

## ***Lesson Plan: Teaching Credential Students How to Teach Articles***

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**Lesson:** Providing Instructional Feedback on Article Use

**Timeframe:** approximately 55-60 minutes

**Target Audience:** This lesson was originally designed for secondary education teacher credential students, both second language learners and native speakers. However, the lesson is applicable to university instructors across disciplines who teach students who struggle with their writing.

**Materials needed:** laptop, projector, whiteboard and markers, “Student Writing Sample” handout, and “Articles” handout

**Objectives:** After the lesson, students will be able to

- identify correct and incorrect use of articles in writing samples.
- articulate when and why definite or indefinite articles should be used in particular contexts.
- provide instructional feedback to others (e.g., their students) on the use of articles.

**Background:** This lesson was originally designed for EDSC 162: Language and Literacy Development of L2 Learners, a credential course required for all teacher candidates. The students who take this course are typically native and non-native English speakers with a wide range of educational and academic language skills (including students who struggle with aspects of writing such as grammar and organization). Students may be English language learners who were born in the U.S., who immigrated to the U.S. five or more years ago, or who immigrated to the U.S. more recently. While this lesson was originally designed for a specific course, it is applicable to university instructors across disciplines who teach students who struggle with their writing.

This lesson provides models for how to teach the use of articles to secondary students who are non-native speakers of English. More specifically, the lesson focuses on helping teacher candidates develop a solid understanding of the use of definite and indefinite articles. Thus, the goal of the lesson is twofold: (1) to help teacher candidates who struggle with grammar improve their own language skills and (2) to enhance the skills of all teacher candidates by providing their own students with effective feedback on the use of articles.

*Prior to beginning the lesson, write the agenda on board:*

1. Review key ideas from previous class session and objectives for today.
2. Analyze and discuss the student writing sample.
3. Explore use of definite and indefinite articles.
4. Revisit writing sample feedback approaches.
5. Wrap up and explain homework.

### **Introduction to Lesson [2 minutes]:**

In our previous class meeting, we discussed various approaches to providing instructional feedback to secondary students (particularly English learners) who struggle with aspects of their academic writing. In particular, we emphasized the importance of commenting on strengths of a student's writing as well as providing instructional feedback on patterns of errors evident in a student's writing. Today we are going to analyze a student writing excerpt, focusing on one of the patterns of errors evident—misuse of articles. We will explore the “grammar” of when and why we use definite and indefinite articles. By the end of this lesson, you will be able to provide instructional feedback to students related to this aspect of grammar.

### **Procedure [45-50 minutes]:**

#### **Step 1: Analyze writing sample [8-10 min]**

We are going to begin by reading through the writing sample you have been given, which is an excerpt from an assignment written by a former student in the program. The reading that the student is responding to in this excerpt is an article by Robin Scarcella highlighting a major problem in our public schools: English learner students are not getting adequate instruction in academic language development and writing. As we read through the excerpt aloud, please take note of any instances where you believe the writer has made an error in the use (or omission) of articles. *Ask volunteers to read parts of the excerpt aloud.* Now, I would like you to take a couple of minute to think silently about what feedback you would give the student related to the errors he has made. (e.g., “The student should write *the author* instead of simply *author* since he’s referring to a specific noun.”)

#### **Step 2: Class discussion [13-15 min]**

Now we will have volunteers share their responses with the class. Please share one of the errors you identified (reading the sentence containing the error aloud) and briefly explain how you would provide feedback to the writer. I will record highlights of each volunteer’s thoughts/ideas on the whiteboard without further comment from me or other students (as later in the lesson we will revisit the errors identified and the related feedback in more depth). *As volunteers share, write key word/phrases from their explanations on the board. Continue having different students volunteer until all six errors have been identified.*

It was very interesting to hear from you about how you would approach providing feedback to this student on his writing errors related to articles. I noticed some specific language you used. *[Recap some of the terms/language used by students such as “specific” “general,” etc. as well as other aspects of their responses (e.g., how they seemed to know that an article should be used/omitted but weren’t quite sure how articulate the reason).]*

#### **Step 3: Present PowerPoint [10-12 min]**

As educators, it is important for us to be able to articulate the rationale behind the correct or incorrect use of articles to our students. In order to provide this rationale, we need to be familiar with the grammatical rules related to the use of definite and indefinite articles. Now, we are going to go over important rules that will help us accomplish this goal. *Before beginning the PowerPoint presentation, provide students the “Articles” handout and explain that it corresponds to the PowerPoint presentation. (Note that the information in the PowerPoint and*

