The use of definite and indefinite articles in English is well known to be a major point of difficulty for many nonnative English speakers. These difficulties prevail even when the speakers are fluent in most other aspects of English grammar and style. This article investigates the pedagogical and linguistic reasons why article use is such a persistent problem area for ESL writers, and it presents a system for teaching the use of articles in English. It shows how the inherent meaning of a noun phrase interacts with other elements in the linguistic environment and with authorial intention in determining which article is most appropriate for that noun phrase. Finally, it provides an apparatus with which ESL writers can track the various components of article use and demonstrates how this apparatus can help make decisions about which article is the best choice for expressing the writer’s intended meaning.

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It is well known that one of the most difficult areas for many English language learners is managing the English article system. However, treatments of this system in grammar handbooks are often only basic, and other more specialized discussions of how English articles work are rare.1 This article explores some of the reasons, both pedagogical and linguistic, that writers working in English as a second language (henceforth ESL writers) are often left

to understand and use the article system without much support, despite the fact that these elements are often the only ones that linger as a problem when writers are otherwise fluent in the discourses of their disciplines.

The goal of this article is to provide resources that can help ESL students, particularly those at the graduate level in the U.S. university system. These students have already demonstrated proficiency in written English, such that they have been admitted to programs of study in the United States. But as anyone who has ever worked on a higher degree knows, the linguistic and discourse requirements of writing for a disciplinary audience are not necessarily easy to arrive at, even for a native English speaker (see Beaufort, 2007, for a discussion of the difficulties associated with entering into a discourse community for student writers). Moreover, specialized academic uses of English grammar, as well as grammar-sensitive professors who often are not trained to teach ESL students to write grammatical discipline-specific English, place ESL students in a difficult position. The availability of support for these students, and indeed for native English speakers training in the discourse of their disciplines, is inconsistent across institutions: Although graduate programs at various U.S. universities offer courses in academic writing for graduate students in their master’s and doctoral programs, such courses are by no means common in universities across the country.² Some might provide support in their writing centers (Phillips, 2009), but, again, whether this support is offered varies among institutions.

The difficulties inherent in teaching the English article system reveal many of the issues that confront graduate ESL students throughout their writing, such as dealing with their own rhetorical stance and attending to their audience and the linguistic context in which they are writing (Ramanathan & Atkinson, 1999; Tardy, 2005). Examining the criteria that native English speakers use to make choices about definite descriptions can help nonnative speakers

²Informal conversations with faculty members at these institutions, as well as a brief web search, indicates that institutions such as the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, University of New Hampshire, University of California-Davis, Ohio State University, University of Chicago, and University of Indiana have such programs. The City University of New York Graduate Center and Rutgers University are two examples of well-regarded graduate institutions that provide no such formal language support or instruction.
understand how to construct discourse in the way that native speakers do. Thus, after an initial discussion of the issues that confront English language learners when they are trying to master the English article system, this article presents a discussion of the English article system that helps ESL writers understand the complex semantics behind the use of definite and indefinite articles and provides a tool to help nonnative English speakers understand the article system and make decisions about which article to use where, resulting in the kinds of choices that native English speakers would make.

WHY TEACH ARTICLES?
The need for explicit language instruction for ESL graduate students is a present one. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics, 11.9% of all students enrolled in doctoral programs in 2006 were “nonresident aliens,” or international students. And of doctoral degrees awarded in 2007, 25.3% were awarded to international students, versus 3.2% of bachelor’s degrees to the same population. Although not all international students are nonnative English speakers, these statistics suggest that nonnative speakers make up a significant part of the graduate student population of the United States and an even greater portion of the doctoral students who are completing their degrees and thus seeking to enter their fields as professors or researchers. Even students who intend to return to their home countries after completing their graduate work will probably end up writing in English for much of their professional lives, due to the increasing internationalization of many academic fields and the emergence of English as the global language of the academy (Leki, 2001).

