

The Well Bred Sentence

Chapter 11: The Articles

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Introduction

Traditional Grammar tells us that the English articles are the indefinite article ‘a/an’ and the definite article ‘the’. It tells us very little else other than that we usually but not always omit ‘the’ when we use a proper noun, and that ‘an’ is placed before a common noun or adjective that begins with a vowel or a mute ‘h’, and ‘a’ before a common noun or adjective that begins with a consonant. Sometimes, however, no article accompanies a common noun. The when-and-why of the matter stumbles about in limbo, much to the consternation not only of learners of English but also of its native users. This Chapter proposes a procedure of reasoning that will enable informed and valid decision about whether to use ‘a/an’ or ‘the’, or neither, in any instance of sentence construction. Central to this procedure of reasoning is the proposal that nouns are:

1. natural genus nouns that articles do not accompany,
and
2. quasi-natural genus nouns that ‘the’ but not ‘a/an’ accompanies,
and
3. identifying nouns that ‘the’ accompanies,
and
4. particularising nouns that ‘a/an’ accompanies,
and
5. definition-structure nouns or genitive nouns that the articles accompany as meaning dictates.

The attendant proposal is that, in order to know when to omit articles and when to use them as ‘a/an’ or as ‘the’, we must know whether a noun is:

- (i) naming genus. or
- (ii) particularising, or
- (iii) identifying, or
- (iv) generalising, or
- (v) defining, or
- (vi) acting in genitive relationship with another noun.

Not knowing which of these things a noun is doing, we are not in a position to make decisions about which article should accompany a noun, if either.

The concept 'indefinite article' is very unhelpful. As this Chapter will demonstrate, 'a/an' can be very definite indeed. Rather than live with the unsatisfactory distinction 'definite' and 'indefinite', this Chapter simply refers to the articles as themselves: 'a/an' and 'the'.

Particularisation and identification

One syntactic function of the article 'a/an' is to particularise. ('A/an' has other functions too. They will be discussed later.) The syntactic function of the article 'the' is to identify:

The man came in with the letter.

The identified subject 'the man' came in with the identified object 'the letter'.

A man came in with a letter.

The particularised but not identified subject 'a man' came in
The particularised but not identified object 'a letter'.

The man came in with a letter.

The identified subject 'the man' came in with the
particularised but not identified object 'the letter'.

Once a noun is particularised it acquires a unique-object status: In the foregoing sentences *the man* and *a man* each correspond to a unique item of the genus *man*, and *the letter* and *a letter* each correspond to a unique item of the genus *letter*. The difference is that *the man* and *the letter* are also identified. That is, the man and the letter are **known items**. We therefore say sensibly that:

The man gave the letter to a man in the room.

Saying this, we distinguish between *the man* who is an identified man (the speaker knows him on some level), and *a man* who is a particularised man but not yet an identified man (the speaker knows nothing about him). In the sentence displayed above, *the man* and *a man* refer to different people. But 'the man' and 'a man' can refer to the same person when the context of these nouns is larger than a single sentence. In a text of sentences a person is 'a man' until he is identified, when he becomes 'the man'. And an object is 'a letter' until it is identified, when it becomes 'the letter'. This process holds true for all common nouns.

'But how do we know whether the noun "man" has or has not been identified?' you ask. The answer is simple: The text in which 'the man' features has made him known. Observe this in the following text:

Our friend Yuri entered the room purposefully and immediately propelled us towards a man [*particularised but not yet identified*] in the thick of the crowd assembled there. 'This is Igor,' Yuri briskly introduced him to us. Then, waving niceties, he addressed the man [*now identified as*

Igor] with: ‘The girls [*identified as ‘us’*] will brief you on everything we know to date,’ then pushed an enveloped letter [*particularised but not yet identified*] into his pocket. Yuri about-turned, apparently meaning to leave.

