Article Use in Context

If you’ve studied rules for article use in English, you may have learned one or more of the following guidelines:

- That choosing between *a/an* and *the* depends on whether you have referred to something previously: the first time you mention something, you use *a/an*, and in later mentions, you use *the*.
- That we use “the” when referring to a specific, singular example, and we use *a/an* (or no article) to refer to something more general.

Article use isn’t so simple, though. Earlier paragraphs in an essay, surrounding words, and context all affect meaning.

In this handout, we focus on two strategies for understanding article rules in context:

1. **Noticing when something is expressed again with a new word** and
2. **Noticing a word’s immediate surroundings**.
Notice when the same thing is expressed in a new way:

Read the paragraph below, noticing the author’s choice of articles:

Nintendo fans will soon be able to watch Netflix shows on the new Switch video game console. In a recent statement, representatives of the streaming giant said they were “still exploring the opportunity with Nintendo” but “don’t have definitive plans to share at this time.” The website released the statement in response to a tweet in which Netflix’s customer-support account answered a fan’s question about Netflix coming to the Switch. “There are currently no plans,” said the tweet, which has now been deleted. Back in November, Nintendo and Hulu reached a deal to launch the platform in the US, and the Japanese firm is also said to be in talks with “a range of other companies” to thicken the popular device’s portfolio of streaming platforms.¹

In the classic cases above (orange), the first time “statement” and “tweet” are mentioned, the writer uses a, while in the second mention, she uses the.

This simple rule also applies when you use a different term to describe something mentioned earlier. In the examples above (blue), we know “the streaming giant” and “the website” refer to “Netflix,” “the Japanese firm” refers to “Nintendo,” and “the popular device” refers to “the Switch.”

Finally, we can also use the when a word refers to a larger idea. In the first sentence we know that the author is discussing “the opportunity” to watch Netflix shows on the Switch, and not to some other unmentioned opportunity.

Notice a word’s immediate surroundings:

We don’t only use the after a second or later mention, though. We also use the when it is immediately clear that the writer is being specific.

Read the examples below carefully, noticing article use. The writer makes the first instance of a word specific (using the)—with phrases such as relative clauses and prepositional phrases—without introducing a general category first.

In the article “Think Millennials Have It Tough? For ‘Generation K,’ Life Is Even Harder,” Noreena Hertz describes the characteristics of my generation and the obstacles they face. From her interviews with 2,000 teenagers in the UK, she concludes that the current generation of teenagers is pessimistic, anxious, and distrustful of big corporations and government, and that it lacks authentic bonds and relationships, a trait which she attributes to the technological advances made in the 21st century. At the same time, she also points out that this generation is innovative and creative, has the desire to be unique, and lacks the selfishness typical of previous generations. As a native of the Philippines, I believe that while the author does make some good points, many of her conclusions are questionable in that they are limited to Western teenagers and, as a result, fail to represent the entire generation. Many of the characteristics that Hertz lists do not apply to teenagers around the world, particularly in non-Western cultures. If her survey were administered across the world, the results would be incredibly different.²

You’ll notice a couple of cases above where the definite article the is not used when a word is immediately specified (purple). This is because when you are describing something that is not “the one and only one,” you use a.

For instance, in the second to last example, the author, Hertz, discusses more than just this one trait, and in the last example, the student is one of many natives from the Philippines.

² Adapted with permission from an ELL student writer.
Practice Activity: Article Use

In the following essay adapted from the *The Lexington Review*, Baruch student Seongeun Tammy Lee explains the effect of activist investors on the overall health of a company.

Follow the evolution of the word “activists” in this adaptation of Tammy’s essay. First, consider the larger argumentative purpose of different sections of the paper. For instance, at moments, the writer provides evidence by discussing **specific** activists involved in the Dow-Dupont merger (signaling the need to use “the”). At other times, the writer draws larger conclusions about activist investors as a **general group** (signaling a need for no article).

In each instance of the word, determine if “activists” is preceded by the definite article “the” or not. Fill in the blanks accordingly either with “the” or “Ø” for no article.

Traditionally, shareholders of a company are invested in maintaining long-term relationships with that company rather than focusing on their short-term interests, such as earning a higher stock price. However, some shareholders are heavily involved with a company, acting as **activists** who manipulate the company in order to increase the share price of their investment in the short term. **These activists** try to change a company’s day-to-day operations, modify the company’s model, or even encourage a merger with other companies for their own purposes. Some people argue that activist investors help to monitor management of the company (Greenwood and Schor). For example, in the recent Dow-DuPont merger, **activists** were heavily involved in the company’s decision to generate current cash-flows regardless of how this impacted the company’s value. If we see their role at a glance, ______ **activists** do not appear problematic because it seems that they are also worried about their company’s future. However, since ______ **activists** are mostly focused on short-term goals, their push for Dow-DuPont to create current cash flows could hurt both consumers and investors in the long term.

…In addition to stripping down poor cash flow industries, **the activists** tried to get rid of R&D expenses because they asserted that they wasted money rather than bringing in profit.

In addition to their investment in earning a quick profit, ______ **activists** were also involved in the merger between DuPont and Dow, so that it would generate a high premium (Greenwood and Schor). **Activists**, Peltz from DuPont, and Daniel Leob from Dow, played a significant role in the merging of the two companies. **Both activists** wanted the companies to narrow down their core business industries to make their stocks profitable in the near future. Peltz, in particular, had a proxy battle against the CEO of DuPont a few months before the merger (Benoit 2)…The merger saved Dow-DuPont $3 billion in costs (Benoit 2), and ______ **activists** were able to narrow down the industries to earn a lucrative profit.
Beyond the specific Dow-DuPont case, ___ activists have had an invasive impact on the business world in general. ___ activists have pursued quick profits and steered companies away from making necessary investments for the future (Gellman and Hoffman). However, pursuing short-term goals has caused problems in both business and society. Pressure from ___ activists results in fluctuating market prices and general instability. . .

In the past few years, ___ activists have become celebrities in the media as hedge funds have become a more available tool to make money for wealthy people or institutions (Regnier). ___ activists have targeted their finance reengineering on big companies such as Microsoft, Apple, Netflix, and so on (Solomon). Due to their effect on society, many business students want to become ___ activists rather than pursue traditional finance roles (Gellman and Hoffman). If too many ___ activists involve themselves in a company’s decision making without a full understanding of the company, the stock price would not reflect business operations, and we would lose sustainable companies that benefit society. In other words, the movement would hurt investors down the road.