Research into the strategies that ESL students use when they write in English suggests several factors that are relevant to the teaching of articles. For instance, Braine (2002) notes that many ESL students may rely on direct translation from their native language into English when writing, and Cumming (2001), in his overview of research into composing processes of second language writers, states that although ESL writers generally use the same writing strategies in their second language as they would in their first,

3 http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d08/tables/dt08_291.asp
second-language learners seem to devote much attention while they write to decisions about the form of the second language or to finding resources such as appropriate words, which may constrain their attention to formulating complex ideas, their capacity to function in situations of high knowledge demands, and the extent of their planning of their writing. (p. 6)

Both of these factors are particularly important for using articles. The definite article is not readily translatable, though in many languages, including English, the singular indefinite article, a or an, is the same as, or closely related to, the word for one.\(^4\) Attention to audience and linguistic context also are essential in using articles correctly. Therefore, if ESL writers are focusing on the style and vocabulary of their writing, the use of articles will continue to be a challenge because making choices about these factors requires attention to the context that authors build when they write.

However, articles tend to be one of the last elements of English that students are explicitly taught. Instruction in the use of articles is hampered by the perception, especially among native English speakers, that, for indefinite and definite articles alike, “their usage is defined more by exceptions than by regular rules” (Haselwander, 2008, p. 6). Furthermore, Master (1995) cites Burt and Kiparsky (1972), who suggest that articles are overlooked in the initial stages of teaching English to speakers of other languages because the effect of these errors is local: The addressee can still understand the meaning of the message that the author or speaker is trying to convey, even when article errors persist. And finally, even among ESL students, the frequency of article errors is relatively rare. Data from Ferris and Roberts (2006) show that article errors occur on average 0.67 times per 100 words, whereas the most common errors—issues with verb use and sentence structure—occur 2.78 times and 2.51 times per 100 words, respectively. However, this rarity does not make them any less important for ESL writers who are striving for native-like fluency; articles are often their last, and most persistent, source of frustration.

Based on research like that of Ferris and Roberts (2006), it is unsurprising that article errors receive relatively little attention from either writing instructors or tutors. Overall, this type of error

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\(^4\) For example, \textit{ek} in Hindi, \textit{exad} in Hebrew.
comprises only a small number of errors in student writing, compared with punctuation and sentence structure issues or issues with verb forms (choice of tense, subject-verb agreement, etc.). They also generally do not impede meaning. Furthermore, articles are difficult to teach; although their effect may be local, understanding how articles work does not rely simply on local information like, for example, agreement systems do. The choice between using a definite or an indefinite article depends on the relationship that writers want to construct between their readers and the information provided in the writing, as well as on the linguistic context in which the article is to occur. Working with articles thus asks writers to keep track of a great deal of information and to understand the consequences for readers of each grammatical choice that the writers make. The next sections explore in detail how native English speakers keep track of this information and use it to make choices about articles.

TEACHING THE ENGLISH ARTICLE SYSTEM

Although it is true that the rules for using English articles are not simple, as many linguists have pointed out, one of the basic assumptions that must be made about language is that it is entirely rule governed with respect to its structure. If this were not the case, according to Noam Chomsky (1972) and many subsequent authors, language would be unlearnable. Chomsky writes, “A person who knows language has mastered a system of rules that assigns sound and meaning in a definite way for an infinite class of possible sentences” (p. 103). However, despite being rule based and able to be learned, the English article system is difficult to teach. Recent discussions of article use, such as by Haselwander (2008) and Lanternfish ESL (2007), describe the complexity of the system and the need to refer to the context of use in order to decide which article is appropriate.

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5 This generalization—that language is rule based—pertains to the grammar, not to the lexicon or vocabulary of language. Irregular verbs, for instance, are cases in which a speaker must override a grammatical rule with a special lexical entry. This is, as various psycholinguists have shown, why small children make overgeneralization errors, such as applying a rule where the correct form is actually an exceptional one, as in Steven Pinker’s (1994) example, “My teacher holded the baby rabbits and we patted them” (p. 278). When speakers learn to say held instead of holded, they have learned the exception and put it into their mental lexicon, rather than rewritten the rule. The English article system, however, is not lexical; it is a functional system and, as such, is entirely rule based. But, in any case, exceptional lexical entries would not invalidate the rules.
Articles are also difficult because they have no inherent meaning: They mean nothing if they do not co-occur with a noun and the noun’s modifiers. Thus, rather than thinking about the meaning of an article in its own right, it is more useful to think of articles as giving a set of instructions from speaker to addressee, from writer to reader. Articles tell the reader about the relationship between a noun or noun phrase and the discussion that has preceded it, and they tell the reader how he or she should consider the status of the noun phrase in relation to the knowledge that is shared between speaker and hearer, or writer and reader. Thus, articles are difficult because they draw on more than the meaning of the noun phrase they precede. These examples illustrate this problem:

- I saw a polka-dot dog yesterday.
- I saw the polka-dot dog yesterday.