In the same instance, the man [*now identified as ‘Igor’*] gave the letter [*now identified as the enveloped letter Yuri had pushed into Igor’s pocket*] to a man [*particularised but not yet identified*] in the throng [*to be identified by the next sentence*] that had pressed closely about him. Seeing this, Susan restrained Yuri with:

‘Who was that man?’

‘What man?’ Yuri pretended ignorance.

‘The man [*to be identified by the ensuing phrase*] Igor gave the letter to,’ Susan disciplined his evasiveness.

Natural identifier nouns

There are nouns that name exclusively by identifying *en masse*. Underpinning these nouns is the concept ‘people of a certain kind’. Characteristically, therefore, these are plural nouns. As identifiers they can identify only the plurality ‘people of a kind’. Hence the role of the identifying ‘the’. Because these nouns can identify only ‘people of a certain kind’ they cannot particularise. **They are therefore always accompanied by ‘the’, never by ‘a/an’.** Pronouns (italicised below) that refer to these nouns are always in plural forms:

The illuminati [plural noun] inform us only on a need-to-know basis. We would rather that *they* were less secretive.

The literati [plural noun] fought a war amongst *themselves* on the question of who deserves the Booker Prize.

The self-styled innocenti [plural noun] took no responsibility for what had happened. *They* always wriggle out of punishment.

The elite [plural noun] sometimes act as if the rest of us were invisible. We shall soon make ourselves known to *them*.

The intelligentsia [plural noun] led the fight against censorship. *They* risked *their* lives for the freedom of the press.

The foregoing are all Latin words (except the French-derived word ‘elite’) that English has adopted. But identifier nouns come as English words too. They are nouns created from the past-participle forms of verbs. These are a few of them:

The informed [plural noun: gerund] worked hard to describe the situation to the rest of us. *Their* effort was truly noble.

The educated [plural noun: gerund] showed a willingness to accommodate our suggestions. *Their* co-operation was much appreciated.

The dispossessed [plural noun: gerund] naturally resent *their* dispossessors.

Identifier nouns are created also from adjectives:

The knowledgeable [plural noun: gerundive] thought little of the item I had mistaken for treasure. *They* smiled tolerantly at me.

The weak [plural noun: gerundive] depend on the strong. *They*, being weak, have few resources of their own.

The educated [plural noun: gerundive] prefer their own company.

It is important to note that natural identifier nouns are always plural nouns, and that they cannot particularise. So we CANNOT SAY ‘he is a knowledgeable’ or ‘he is a literati’ or ‘he is an educated’.

The legal exception

Legal language provides us with an expression that appears to depart from the ‘natural identifier’ convention. That expression is ‘the accused’. Unlike other natural identifier nouns, ‘the accused’ can be both singular and plural:

The accused was ordered to take the stand. *He* complied.

The accused were all ordered to take the stand. *They* complied.

‘The accused’ can also be particularised:

That provision cannot protect an accused whose offence is a criminal one.

On reflection, one realises that ‘the accused’ is not a natural identifier noun at all. Rather, it is merely the abbreviation of the expression ‘an/the accused person’.

The superlatives

When a noun phrase includes a superlative adjective, or it names some ‘highest degree’ concept, there is, logically, an identification: Only one entity can occupy the superlative (the ‘top of the pile’) position. Nouns and noun phrases that name by designating that the named item is in the superlative position thereby identify that named entity. Those nouns and noun phrases are therefore necessarily accompanied by ‘the’:

We had the best fun in Paris.

We had the time of our lives in Paris.

He caught the mother of all influenzas when he came home.
The worst was yet to come.

Genus nouns and the articles

Genus nouns do nothing more than perform acts of naming. They name such that their denotation is 'all things that are that genus'. It is precisely because they perform acts of naming, and because they have 'all' denotations, that they are genus nouns. This aspect of the naming habit of genus nouns is illustrated by the meaning-templates below each of the following sentences:

We eat duck but we do not eat rabbit.

We eat all things that are 'duck'. We do not eat all things that are 'rabbit'.

They shunned peace and chose war.

