

Writer's Edge

By Ingrid Sapona

Welcome to Writer's Edge — a column by Ingrid Sapona, owner of Good with Words. In her column, Ingrid will write about ways of improving your communication skills. Many of you already know Ingrid — she's been working with the CICBV and CBVs for more than 10 years and is the creator and presenter of the popular seminar: Valuation Reports and Opinions: Your Stock In Trade — Are they as clear as can be?

Are You Using “a”, “and”, and “the” Properly?

By Ingrid Sapona*

“A”, “an”, and “the” are called articles when they function to announce a noun. Contemporary grammarians sometimes call them *determiners* because they help the reader or listener determine which person, place, thing, or idea is named by the noun.¹ Though choosing the correct article is pretty easy, many writers don't appreciate the confusion they create if they're sloppy when using them.

Definite versus Indefinite Articles

“The” is called a definite article because it signals a specific (definite) item that's known to the reader or listener. “A” and “an” are indefinite articles because they signal nouns whose specific identity aren't known to the reader or whose specific identity doesn't matter. For example, “bring *the* book” only makes sense if you know which particular book I'm talking about. If I say “bring *a* book”, then any book will do.

Whenever you use “the” you must be sure the reader knows exactly what item you're talking about. Sometimes a reader knows which item you're talking about because you've made it clear earlier in the text. If you made it clear earlier in the paragraph or document but there has been a lot of information to process since you made it clear, it's useful to help the reader by reiterating it. Sometimes additional information in the sentence makes the reference clear. Here's an example:

Despite the cocky, young defence counsel's badgering, Sally calmly explained how she derived the value of ACME's shares.

The sentence itself includes information so you know which counsel (the cocky, young defence lawyer) and exactly what value Sally explained (her valuation of ACME shares).

Questions and Problems Regarding Articles

It seems the most common question people have relates to when it's correct to use “a” versus “an”. The rule is straightforward: use “an” before words that start with a vowel sound. So, for example, though “hour” begins with a consonant, the sound is of a vowel, so you say “an hour”. The same rule applies to abbreviations and acronyms, but because it depends on the sound of the word after the article, the choice hinges on whether you enunciate each letter when you read it aloud (like you do with RCMP), or whether you say it as a word (like NASA). As you can imagine, having a grammar rule that relies on pronunciation is especially challenging for non-native English speakers.

Difficulties also arise because whether to use an article can be idiomatic, which means there's no rule to rely on. In such cases, you just have to pay attention to how locals use them. For example, in Canada people say: “she was taken to hospital”. In the U.S., however, you would always insert the definite article: “she was taken to the hospital”.

¹ Strumpf, M. and Douglas, A, *The Grammar Bible*, (St. Martin's Press) 2004, at p. 104-105,

By far the most serious problem relates to reader confusion created by sloppy or imprecise use of articles. Here's an example where use of "the" can mislead the reader:

A receiver is someone appointed to take possession of a debtor's assets, whether at the request of another party (such as *the* secured creditor) or by order of a court.

The italicized "the" implies a single, specific creditor, but because the sentence is setting out a general definition, an indefinite article should have been used — it should read: such as a secured creditor.

Confusion also arises when a writer switches from a definite article to an indefinite article (or visa-versa) when referring to the same thing. Here's an example:

The expert estimated earnings of \$1-\$2 million for *the* manufacturing company. According to another expert, a manufacturing company could reasonably expect estimated earnings of only \$800,000.

By switching to "a" in the second sentence it's not clear whether both experts were talking about the same company. Because of the change, the reader may wonder whether the first expert's determination was based on specific information about the company in issue while the second expert was speaking of manufacturing companies in general. If both experts were talking about the same company, uncertainty could have been avoided simply by using the definite article in both sentences.

Conclusion

Because the rules relating to articles are straightforward, people sometimes get careless applying them. Taking care to make sure you're using the right article will prevent confusion and will enhance your reputation as a good communicator.

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Ingrid welcomes your feedback, questions, and suggestions for topics you'd be interested in reading about. Drop Ingrid a line at: ingrid@goodwithwords.com, or call 416-259-3399.

Book Review

Building Value in Your Company

Howard E. Johnson MBA, FCA, FCMA, CBV, CPA, CFA, ASA, CF, C.DIR

Building Value in Your Company provides a practical, hands-on explanation of how business value is measured; how this value can be increased; and how business owners and executives can realize on that increased value by focusing on cash flow, risk management and invested capital. It shows readers how developing a competitive advantage generates intangible value, which ultimately leads to value creation.

Written in clear, easy-to-understand language, this comprehensive guide explains the practical steps involved in value measurement, creation and realization; providing business owners and executives with key guidance on generating shareholder value for their company. It covers:

