Articles: A, An, or The

The below diagram is presented in Patrick Hartwell’s article, “Grammar, Grammars, and the Teaching of Grammar.”

Originally presented by Thomas N. Huckin and Leslie A. Olsen, it provides students a guide for understanding when to use the definite article the or the indefinite articles a and an. Of course, in some situations, no article is necessary at all.

Hartwell points out that there are limitations to such a rule, for “article choice in English is less a matter of rule than of idiom, real-world knowledge, and stylistic choice” (217). However, for non-native English speakers the rule can be very valuable; it also can assist native speakers in explaining when and why we use one article over another.

ENTER NOUN

Does the noun have a unique referent? yes

Use the

(Maria wore the yellow coat she received for Christmas.)

no

Is the noun countable? yes

Is the noun singular? yes

Use a or an

(She grabbed a pencil.)

no

no

Use no article

Use no article

(Coca-Cola is enjoyed throughout the country.)

(Most birds migrate south every winter.)

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2A unique referent is a specific person or object that a term refers to. For example, the house on the corner has a unique referent. It is not any house but a specific one that is on that specific corner.