They shunned all things that are 'peace' and chose all things that are 'war'.

Humanity has resilience.

All things that are 'humanity' are all things that have 'resilience'.

We eat ice-cream after dinner.

We eat all things that are 'ice cream' after all things that are 'dinner'.

He travels by bus.

All things by which he travels are 'bus'.

The hostess served fish for breakfast.

The hostess served all things that are 'fish' for all things that are 'dinner'.

In the following sentences the genus nouns have plural forms:

Western European males at some time abandon shorts for trousers.

All things that are 'European males' abandon all things that are 'shorts' for all things that are 'trousers'.

Good governments represent the people who elected them.

All things that are 'good government' are all things that represent the people who elected them.

Neither 'the' nor 'a/an' can accompany a genus noun. Adding 'a/an' or 'the' to that denotation is logically impossible: genus nouns, by nature, cannot be particularised or identified, for they correspond to a class, not to an item of a class.

When is a noun a genus noun?

Any noun can function as a genus noun if it can name without identifying or particularising. A noun is not a genus noun otherwise.

Natural genus nouns

A few concepts exist to name genus that does not have an identifiable sub-class. Consequently, few nouns exist to name such genus. All the ones that do exist are singular nouns. These are some of them:

1. *People concepts*: mankind, (and ‘man’ and ‘humanity’ when they are synonymous with ‘mankind’), Everyman, everyone, everybody:

- (i) Whatever the times, it is never mankind that *is* the innocent victim.
- (ii) His audience is Everyman, not the specialist.
- (iii) Everybody *is* welcome.

Natural genus nouns are always singular, and take the singular copula when they are the subjects of the copula, as in (i) and (iii) above.

2. *Non-geographical territory concepts*: academia, nirvana, individuality:

It is only in academia that we find a genuine pursuit of truth.
Academia is not the real world.

When you no longer feel your individuality you are close to attaining Nirvana.

The articles cannot accompany natural genus nouns.

Quasi-natural genus nouns (collective nouns)

Quasi-natural genus nouns are collective nouns. Collective nouns can be identified but they cannot be particularised. *Rubble* and *treasure* in this sentence are quasi-natural genus nouns (or collective nouns) that are in fact very like natural genus nouns:

The novice miner mistook rubble for treasure.

The novice miner mistook all things that are ‘rubble’
for all things that are ‘treasure’.

In the next sentence, *the rubble* and *the treasure* are identified quasi-natural genus nouns (or collective) nouns. (The identifying sequences are rendered in italics):

The novice miner mistook the rubble [*that was*] *in the cave*
for the treasure [*that*] *we were seeking*.

A very important thing to note here is the role of the identifying ‘the’ that accompanies the quasi-natural collective, or genus, noun: this

‘the’ simply isolates an instance of the named genus. The following is an indicative, not an exhaustive, list of collective (or quasi-natural genus) nouns:

Collective product-naming nouns:

footwear, clothing, furniture, glassware, tableware, cutlery, hosiery;

Nouns that name disciplines:

politics, mathematics, carpentry, photography, law;

Ethical concepts:

freedom, justice, injustice, honour, humour, piety;

Nouns that name substance:

flesh, steel, gold, iron, milk, water;

Nouns that name detritus: rubble, rubbish, refuse;

Nouns that name chemicals and minerals:

calcium, alcohol, nitrogen, ether;

In sentences that call upon ‘the’ to accompany a collective noun (quasi-natural genus noun) there is always an adjective phrase, either explicitly or implicitly, that describes them and thereby isolates an instance of the genus that noun names. (Adjective phrases in the following sentences are rendered in italics.) In this sentence, the adjective phrase is explicit:

Everyone admired the glassware *[that]we bought/at the exhibition/on our table.*

But in this sentence it is implicit:

The milk has gone sour.
The milk that you bought/on the table/in the refrigerator has gone sour.

When the identifying adjective phrase is a relative-adjective phrase, it is always explicit:

We demand the justice *[that] we deserve.*
The mathematics *[that] we were taught* was really just arithmetic.
The ideology *[that] he propounded* was not to my taste.