*handout covers general rules/guidelines related to the use of articles but does not cover the many exceptions to the rules that exist.) Engage students in the presentation by asking for volunteers to read parts of the content. Ask questions to check for understanding and elaborate on information in the PowerPoint as needed.*

#### **Step 4: Revisit writing sample [12-15 min]**

Now that you have a better understanding of when to use definite and indefinite articles, you should also feel more confident in explaining these concepts to others. We are going to take a few minutes to revisit the writing sample we worked with earlier and review how you would provide feedback to the writer about errors he has made with the use of articles. Choose a couple of instances when the student used an article incorrectly and share with a partner how you would provide instructional feedback to the student. *Provide students with the example listed below.*

#### *Example:*

The student writes, “*The teachers* tend to think . . .” when he is referring to all individuals of a group of nouns; as such, the article should be omitted. I’d explain this rule to the student, and I’d tell him to omit *the* and instead write, “*Teachers* tend to think . . .”

We will take about seven minutes to do this and then have volunteers share their thoughts with the whole class.

#### **Closure/Evaluation [5 min]:**

*Ask volunteers to share something they learned today that they feel will be helpful in providing students with instructional feedback on the use of articles.*

*Tell the students to complete the exercises on the “Articles” handout for homework.*

In our next class meeting, we will review what we learned about articles today by having you share your responses to the items in the exercises. Make sure that you’re able to explain your rationale behind your use of articles.

#### **Lesson Analysis:**

The students (teacher candidates) in my course, Language and Literacy Development for L2 Learners, must be able to support the academic language development of their own middle and high school students, many of whom will be English learners (EL’s). As such, it is critical that teacher candidates not only model appropriate academic language for their students but also have the tools to assist students in developing their English language skills. The inquiry-based approach used in this lesson focuses on providing instructional feedback to students on the use of articles. This is an effective approach with students who take this class (who typically have a wide range of academic language skills). In the process of focusing on how to provide feedback to students on the use of articles, teacher candidates who struggle with their own academic language will have an opportunity to enhance their language skills. Moreover, all teacher candidates will develop confidence and skills in providing specific instructional feedback to students on this aspect of grammar.

# Articles

Source: Homegrown Handout on Articles developed by Nick Chu  
(SJSU Writing Center)

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# Articles

- The articles *a*, *an*, and *the* are adjectives used to modify nouns.
- *A* and *an* are *indefinite articles* used to modify nouns from a larger group of nouns (e.g., *an egg* from a carton of eggs).
- *The* is a *definite article* used to modify a specific noun (e.g., *the egg* I ate for breakfast).

# When to use *a* or *an*

- When the noun modified is **indefinite** or **non-specific**, referring to **any** member of a group of nouns
  1. **We packed your clothes in *a box* in the garage.**
  2. **We need *a box* for Johnny's toys.**
- To decide between *a* and *an*, think about the sound of the beginning of the next word. Use *a* when the next word begins with a consonant sound, as in *a book* or *a useful book*. Use *an* when the next word begins with a vowel sound, as in *an apology*.



# When to use *the*

- When the noun modified is **definite** or **specific**
  1. **We packed your t-shirts in *the box with red tape* in the garage.**
  2. **We need *the largest box* for Johnny's toys.**

In these examples, we are not referring to just any box, but rather, to specific boxes.

# Examples of ways nouns can be specific

1. When a phrase describes the noun: **Through my studies, I will gain *the skills needed to be a pharmacist.***  
The phrase *needed to be a pharmacist* tells us which kind of skills.
2. When the noun is mentioned earlier in the text: **We interviewed an economics student for his opinion on the situation. *The student was opposed to budget cuts.***
3. When the reader is familiar with the noun: **Before you come outside, grab *the car key.***



# Examples of ways nouns can be specific

4. When the noun is one of a kind: **I want to visit *the Louvre* in Paris and *the Great Wall in China*, and I also want to *meet the Queen* when I go to England!**

Only one of each of these items exists in the world, so we know exactly which nouns are being referred to.

5. When using the superlative: **Elephants are *the largest animals on land*.**

The superlative is an adjective like fastest, smartest, or least healthy that indicates that the noun is faster, smarter, or less impressive than anything else that it is compared to.

