Tips on Article Use

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Introduction

What is an article?
English has two articles: the and a/an.

the = definite article
a/an = indefinite article
For example:

Let's read **the** book.
Let's read **a** book.
Tips on article use:

1. Use “the” with something which has already been mentioned so that both the speaker and listener know what is being talked about.

A man came up to a police officer and asked her a question. The police officer didn’t understand the question, so she asked the man to repeat it.
2. Use “the” before superlatives and ordinal numbers.

The tallest student in the class is 2 meters tall.

Please read the fourth paragraph on page 3.

Today is the most important day in his life.
3. Use “the” to refer to things that are unique.

The earth revolves around the sun once every 365 days (Kohl).
4. Use “the” before musical instruments.

Examples:
the piano
the violin
the saxophone
the erhu
5. Use “the” in sentences or clauses where we identify a specific person or object. The context or situation makes the noun's identity clear.

Close the door.
I’m going to the library
This magazine helps women analyze the problematic situation and offers possible remedies (Kohl).
6. Use of Articles with Proper Nouns.

*Proper nouns* are names of particular people, places, and things.

John F. Kennedy
New York City
Notre Dame Cathedral
The definite article is not used with most singular proper nouns.

The George and I went to a movie last night.
→ George and I went to a movie last night.
Exceptions:

a) when you want to be emphatic

the Elizabeth Taylor

b) when you are actually using the name as a common noun

the George that I introduced you to last night
Use “the” with a surname in its plural form to refer to members in the family.

the Johnsons

the Greens
Singular geographical names are very irregular with respect to article usage.

Asia
Africa
Mount Fuji
San Francisco Bay

the Crimea
the Sahara
Examples of irregularities (Kohl):

State Street
the Empire State Building
Great Britain
the Soviet Union
the University of Virginia
Bowling Green State University
the United Nations (the U.N.)
the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries
(but "OPEC," not "the OPEC")
Works Cited
http://www.wecc.rpi.edu

Thanks