Collective nouns cannot be particularised. This is so because collective nouns by nature name a class of items, not the particular items of that class. It would be illogical to treat them as if they named particular items. So ‘a/an’ cannot accompany collective nouns.

The appearance that it is possible to particularise collective nouns (i.e., let a/an accompany them) is created by sentences such as this one:

They found a treasure where they were expecting only rubble.

However, there is no particularisation here. Rather, there is enumeration: *a treasure* = ‘one treasure’. (Enumeration is discussed further under that sub-heading.)

The quasi-natural genus noun (collective nouns) in abbreviated expressions

A habit of abbreviation has enabled what at first glance appears to be a particularisation of the collective noun ‘injustice’:

He was the victim of an injustice.

In fact, there is no particularisation of ‘injustice’ here. What has happened is that the expression ‘an act of injustice’ was abbreviated. This is the version of the sentence with the abbreviated element restored:

He was the victim of *an act of* injustice.

‘An’ in this context actually accompanies *act*, not *injustice*: *of injustice* here functions adjectively to describe *an act*. And it enumerates *act*: it does not particularise it.

What happens when a noun is neither a natural identifier noun nor a genus noun nor a quasi-genus noun?

Nouns that are not natural identifier nouns or natural genus nouns or quasi-natural genus nouns are either identified or particularised nouns. So either ‘the’ or ‘a/an’ must accompany them. But which? Fortunately, there is a simple answer available:

1. A noun that is described by an implicit or explicit adjective phrase is identified by it. Because it is identified, ‘the’ necessarily accompanies it. (Adjective phrases are italicised in the sentences below):

The panic *[that] we were in* prevented us from thinking clearly.

The no-win position *in which she found herself* was the source and cause of her depression.

The daze *[that] the girl was in* was due to the surprise *that had been sprung* on her.

The poet *[that is] in me* refuses to bend to grammar rules.

The London *[that] I knew* was a foggy city.

2. Where there is no explicit or implicit identifying adjective phrase to describe it, we are free to particularise a noun with ‘a/an’:

Their message threw us into a panic.
Anna found herself in a no-win position.
She was in a daze after that unexpected event.

Generalisation and the articles

The syllogism is the procedural model of the generalisation. The sentence form of the syllogism is the copula sentence. It is an axiom of logic that all propositions (the premises and conclusion of the syllogism) have a singular form and a plural form. Thus the singular form:

I am old

has the plural form:

All things that are ‘I **are** some things that **are** ‘old’.

It follows that when the plural form of a generalisation is

‘All apples are fruit’,

its singular form must be

‘An apple is a fruit’.

The article ‘a/an’, therefore, accompanies not only nouns with a particularising function but also nouns with a generalising function. When ‘a man’ has a generalising function, ‘a/an’ does not reference a particular man. When ‘a toy’ has a generalising function, ‘a/an’ does not reference a particular toy. When ‘an apple’ has a generalising function, ‘an/an’ does not reference a particular apple. Rather, ‘a/an’ references the generality ‘man’, the generality ‘toy’ and the generality ‘apple’:

A man prefers a blonde.

Men prefer blondes.

A toy pleases a child.

Toys please children.

An apple is a fruit.

Apples are fruit.

The generalising relative-adjective phrase

When there is a generalisation in the singular form, the noun subject of the verb (in bold italics) can be accompanied by either ‘the’ or ‘a/an’:

(i) A mother *who abandons her children* ***injures*** also herself.

(ii) The mother *who abandons her children* **injures** also herself.

The noun subject is not be accompanied by either article if it is a plural noun. That is so because the plural noun subject carries the meaning ‘all’:

(iii) Mothers *who abandon their children* **injure** also themselves.

We make exactly the same meaning no matter which construction, (i) or (ii) or (iii), we choose to use. In each of the foregoing sentences the relative-adjective phrase (italicised) itself has a generalising function: it does not identify the noun it describes. Which construction we choose is therefore purely a matter of style.