# When not to use articles

1. Never use an article with any part of speech besides a noun (such as with an adjective or a verb).

**Incorrect:** Sammy is *the black*.

**Correct:** Sammy is *the black dog*.

2. Never use **a** or **an** with a plural noun.

**Incorrect:** They sat down at *a tables*.

**Correct:** They sat down at *a table/the table/the tables*.  
(depending on context)



# When not to use articles

3. Never use **a** or **an** with a noun that cannot be counted. Examples of nouns that cannot be counted are *research* and *information*.

**Incorrect:** We received ***an information*** about the patient's treatment.

**Correct:** We received ***information*** about the patient's treatment. We received ***the information*** (*that the doctor sent us*) about ***the patient's treatment***.

# When not to use articles

4. When making a statement that refers to all individuals of a group of nouns, do not use an article.

**Incorrect:** I am afraid of *the snakes*.

**Correct:** I am afraid of *snakes*.

5. When making a statement about something in general, do not use an article. In many non-English languages, nouns such as *love* and *childhood* take an article in general statements; however, this is not the case in Standard English.

**Incorrect:** *The childhood* is difficult without friends.

**Correct:** *Childhood* is difficult without friends.



# Source:

- Homegrown Handout on Articles developed by Nick Chu (SJSU Writing Center) available at <http://www.sjsu.edu/writingcenter/writingresources/handouts/Articles.pdf>

## Student Writing Sample

Van graduated from high school without knowing how to write academically in English. However, there are many students who are insufficient in writing just like her. In the article “Balancing Approaches to English Language Instruction” by Robin Scarcella, author talks about how the schools and teachers are not helping those students who need help with their writings. She claims that there has to be a balance in instructions.

Van talks about how she was never assigned to any demanding assignments in school. English learners tend to get assigned to easier assignments. However, their standards and expectations should be placed higher and not lower. Van asserts that she was willing to work if her teachers gave her more challenging homework. The teachers tend to think that assigning complicated assignments will discourage students but there has to be a fine balance. The homework and assignments should not be too easy for students. I completely understand how Van feels. I felt the same way when I was in high school. I passed my classes not really knowing how to write academically and when I got to college, I realized how uneducated I was. No one had really assessed me about my writing and when I took WST for the first time, I realized that I had some work to do. One time, I showed my English paper to my colleagues and they thought it was a joke. They could not believe I was turning in an assignment with such a horrible writing. I am still struggling to be able to write academically.

As a second language learner myself, I will balance my assignments for my students so that it will push them. If they are making mistakes in their writing, it has to be addressed. I am thankful to my English 100W teacher at SJSU for pushing me to do better. If she didn't address my problems, I would not be at the level that I am today.

## Articles

The articles are *a*, *an*, and *the*. Articles modify nouns, as in *the* monkey or *an* astronaut. *A* and *an* are indefinite articles, meaning they address any noun from a larger group of nouns. The noun does not have to be a specific noun: *an* egg from a dozen eggs. *The* is a definite article, meaning that it points to a noun that is one of a kind: *the* egg I ate for breakfast.

### When to use *a* or *an*

To understand how to use indefinite articles, imagine someone telling you to choose an apple from a basket. *An apple* can be *any* apple from the basket; it does not matter which particular apple we choose. We do not need to take the smallest apple or the only green apple from the basket; we just need *an* apple. In the following examples, *a* points only to nonspecific nouns; it is unclear exactly which box the speaker is referring to.

- a. **We packed your clothes in *a* box in the garage.**

The box could be any box in the garage.

- b. **We need *a* box for Johnny's toys.**

A box is needed, but we do not know if it is *the box in my room* or *the box in the back of the car*.

To decide between *a* and *an*, think about the sound of the beginning of the next word. Use *a* when the next word begins with a consonant sound, as in *a book* or *a useful book*. Use *an* when the next word begins with a vowel sound, as in *an apology*.

### When to use *the*

Using the same apple example, think of using *the* like having to choose one specific apple from the basket. This is not just any apple but *the most delicious apple*, *the apple that weighs the most*, or *the apple that Jim's mother wanted*. The examples below demonstrate the ways that nouns can be specific.