If a speaker says to an addressee, “I saw a polka-dot dog yesterday,” the speaker is telling the addressee that this is a new topic of conversation that the speaker presumes the addressee will find interesting. The speaker is not assuming anything about what the addressee might know about polka-dot dogs: The “a” tells the addressee that the speaker does not expect any previous knowledge of any particular polka-dot dog, though this same dog, or a different one, may already be known. The important point is that speaker and addressee have no shared knowledge about this dog; the speaker’s use of the indefinite relies on the assumption that the addressee has less information about this particular referent than the speaker has. Furthermore, for the purposes of the conversation, it does not matter if there is one polka-dot dog in the world, or fifty, or even two; the speaker only wants to tell the reader about the one that is described in the sentence. This point will become relevant to the discussion of the definite in the next paragraph.

If the speaker says, on the other hand, “I saw the polka-dot dog yesterday,” the sentence implies that the speaker and addressee already share a referent for the noun phrase “polka-dot dog.” The definite tells the addressee that the existence of a polka-dot dog is old information, which the speaker assumes is shared between the two interlocutors. Furthermore, the use of the definite article tells the addressee to assume that the speaker intends to refer to a single
referent for the noun phrase, which is part of the interlocutors’ shared information about the world. Unlike with the indefinite, if a speaker uses a definite article with a singular noun, there cannot be fifty polka-dot dogs; there can be only one possible referent, one polka-dot dog. If there is more than one dog that might fit the description and thus render the reference ambiguous, the speaker must add more information to the noun phrase so that the addressee can figure out what unique entity the speaker intends to identify. The reason for this is as follows: The definite description (definite article plus noun phrase, including modifiers) must pick out every entity that fits the description. Thus, when a speaker uses a singular definite, the speaker’s intended reference is unique.

This explanation of these two apparently simple examples shows much of the complexity involved in using indefinite and definite articles, but it also shows a basic set of information-based rules that distinguish them. First, these two articles are not opposite settings on just one parameter; rather, they share three points of contrast. They refer to new information versus old information (discussed in some detail by Noguchi, 1991) and contrast shared information with information known only to the speaker or writer. Second, the indefinite’s noun phrase needs just enough information in it for the addressee to ascertain what kind of entity the speaker is discussing; definites, on the other hand, require enough information to uniquely identify a common referent between speaker and addressee. And finally, they also show whether the referent is one among potentially many or must be unique. Table 1 shows how these three parameters fit together.

To examine how authors wield indefinite and definite descriptions rhetorically, let us consider the first sentence from Watson and Crick’s (1953) Nature article in which they announce the double helix structure of DNA: “We wish to suggest a structure for the salt of deoxyribose nucleic acid (D.N.A.)” (p. 737; emphasis added). They begin their article with a proposal, presenting their new idea by using the indefinite article in “a structure for” and a definite description to refer to the “old” idea for which they are proposing a new structure, “the salt of deoxyribose nucleic acid.” Watson and

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For more information about uniquely identifiable referents for definites, see Gundel, Hedberg, and Zacharski (1993, 2001).
Crick expect their readers to understand this information as background knowledge for their claim. They would have assumed that their readers would be scientifically literate, and so they would not have to introduce the concept of DNA explicitly; rather, they could introduce the term in such a way that indicated to readers that understanding the concept was necessary background information for anyone reading the article, that is, by using the definite article.