(Compare these sentences with the sentences below (**‘The’ and ‘a/an’ as enumerators when there is identification but no generalisation**), in which the relative-adjective phrase has a generalising function. Note how meaning changes when the relative adjective phrase identifies but does not generalise.)

Definition and the articles

In classic definition structure, the subject (the definiens) is defined in terms of the complement (the definientia).

When the definiens is a plural or compounded noun, the definientia takes the plural-noun form and omits ‘a/an’:

DEFINIENS	COPULA	DEFINIENTIA
<u>John and Mary</u>	are	<u>doctors</u> of considerable standing.
<u>Those women</u>	have been	<u>scientists</u> on a humble level.

When the definiens is a singular noun, the definientia takes the singular-noun form and ‘a/an’ precedes it.

DEFINIENS	COPULA	DEFINIENTIA
Tom	is	<u>an engineer</u> in France.
Fido	was	<u>a dog</u> worth knowing.

As the table above shows, the article ‘a/an’ necessarily precedes the definientia noun whenever it is a simple entity-naming noun. However, when a superlative sense is inherent in the definientia, ‘the’ has to precedes the noun that names it:

DEFINIENS	COPULA	DEFINIENTIA
Drink	is	<u>the curse</u> of the working class.
Drink is the only curse of the working class.		

If the definiens is constructed with ‘a/an’, another meaning is achieved:

DEFINIENS	COPULA	DEFINIENTIA
Drink	is	<u>a curse</u> of the working class.
Drink is one of several curses of the working class.		

Identification and the copula sentence

The copula construction does not only generalise or define. It can also identify. That defining and identifying are two distinct functions is obvious in the following sentences.

Definition is performed by the highlighted sentence:

‘I know you have two women in custody, Mary and Susan. One *is* a doctor, the other a painter’

Identification is performed by both the following sentences (highlighted):

‘I want to know which is the doctor, and which the painter.’

‘Susan *is* the doctor, and Mary is the painter’, the sergeant quickly answered.

Defining and referencing

When we wish to define the subject and say something else about it, we do not have to define it first then say something else about it later. We can reference the subject with alternately-naming nouns instead. (The referencing nouns are italicised in these sentences, and the verbs are rendered in bold italics):

(i) John, *doctor, artist and rogue*, **arrived** later than everyone else.

(ii) John, *a doctor, an artist and a rogue*, **arrived** later than everyone else.

Referencing with ‘a/an’ can land us into difficulty. For instance, according to sentence (ii), above, how many people arrived later than everyone else: only John, or also a doctor, an artist and a rogue? Ambiguity of this sort will arise only in a sentence where the verb

is such that it does not reveal whether the subject is singular or plural; ‘arrived’ in the foregoing sentences is such a verb. If the sentence had been:

John, a doctor, an artist and a rogue, *was* the last to arrive, the ambiguity would not have arisen.

A further point is that when we define by referencing, we can chose to use ‘a/an’, or we can omit it if the referencing noun is a phrase, or if there is a list of referencing nouns:

Referencing noun phrase

John, veteran of many difficult situations, was nevertheless nervous about this one.

John, *a veteran of many difficult situations*, was nevertheless nervous about this one.

Rebel without a cause, John often picked pointless fights.

A rebel without a cause, John often picked pointless fights.

List of referencing nouns (in italics)

Sailor, poet and dairy farmer, Muriel churned out verses at a great rate of knots.

But we must use ‘a/an’ when the referencing noun is a single noun:

The girl, *an actress*, found it easy to speak in public,

unless the that noun is part of a foreshortened sentence (*underlined*):

Actress by nature, the girl produced tears easily.

Nouns that define by referencing have this in common: all of them carry a sense of ‘*x*, who is ...’. That is, nouns that reference are really foreshortened-sentence versions of relative-adjective phrases (*in italics*):

John, *who is a rebel without a cause*, often picks fights pointlessly.

