the professionals in a field, especially when it comes to writing manuscripts or academic writing in general, so one has to be extremely aware of the context for the article.

Therefore, the most critical advice which can be provided to help foreign writers understand articles, in general, is to start reading more and more academic works done by native English writers and having more hands-on experience with texts from native speakers. These texts can provide foreign authors with skills on how native professionals use articles to develop their ability to use articles over time, gained from the knowledge of direct source materials and observations.

In the shortest explanation, the usage of the indefinite article *a* and *an* is for discussing a non-specific object, things, or people. It is mostly only used with singular and countable nouns, its usage is when an author mentions something for the first time, and any generic or general reference to anything. Consider it as something that is vague, and that when the reader sees the indefinite article, it does not imply a more specific or deeper meaning for a noun. It is not something that should be used to describe something *definite* which is why it is called the *indefinite* article. Additionally, the indefinite article is used to refer to something for the first time, or to refer to a particular member of some group or a class of things.

There is no difference in the meaning between using *a* or *an*. Choosing which one to use is purely grammatical, and it will not impact the actual meaning of the sentence if an author uses the wrong indefinite article; it will just be grammatically wrong like any ordinary typo. Therefore, learning when to use which indefinite article either *a* or *an*, boils down to learning some basic grammatical principals.

Generally speaking, a writer should use the indefinite article *A*, before any word that begins with a consonant sound, while also not beginning with a vowel sound (vowels being A, E, I, O, U, and sometimes Y). For example, phrases like, “a procedure,” and “a lymph node.” However, *an* has the same meaning as *a*, but its usage is on nouns that

do not begin with consonants or vowels.

Using *a* or *an* is not about looking at the first letter of the word, and deciding which article, it is important to think how the word is pronounced. For example, the word “university” starts with the letter U, which is a vowel. So naturally following the rules above, one would think that it should use *an* and not *a*, due to it starting with a vowel. However, because the word, university has a pronunciation of /ju:.niv3:.. si.ti/, which means that it does not start with a vowel sound we do not use *an*, we use *a*. Another example of this would be the phrase “one-stop procedure” because *one* starting with a vowel, a writer would think that it should be using *an*; however, it does not. It should be “a one-stop procedure.”

What does this look like in academic writing? Consider the following examples of items used in the indefinite form:

| Phrase | Meaning |
|--|---|
| A leading cause of cancer | Just one of the many leading causes |
| An interesting finding in our analysis | One of the many interesting findings |
| An analysis had determined it | Some non-specific analysis had determined something |

In the above chart, it demonstrates that the indefinite article can be used to describe something non-specific. However, using the indefinite article to indicate that the noun is just one of something *is possible*. In this context, using the indefinite article to mean *one of something* would refer to a singular object or a single unit of measurement. Instead of writing *one*, a writer could substitute the indefinite article. For example, instead of writing, “one gram of medicine,” the phrase could be written as “a gram of medicine” and retain the same meaning.

Part 3: the definite article *the*

The definite article, unlike the indefinite article, is specific. When using the definite article, the noun that is modified becomes restricted in meaning, specified and identified. Unlike the indefinite and zero article, which only use is on singular or countable nouns, the definite article, *the* can be used on all nouns. It is mostly used when something is uniquely referenced or mentioned to the reader for the second time.

Unlike the indefinite article, the definite article has the extraordinary ability to influence the meaning of a

sentence. Additionally, due to the definite article having no restrictions in use on a noun, it is easy to make a mistake in writing intention and have it gone unnoticed by the reader or the editor. Only through a more in-depth conversation with the author post-research would this mistake be identified. Therefore, it is of paramount importance to learn when to use the definite article to avoid this problem.

The is used when there is some assumption that there is only one of something in a specific place, even if that particular item has never been mentioned before in the paper. For example, this would be phrases like, “the medicine issued” or “the patient underwent surgery”. If using the indefinite article, it would specify that there could be more than one type of medicine issued after the first one, or in the case of “the patient underwent surgery” when using the indefinite article, it would imply that there were a series of patients who went under surgery, not just one.

Next, use the definite article when there is a clause introduced by the word, *only*. For example, “this is *the* only procedure that has been proven to work” and “*the* only patients who survived were in the control group”. The word *only* in this phrase acts as a final phrase, something that is exact. Therefore, it must follow the definite article.