Let us now consider Watson and Crick’s (1953) sentence in light of Table 1. Their use of the definite description, “the salt of deoxyribose nucleic acid (D.N.A.),” fits the three criteria in this table. First, “the salt of . . . D.N.A.” is shared information. Second, the noun phrase has enough content for readers to figure out exactly what the writers want them to understand. Thus, and third, the whole description can be used to identify a unique referent. By contrast, the indefinite description, “a structure for the salt of deoxyribose nucleic acid,” is new; readers know only that it is a new kind of structure and that the noun phrase is singular, but the referent is not unique. In fact, Watson and Crick were contrasting their new structure against structures that had been previously proposed, so it would not make sense for them to use the definite with this noun phrase and thus require unique reference. Instead, the indefinite highlights the one-of-many aspect of the structure that they proposed. The discussion that follows in their article shows why this new structure is the better or correct one. In sum, the content of the noun allows readers to figure out what the authors are discussing, what they are declaring to be new, and how the readers should treat the information. This pattern can be seen throughout academic writing.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1. Factors in the Choice Between Indefinite and Definite Articles</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Indefinite</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New information (from the addressee’s perspective)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Noun gives sufficient information to establish what kind of thing the speaker’s intended referent is</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Singular (but possibly one of many)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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This Watson and Crick example shows that simple as well as complex definites and indefinites follow a predictable set of rules that have to do with author intention, context, and the inherent meaning of the nouns. Although their use is complex, they, like all other linguistic constructions, are governed by rules that can be articulated quite precisely. The following section introduces a flowchart that shows the order in which these rules are processed and applied by a native English speaker and how these rules interact in a longer discourse.

A TOOL FOR USING DEFINITES

The flowchart presented in this section is a complex tool. This is not the kind of tool that can immediately be used out of the context of some supporting discussion, either by a student or an instructor; although the language is accessible, it is still technical. To show how the flowchart works, we examine a passage of authentic academic writing, the first paragraph of David Bartholomae’s (1980) article “The Study of Error”:

It is curious, I think, that with all the current interest in “Basic Writing,” little attention has been paid to the most basic question: What is it? What is “basic writing,” that is, if the term is to refer to a phenomenon, an activity, something a writer does or has done, rather than to a course of instruction. (p. 253)

This passage contains several noun phrases that are of interest to us in this passage (see Table 2) because they have the form of either a definite description, an indefinite description, or a bare noun. A bare noun is a noun phrase without an article. Singular count nouns in English cannot occur without an article, but any plural, mass, or abstract noun in English is potentially a bare noun, depending on the meaning the writer wants to convey in a sentence. Because of this overlap between bare nouns and definites, this is an area of particular difficulty for nonnative English speakers.

7 An anonymous reviewer pointed out that use of the term abstract noun in this sense could be problematic for readers with backgrounds in psychology and education. The definition used here is from the field of linguistics, which indicates that an abstract noun is a noun that functions like a mass noun (i.e., it is uncountable) and that refers to a “non-material referent” (Hartmann & Stork, 1972, p. 2), for example, happiness or curiosity. This definition does not apply to the nouns “phenomenon,” “activity,” and “course of instruction,” then, because they are all countable.
The flowchart in Figure 1, with which we will analyze the article choices in the passage from Bartholomae (1980), is a decision tree, showing the paths that a native speaker will follow—unconsciously, of course—when composing any text in English. It shows how authors must make a choice for each noun phrase about how their readers should treat the idea being presented. All the questions in the flowchart refer to the noun phrase that is under consideration. As we will see, however, sometimes the choice depends on the nature of the noun phrase, the context in which it occurs, and speaker or writer intention. In this discussion, we follow the order of the flowchart, rather than of the passage, in order to focus on how the flowchart works. Sometimes two boxes could make the decision for a particular noun phrase; when that is the case, we will examine both decisions.

We start at Line 1, from the top left-hand box. For the whole chart, a “yes” answer chooses the rightward path; a “no,” the downward one. Line 1 addresses the first fundamental contrast between definite and indefinite articles: Does the noun phrase present old or new information? This box makes the decision for the noun phrase “the term” in the second sentence of the passage from Bartholomae (1980): “What is ‘basic writing,’ that is, if the term is to refer to a phenomenon” (emphasis added). Here, “the term” refers back to a noun phrase almost immediately before it in the passage: “basic writing.” It is an anaphoric noun phrase, and so it is perhaps the simplest kind of old information; its referent (though not the words “the term” themselves) has already been mentioned in the passage, so it is clearly part of the shared knowledge of reader and writer.