A rebel without a cause, John often picked pointless fights.

The girl, *who is an actress*, found it easy to speak in public.

The girl, an actress, found it easy to speak in public.

Defining and identifying

Sometimes an identification process runs alongside the defining process. The definition is achieved by the relative-adjective phrase (*italicised*) and the identification by *the*. In such cases, both the definiens and the definientia are accompanied by *the*:

DEFINIENS	COPULA	DEFINIENTIA
The Mary Smith who raised the alarm	is	the teacher, not the nurse.
There are two people called 'Mary Smith'. One is a teacher, the other a nurse. The one who raised the alarm is Mary Smith the teacher, not Mary Smith the nurse.		

Defining and particularising

If the clarification we are seeking to offer is not to do with which Mary Smith raised the alarm, but instead, it has to do with whether Mary Smith is a teacher or a nurse or some other sort of professional, we have no use for the identifying article 'the' in the definientia. We need the particularising 'a/an':

The Mary Smith who raised the alarm is a teacher, not a nurse or an estate agent.

Definition by apposition

Definition results when a common noun (*highlighted in blue*) and a proper noun (*highlighted in yellow*) that is the name of a person are juxtaposed such that the proper noun is second in their sequence. Nouns in this sequence are said to be 'in apposition':

Teacher Mary Smith raised the alarm.

Teachers Mary Smith and Tom Jones raised the alarm.

Nouns in apposition are never accompanied by articles.

Enumeration and the articles

Sometimes our intention is not to name genus nor to generalise, particularise, identify or define. Instead, our intention is to enumerate. The numerical concepts 'one' and 'some' are central to the expression of that intention. When the concept is 'one', 'a/an' precedes the noun:

I have an uncle [*one person who is my uncle*] in Paris.

I have a flat [*one flat*] in Paris.

The article is omitted when the numerical concept is larger than one but is not specified:

The girl has family [*some family members*] in Paris.

We had [*some*] fun in Paris.

Naming genus or enumerating?

When we name genus, the associated numerical concept is 'all'. The 'all' in this use does not entail *every item* that it is a member of the

named genus. Rather, it entails *only one item* that is a member of the named genus.

The guests were served whiskey before dinner.

The guests were served all things that are 'whisky'.

Milk is a good source of calcium.

All things that are 'milk' are a good source of all things that are calcium.

The children asked for ice cream.

The children asked for all things that are ice-cream.

She asked for coffee.

She asked for all things that are 'coffee'.

We can associate the numerical concept 'one' with some of these nouns (underlined above) when we do certain things. For instance, when we place our order with a waiter in a restaurant, we can say:

Please bring me a whiskey, a milk, an ice-cream and a coffee.

But we **cannot say**

I should like a calcium,

'for 'calcium' does not lend itself to the concept 'one': it is conceptually innumerable. *Whiskey, milk, ice-cream, coffee* and other potable substances do, for the simple reason that they associate also with some kind of unit, such as a container: glass, cone, cup, *etc*:

a [one] *cup* of coffee, a [one] *glass* of milk, *etc*.

Quantifying

When we speak of someone's 'having' a commodity, we comment on the level at which that person possesses that commodity. When we say:

She has money

we mean that *she* is in possession of money at a high level. But by:

She has little money

we mean that *she* is in possession of money at a low, or insufficient, level. And by:

She has a little money

we mean that *she* has a significant amount, if not a lot, of money. The same meanings obtain when we quantify other attributes or possessions:

The plan has merit [level of merit: substantial].

The plan has little merit [level of merit: very low].

The plan has a some merit [level of merit: some but not much].

We have friends [a substantial number of friends].

We have few friends [a very small number, not enough, friends].

We have a few friends [a significant number of friends, but not many].

She has patience [a commendable level of patience].

She has little patience [not enough patience].

She has a little patience [some but not enough patience].