- 1) **When a phrase describes the noun: Through my studies, I will gain *the* skills needed to be a pharmacist.** The phrase *needed to be a pharmacist* tells us which kind of skills.
- 2) **When the noun is mentioned earlier in the text: We interviewed an economics student for his opinion on the situation. *The* student was opposed to budget cuts.** From the first sentence, we know that the student in the second sentence is the economics student who was interviewed.
- 3) **When the reader is familiar with the noun: Before you come outside, grab *the* car key.** The reader is expected to know that this is not just any key but specifically the key to start the car.
- 4) **When the noun is one of a kind: I want to visit *the* Louvre in Paris and *the* Great Wall in China, and I also want to meet *the* Queen when I go to England!** Only one of these items exists in the world, so we know exactly which nouns are being referred to.
- 5) **When using the superlative: Elephants are *the* largest animals on land.** The superlative is an adjective like *fastest*, *smartest*, or *least healthy* that indicates that the noun is faster, smarter, or less impressive than anything else that it is compared to. When using the superlative, *the* must always be used before the adjective, as in *the fastest runner* or *the least healthy child*.

### When not to use articles

- 1) **Never use an article with any part of speech besides a noun.** For instance, do not use an article to modify an adjective or a verb. In the following incorrect sentence, *the* incorrectly modifies *black*. *The* should modify a noun, such as *dog*.  
Incorrect: Sammy is *the black*.  
Correct: Sammy is *the black dog*.
- 2) **Never use *a* or *an* with a plural noun.**  
Incorrect: They sat down at *a tables*.  
Correct: They sat down at *a table/the table/the tables*. (depending on context)
- 3) **Never use *a* or *an* with a noun that cannot be counted.** Examples of nouns that cannot be counted are *research* and *information*. We can leave out the article to refer to these nouns in a general sense, or we can use *the* to refer to a specific noun.  
Incorrect: We received *an information* about the patient's treatment.  
Correct: We received information about the patient's treatment. We received the information (*that the doctor sent us*) about the patient's treatment.
- 4) **When making a statement that refers to *all* individuals of a group of nouns, do not use an article.** In the following example sentence, the speaker is afraid of *all* snakes.  
Incorrect: I am afraid of the snakes.  
Correct: I am afraid of snakes.
- 5) **When making a statement about something in general, do not use an article.** In many non-English languages, nouns such as *love* and *childhood* take an article in general statements. A roughly translated sentence might look like this: *The childhood is difficult without friends*. In a standard English sentence, however, *childhood* would not take an article because it is not a specific childhood (e.g. the childhood of a shy boy).  
Incorrect: The childhood is difficult without friends.  
Correct: Childhood is difficult without friends.

### **Exercises**

Part A. Insert the appropriate articles or omit them (use a zero article) where needed.

1. I want to bring \_\_\_ sandwich to \_\_\_ picnic at the park.
2. The professor requires three textbooks. Fortunately, \_\_\_ textbooks for this class are inexpensive.
3. I need to look at \_\_\_ manual for the coffer maker.
4. Immigrants who came to \_\_\_ United States saw \_\_\_ Statue of Liberty.
- 5a. Carlos is afraid of \_\_\_ mice. (generalization)
- 5b. Carlos is afraid of \_\_\_ mice. (specific: mice in his bedroom)
6. She has \_\_\_ laziest coworkers in the world.
7. \_\_\_ Children/children always know things that \_\_\_ adults do not. (generalization)
8. Do you have \_\_\_ opinion on this paint color?

Part B. Identify and correct the errors in article usage in each sentence.

1. According to a research, there are no bodies hidden inside Great Wall of China.
2. She is currently undergoing a rehabilitation.
3. The love is most important thing in world.



## Key

### Part A.

- 1) a; the      3) the      5a) \_\_\_\_      6) the      8) an  
2) the      4) the; the      5b) the      7) \_\_\_\_; \_\_\_\_

### Part B.

- 1) According to **the/** \_\_\_\_ research, there are no bodies hidden inside **the** Great Wall of China.  
*Research* is noncount, so it cannot take an indefinite article (*a* or *an*). We can use *the* if we know which specific piece of research provided the information (such as *the research conducted by satellite technology*), or we can use a zero article to refer to research in general. *The Great Wall of China* is a proper noun and normally takes a definite article.
- 2) She is currently undergoing \_\_\_\_ rehabilitation.  
Since *rehabilitation* is a noncount noun, it is not preceded by an indefinite article. It typically does not take a definite article, either, unless the speaker has specified a particular source of rehabilitation (*the rehabilitation that the doctor proposed*). The best choice in this situation is to use the zero article.
- 3) Love is **the** most important thing in **the** world.  
*Love* in this sentence is part of a generalization and is a noncount noun, so it can take neither a definite article nor an indefinite article. *World* is a count noun, yet only one specific world exists (*the world that we live in*), so it takes a definite article.

### Works consulted:

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