The usage of the definite article should be in a clause or a sentence where something is defined or identified to be an exact person or object. For example, this would be “*the* patient who underwent the procedure” or “*the* control group”. Additionally, it should also be used when something is referred to a unique idea, person or object. For example, “*the* author reported” or “*the* grant from the ministry of health.” The definite article is used in these cases because there is only one of this specific object, and it is unique. They are an exact person or an object; therefore, the definite article helps to declare this. When using the indefinite article here, it loses its uniqueness. For example, with the phrase “*the* grant from the Ministry of Health” when using the indefinite article here, it implies that there were multiple grants issued from this Ministry of Health, not just one.

The should be used with any adjective when that adjective refers to a whole group of something or a whole group of people or individuals. Making sure there is specificity is vital in medical writing, especially when talking about tested cohorts. For example, it should be “*the* control group showed no change in results” or “*the* Chinese patient population.” In both of these cases it is referring to some specific group or a collective of something, so the definite article must be used.

Furthermore, if mentioning an item or something or

someone, for the very first time, we must use the indefinite article first. Then, the next time that that same item is spoken or mentioned again, we must use the definite article. For example,

- (I) “The patients received a vaccination. *The vaccination* had a poor survival rate.” (3)
- (II) “*A study* was produced by a US university that showed it was correlated. *The study* was used in this paper.”

In example number one (3), vaccination is introduced for the very first time in this paper. Therefore, we introduce it using the indefinite article because it is not some particular vaccination that would require the definite article, in this case. However, even though it was initially non-specific the first time it was mentioned, now that it has been mentioned in the manuscript, it *has* become specified. Therefore, the definite article must be used. The same goes for example number (II). “A study”, which is vague, and doesn’t say anything about what kind of study or any information, is introduced in the first sentence. However, even though it is still vague, it has been introduced and now must follow the definite article.

Lastly, the definite article needs to be used when it comes to numbers, counting, or collectives. The definite article should be used before any ordinal number or a superlative. For example, ordinal numbers being “after *the* 3rd time” and superlatives being “this group experienced *the* highest impact.” The definite article should be used with decades like, “*the* 1970s.” As for collectives, this is an item that is made up of multiple parts. For example, “*the* United States of America.” As a side note, anytime that the definite article is used before a country’s name, it does not need to be capitalized (2).

As stated, because of its ultimate nature, the definite article can convey a particular viewpoint to the reader about a specific noun, so it is essential to make sure the viewpoint that is wanted is expressed correctly. Therefore, after learning the rules of when to use the definite article, it is crucial to learn then the grammatical rules of when to not use the definite article.

It would be grammatically incorrect to use the definite article when referring to the name of a country (except if the country is made up of a collective of nations or states like the United Kingdom). For example, never say “*the* China” or “*the* France.” If an author would like to use the definitive article for these things, they must refer to the people from these countries like, “*the* French” or “*the* Chinese” instead.

Never use *the* with the name of a language, town, street, station or airport. For example, never say "I learned *the* Chinese" or "the assay kit from *the* New York City" or "analyzed using the SEF software sourced from *the* Houston Texas." All 3 of these examples are incorrect grammatically and will need to be revised if misused.

To conclude, following these rules listed as a guideline while writing a manuscript or any other kind of academic literature will help to make the revision process smoother and less troublesome. Additionally, it will eliminate any possibility that an article is misused, and a different meaning is stated entirely.

Part 4: no article used, the zero article

When there is no article used on a noun phrase, neither definite nor indefinite, it is considered to have the *zero article*. Disregarding the exceptions, the most basic rule for knowing when to use the zero article is determining if the noun is either plural or uncountable. If the noun is either plural or uncountable, while simultaneously being an object that is not individually identifiable based on the context, the zero article should be used in these cases. Additionally, if the noun is a proper noun, no article should be used too.

There are some different sets of rules for using the zero article, depending on the dialect of English that an individual speaks. For example, in regions considered to be native speakers while also having regional influences, like Singapore and India for example, omitting an article is often done when the individual wants to be non-specific. To get a greater feel and understanding of how a regional dialect can impact the usage of articles, read more works by authors from specific regions to gain a more excellent knowledge of when articles should or shouldn't be used. For simplicity in this chapter, it will only analyze the usage of the zero article in American and British English.

To begin, in both American and British English, if the noun is some institution, no article should be used. However, there are some exceptions to this rule. In American English, it would be familiar to say "The patients were omitted to *the* hospital" using the definite article. Conversely, in British English, the word *hospital* would never have an article before it; a British person would write, "The patients were omitted to hospital" with zero article. While these differences are few, it is essential to keep in mind that there are some regional differences and to keep them in mind when writing a paper.