‘The’ and ‘a/an’ as enumerators when there is identification but no generalisation

In the following sentences, the relative-adjective phrase is used to identify persons who have performed an act. In such a construction, a numerical concept (one, some, several) always associates with the identified subject.

(Compare following sentences with the sentences above (***The generalising relative-adjective phrase***) in which the relative-adjective phrase has a generalising function. Note how meaning changes when the relative adjective phrase identifies but does not generalise.)

The mothers *who abandoned their children* injured themselves.

Several [identified] mothers abandoned their children. Those mothers injured themselves.

The mother *who abandoned her children* injured herself.

One [identified] mother abandoned her children. That mother injured herself.

A mother *who abandoned her children* injured herself.

One mother abandoned her children. That mother injured herself.

We have to use an article before each of the nouns underlined above. ‘The’ is the only one we can use with a plural noun ‘mothers’. We can use either ‘a/an’ or ‘the’ before the singular noun ‘mother’. Which we use depends on whether we want to identify and enumerate (in which case we use ‘the’), or whether we want only to enumerate (in which case we use ‘a/an’).

A curious situation arises when we have a sentence that uses the non-generalising relative-adjective phrase twice to identify two different people. Before which described noun do we use ‘a/an’, and

before which ‘the’? As these four sentences demonstrate, we use either ‘a/an’ or ‘the’, as we please:

A man *whom we did not know* came into the room. A man *[who was] already in the room* ran for cover.

The man *whom we did not know* came into the room. The man *[who was] already in the room* ran for cover.

A man *whom we did not know* came into the room. The man *[who was] already in the room* ran for cover.

The man *whom we did not know* came into the room. A man *[who was] already in the room* ran for cover.

Idiom and the articles

There are a few article usages that do not fit into the pattern of the usage outlined above. But they are not a great number, and they are easily learnt.

Tacit agreement and the omission of articles

When ‘town’, by tacit agreement among a group, is used to signify ‘a particular town’, it functions as if it were the proper name of that city. So:

He went to town yesterday

is equi-meaning with

He went to London yesterday,

if *town* tacitly signifies *London*.

It should be noted that this arrangement works only for *town*. It does not work for ‘city’ or ‘village’: We CANNOT SAY ‘He went to city’ or ‘He went to village’. Otherwise, usage is the normal pattern of identifying or particularising:

He went to the town [identified town].

In a text, this town has either been named or otherwise identified.

He went to a town. [particularised but not identified town.]

There is a further ‘town’ eccentricity: The expression ‘to go to town’ is used to mean ‘to do something in an extravagant, or somehow unrestrained, way. For example:

They really went to town when they designed their new house

remarks that *they* were quite unconventional/unrestrained in what they put into the design of their house.

More ‘tacit agreement among a group’ usages

The ‘tacit agreement among a group’ factor works also for nouns other than ‘town’:

He is at school/ He has gone to school

means that he is at, or has gone to, ‘his’ school. ‘School’ references the proper name of his school, *e.g.* Tonbridge School, but the proper name is out of order in this familial context.

Other expressions that omit the articles locate the subject in activity zones:

He is at church/at services.

He is attending a church service.

He is at practice.

He is practising a piece on the piano/participating in a sport training event, *etc.*

and in comfort zones:

He is at home.

He is at ease.

He is at play.

‘The’ and body-parts nouns

When we speak of contact with body parts ‘the’ always accompanies the noun that names the body part. There is no discernible reason for this:

He tapped the girl on the shoulder.

His false friends stabbed him in the back.

He took the punch on the chin.

Metaphorical locations

‘The’ always accompanies nouns that name metaphorical locations:

The man knew he would be in the dog-house for what he did.

The man knew he would be punished, shunned, denied domestic comforts, *etc.*

He was put into the cooler after he attempted to escape.

He was put into a punishment cell.

He led us up the garden path.

He misled us.

We knew he would go on the rampage as soon as he heard the bad news.

We knew he would become violent.

I am always on the defensive when people criticise him.
I always assume a position where I can fend off
people's criticism of him.

