

Teaching Articles, Knowing if They've Understood, and the Art of Writing

Three Questions Answered
by Shawn T, English Tutor

Why is the use of articles so confusing to tutees? And how can I get across how to use them?

The answer lies in the tutee's native tongue. In many other languages, it is not required to specify singular nouns. In English, we are required to specify whether it is an apple, the apple, etc. In other words, is it any apple, or is it this specific apple. So an article has no other purpose than to identify the relation of an individual to a given noun. There are quite a few words that negate the use of, and are used as, articles: this, any, that, one, his, her, my, your, their, our, etc. Very few people go about learning the use of an article this way. And there are times when these rules are broken. So most people learn the use of articles by ear and never even think about it. However, it is important to get this message across to a tutee. The best way to approach this is to explain that nouns that are singular (for the most part) need an article in front of them or in front of the adjective that modifies the noun.

How do I know if my tutees understand what I'm saying?

Often times, when a tutee is asked by the tutor if they understand what the tutor means, the tutee will say they understand just to move on. This can be a problem for the tutor because if the tutee doesn't understand the material, it's a waste of time and can cause more problems later on down the road. So it's a good idea to give examples of each lesson. And then ask the tutee questions about the example given. For example: "Is there anything wrong with the sentence: I have apple? Which sounds better, I have apple or I have an apple?" When this is done, the tutor can give another example that is very similar at the beginning of the next session. If the tutee does not answer correctly, the tutor should give the example that was given on the first session (eg. do I have apple or an apple?)

How can I help someone understand what, to me, is an art?

Examples of writing done by the tutor can be helpful when trying to explain the beauty of the written word. Suggestions are also helpful. What needs to be said and what would be the most verbal or aesthetically pleasing are two very different things. Helping the tutee to understand the position the teacher is in is a good way to explain the art. Both the tutor and the tutee must keep in mind that the teacher is reading many papers so grabbing her attention can sometimes be difficult. Being bold, yet subtle, to catch the reader's attention is an important part of any writing. This is a lesson that is rarely taught, but always applies. Being considerate to the needs of the reader is the foundation for all good writers. Just being conscious of the reader is the first step to understanding the art of writing.

As simple as it may sound, the basis for good tutoring is understanding the subject. Anyone can tell the tutee the answer to a problem. Anyone can fix mistakes in an essay. The tutor's job is to

be there when the tutee asks "why?" and be able to articulate an answer in terms the tutee can easily comprehend. Tutees are often above-average students that are not satisfied with just knowing the answer. They want to know why. They need to be able to invest themselves in a subject in order to be conscious of what they are doing. It is possible that "why" is the first question we learn. But it is the last question answered. This is a philosophy that is highlighted by the unique learning abilities of the tutee.