Article Charts for ESL Students

The following is excerpted from The Writing Process: A Guide for ESL Students. A Workbook to Accompany “The Longman Concise Handbook for Writers.” It has been adapted slightly to meet accessibility needs.

Rules for Use of Articles with Common Nouns

In the preceding section, you learned three distinctions for common nouns:

1. Countable versus noncountable.
2. Singular versus plural.
3. Definite, generic, or indefinite.

Now that you understand these distinctions, look at the rules for usage of articles with common nouns in the chart below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rule</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Always use an article with singular countable nouns.</td>
<td>Tomorrow he is going to look at a used car.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use the article a or an with singular countable nouns that are definite.</td>
<td>Tranh has to buy a car to drive to work on Monday.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use the article the with singular countable nouns that are definite.</td>
<td>The building where he works is not located near a bus line.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use the article the with definite plural nouns.</td>
<td>He looked at the cars that Jan had recommended.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use the determiner some or no article at all with indefinite plural nouns.</td>
<td>There must be some cars for sale under $6,000.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do not use an article with generic plural nouns.</td>
<td>Car dealers expect customers to bargain with them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use the article the with definite noncountable nouns.</td>
<td>Tranh was aware of the reputation of car dealers for driving hard bargains.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use the determiner some or no article at all with indefinite noncountable nouns.</td>
<td>Tranh experienced some nervousness when the dealer started pressuring him to sign a contract.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use no article with generic noncountable nouns.</td>
<td>The dealer assured Tranh that nervousness was a normal reaction.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Exceptions to the Rules for Articles with Common Nouns

The box presents rules for article use with common nouns, but there are many exceptions, especially in the following areas.
Diseases
Diseases use articles in unpredictable ways. Those with formal names (pneumonia, AIDS, influenza) are frequently referred to by the singular noun and no article. Those with more informal names sometimes take the (the flu, the plague) and sometimes take a or an (a cold, an earache). Those with informal names and plural forms can often be used with no article (measles or the measles; chicken pox or the chicken pox). Note also that names of diseases are not capitalized.

More Exceptions to the Rules for Articles with Common Nouns

Names of nations
the Sudan
(countries named for regions)*
the Republic of China (republics)

Empires and dynasties
the Roman Empire
the Ching Dynasty

Organizations
the Red Cross
the American Association for Retired People
the National Honor Society

Geographic areas
the American South
(regions)
the Mojave Desert
(deserts)
the Iberian Peninsula

Languages
the English language
(but not the English)
Colleges and universities
the University of Hawaii, the University of Colorado (but Hawaii State University, Colorado State University)

Historical periods and events
the Great Depression
the Holocaust

Museums and libraries
the Louvre
the Library of Congress

*Country names that are grammatically plural (the United States, the Netherlands, the Philippines) follow rule 3 for plural proper nouns, even though they are construed as singular: The Netherlands lies entirely below sea level.

Exercise: Using Articles with Proper Nouns
Fill in the blank with the correct article. Write a short dash if no article is needed.
Example: _____The_____ University of California is located in _____ Los Angeles.
1. ____Charles Darwin proposed his theory of speciation by observing _____ Galapagos Islands.
2. _____ Minneapolis Institute of Art recently acquired a famous Monet painting.
3. The end of communism in _____ Czech Republic and _____ Slovakia is referred to as _____ Velvet Revolution.
4. _____ Mount McKinley, part of _____ Alaska Range, is the tallest mountain in _____ North America.
5. Notre-Dame is a good example of Gothic Architecture in _____ Middle Ages.
6. One of the largest deserts in the world is _____ Sahara.

Chart 3: Selecting Articles with Common Nouns
References Consulted