Metaphorical activity

'A/an' always accompanies nouns that name metaphorical activities:

He went on a bender on New Year's Eve.
He drank an excess of alcohol on new Year's Eve.
He led us a merry dance.
He misled and confused us.

Native speakers, the articles and genitive nouns

Native speakers of English, not only ESL learners, should study article usage. There is a tall story in broad circulation to the effect that native English speakers do not make errors when they use articles because they are blessed with 'received knowledge' of their use. In fact, it is quite common even for well-read native speakers to lose track of what their articles are doing. Here is an example of this, extracted from a thesis writer's text.

Criminal liability of the corporation is determined by the estimate of its state of mind. For the purposes of this procedure, the corporation's state of mind is a state of mind of its directors. Unlike the civil law, the criminal law considers the directors to be a personification of the corporation, not its agents.

The wrongly used articles are struck out in the text below, and the appropriate articles are added in blue font:

~~The~~ a criminal liability of ~~the~~ a corporation is determined by ~~the~~ an estimate of its state of mind. For the purposes of this procedure, ~~the~~ a corporation's state of mind is ~~a~~ the state of mind of its directors. Unlike ~~the~~ civil law, ~~the~~ criminal law considers ~~the~~ directors to be a the personification of ~~the~~ a corporation, not its agents.

The writer's dual problem in the text above is manifest in his very first sentence. He meant to generalise about 'corporations':

Criminal liability of corporations is determined ...
[article omitted wrongly]

For some reason he cast his generalisation in the singular form: *is determined*. In itself that is fine. But he simply did not know that when one is generalising with the 'of' construction of the genitive case, the nouns must be preceded by 'a/an'. He should have written:

A corporation's criminal liability...

or

The criminal liability of a corporation ...

The article and genitive nouns

It seems that he thought he could obtain a generalising effect by using ‘criminal liability’ as a genus noun. He therefore omitted the article. However, when one is using the ‘of’ construction of the genitive, an article must precede both nouns in genitive relationship.

A further fact about the ‘of’ construction of the genitive relationship is that the component of it that would carry the apostrophe (if it were expressed as the apostrophe construction) is the dominant noun. The other noun identifies a property of it. The identifying ‘the’, therefore, always precedes the noun that names the property owner. So this writer’s *Criminal liability of the corporation* should have been rendered thus:

The criminal liability of a corporation ...

If the dominant noun names to identify, the nouns in genitive relationship are preceded by ‘the’ in the ‘of’ construction, and in the apostrophe [’s or s’] construction:

The corporation’s criminal liability was measured in terms of its directors’ guilty minds ...

The criminal liability of the corporation was measured in terms of the guilty minds ...

The writer's problem with the articles and the genitive recurred in the second sentence:

a **the** state of mind of its directors,

and in the last one:

a **the** personification of ~~the~~ a corporation.

His last sentence contains two further errors: ‘The’ wrongly precedes the names of disciplines. The text he constructed makes it clear that *his intention was to name disciplines, not to identify them*. There is, therefore, no role for ‘the’ in this naming. He should have used these names of disciplines as genus nouns, and omitted the article:

Unlike ~~the~~ civil law, ~~the~~ criminal law considers

(In another text, we can identify these nouns such that they cease to be genus names, and become nouns identified by adjective phrase (in italics):

The civil law *in this jurisdiction* is unlike the civil law *in mine*.)

Finally, 'the' wrongly precedes a generalising/collective plural noun:

... criminal law wrongly expects ~~the~~ directors to be ...

So much for native-speaker infallibility in the use of articles!

Conclusion

The ambition of this Chapter was to illustrate that, contrary to the common perception, the use of the English articles does not defy description. The English system of articles is highly logical, and the eccentricities of idiom have only a minor role in it.

PS: I am very grateful to Alex Levitsky for directing me to the excellent points on article usage that John M Lawler makes in this piece:

<http://www-personal.umich.edu/~jlawler/000001.html> .

It is very well worth reading.

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