Next, the zero article is used with any countries, states,

counties or provinces. Except, when it is a collection as stated before, then the definite article is used (*the* United States). For example, in medical writing, this would be along the lines of, "the kit was purchased from Sichuan" or "the medicine was sourced from northern Hubei". Both Sichuan and Hubei are provinces, so no article should be used with these.

The zero article should not be used with any plural or an uncountable noun when talking about something in general. For example, "nanotechnology offers an opportunity for the community" and "information about the mechanical properties of something." Both of the nouns, nanotechnology, and information, in this context, are uncountable and the context is something in general. Neither of these sentences is referring to something specific so the zero article should be used.

The zero article should be used when some abstract substance is mentioned. An abstract substance is a substance that like a liquid, metal, and gas that lacks a definite shape or a clearly defined form. A few examples of abstract substances like that, that would be used in academic literature are water, salt, CO₂, radiation, steel, and others. Subsequently, the zero article should also be also used when talking about abstract concepts too. This would be something like heat energy, friction, pressure, performance, and others.

Following the rule about abstract substances and concepts, the zero article should also be used when a noun is singular in form and takes a singular form of the verb, while also referring to a group. Some examples of these in medical writing would be knowledge, information, furniture, baggage, equipment, weather, and others. Following the rule about referring to a group of something, the zero article should be used when referring to fields of study like engineering, chemistry, physics, and others.

The zero article should also be used when the noun is describing any process or action; this includes diseases or medical conditions. Some examples of processes or actions would be, evaporation, transportation, production, and others. For some examples of diseases and medical conditions, never use an article when talking about diabetes, Alzheimer's disease, arthritis, dyslexia, and others.

Part 5: resources to use

There are many rules to remember when it comes to the usage of English articles. As a foreign writer, it might feel overwhelming to be presented with so much information that needs to be memorized and applied. English articles are

the most commonly used words in the English language, so it is relatively easy to make mistakes with them. It is easy to think that a foreign writer will never be able to master them and that they should give up and have some professional editor look over it. However, there are other ways and solutions for when there is not any access to an English editor available.

Besides just reading literature from academics in the field, some online sources can be used as a guide in writing to avoid mistakes and to avoid making the revision process tedious. As stated, one of the fundamental rules for determining the article that must be used is to check if the noun is uncountable or countable. Sometimes words are tricky and can be countable or not. One of the best resources for checking if a noun is countable or not is the website, Oxford Living Dictionary. When a word is searched on this website, it will indicate if it is a mass noun or not. If it shows that the word is a mass noun, that means it is uncountable. Therefore, using the information from this website, it is easy to eliminate the article that cannot be used right away based on the countability status.

Next, make sure to keep writing as simple as possible. Try to avoid using words that are unfamiliar and make sentences as simple as possible. The most mistakes are made when a writer is trying to be advanced and using phrases or concepts that they might not understand. This advice is not only helpful in academic writing, but it can also be translated to other skills in the field like writing cover letters, responses to reviewers, emails, proposals, and others. However, it is not always possible to be as simple as possible, and there will be times when words need to be used that the author is not always familiar with. So, what must the author do in these cases?

Many online resources are great and can help to teach how a specific word is used in academic writing; therefore, this knowledge can be transferred to allow the author to become more comfortable with specific terms or a phrase in English. For example, some of the best sources for learning more about academic writing and finding resources written by experts in the field who are native English speakers are:

- (I) **Google Ngram:** this tool will allow the users to search for some specific phrase, and it will display its usage amount in written text. If there is any confusion about if a word is typical or not, this will help to clarify that.
- (II) **Google Scholar:** this tool will allow the user to search through thousands of published papers and manuscripts for any specific phrase or keyword.

Therefore, an author can use this information to check to see how native English speakers are saying a specific phrase.

- (III) **Ludwig:** this tool allows the user to search for a specific phrase and then it will search the database to see how commonly it is used in academic writing. This is useful because if the user searches for something and there are no results returned, it is highly likely that the phrase or term is misused and must be fixed.

These above resources can provide a great solution to writers looking for more information about grammatical usage. Using these online resources during the writing process will significantly help. It will be especially helpful in the writing process when a native English speaker is unable to help while writing a manuscript.

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