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This is the most easily understood use of the definite. Peter Master (1995), in a study of 19 ESL students and their error patterns in the use of definite and indefinite articles, suggests that the students did not have difficulty with this usage, because he did not

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Definite</th>
<th>Indefinite</th>
<th>Bare noun</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>all the current interest</td>
<td>a phenomenon</td>
<td>little attention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the most basic question</td>
<td>an activity</td>
<td>basic writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the term</td>
<td>a writer</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>a course of instruction</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 1. Flowchart for Selecting Appropriate Articles in English

Note: NP = noun phrase.
include error statistics for it. This use of the definite is also the easiest to teach because the reference of the definite is entirely available within the text. However, it is by no means the most common type of definite description. In my own research into the uses of definite descriptions in spoken and written language, this type of anaphoric definite, whereby the author uses a new word to introduce a concept that has already been introduced into the discourse, accounts for 24% of the definite’s use in speech and 14% of the definite’s use in writing (Robinson, 2009).

The second question that the flowchart asks, in Line 2, is whether the noun phrase is the subject of a generalization. This is true of the indefinite phrase “a writer” in the passage “something a writer does or has done.” In this part of the passage, Bartholomae (1980) is not referring to any particular individual; rather, he is referring to individuals in general. Starting with the leftmost box in Line 2, the first “yes” decision takes the writer right to the singular or plural question, which is crucial when writers and speakers are making generalizations. Because the noun “writer” is singular, we continue rightward to the individual- or species-oriented question. The description in the flowchart is brief; in a more elaborated form, it investigates whether the description in the noun phrase concerns an attribute of an individual or the attributes of a species.8 Answering this question can be difficult, but if we consider species to be things named by nouns such as dodo and African lion, and to be the subject of generalizations that refer to the behavior or attributes of the species as a whole, such as the dodo is extinct or the African lion naps in the afternoon, the distinction makes more sense. For species-oriented generalizations, the behaviors and attributes that we are describing help to classify the entity described by the noun, but they seem somewhat detached from the individual. On the other hand, generalizations that are individual oriented describe actions that any individual might do; they are more attached to the everyday.9 Bartholomae’s indefinite noun phrase “a writer” is something that he wants the reader to generalize to any writer, but that is still attached to the everyday, and so the indefinite is appropriate.

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8Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for assistance with this language.
9These are informal descriptions of these kinds of noun phrases. For a more technical discussion, see Krifka et al. (1995).
The next line in the flowchart, Line 3, asks whether the noun phrase describes a unique referent, revisiting the distinction between unique and singular, which was central to the discussion of the polka-dot dog example. For a definite, uniqueness in context is crucial: If the writer cannot expect the reader to use the description to identify a unique referent, then the definite is not the best choice of article for that noun phrase. This distinction comes out clearly in comparing two different types of noun phrase in this passage. The unique-versus-singular distinction makes the decision between articles for the first noun phrase in the passage, “all the current interest in ‘Basic Writing,’” but not for the nouns in the third line, “a phenomenon,” “an activity,” “a course of instruction.” As discussed earlier in this section, uniqueness means that the description unambiguously identifies the only possible referent that fits it in the context. For the noun phrase “current interest in ‘Basic Writing,’” it is clear that Bartholomae (1980) wants to include anything that fits the description so as to use it to set up the background for what he will write. Because of this objective, the use of the definite is important. It means that there is no other “current interest in ‘Basic Writing’” that could make his claim false; hence, uniqueness is satisfied. Furthermore, the “all” preceding the definite makes the uniqueness stronger in that the reference is all-inclusive. The choice of the definite article in “the most basic question,” a little later in the passage, is also driven by Line 3 of the flowchart. It is a noun phrase that can have only one referent. Two separate entities cannot be the most anything, so the uniqueness requirement is the one that necessitates the choice of the definite.

The question of singular versus unique is also crucial for dealing with the remaining nouns. We will focus on those at the end of the passage first (“phenomenon,” “activity,” “course of instruction),” which occur in the following sentence: “What is ‘basic writing,’ that is, if the term is to refer to a phenomenon, an activity, something a writer does or has done, rather than to a course of instruction.” These nouns all refer to a concept that has been introduced in the passage—Basic Writing—so they could be said to tap into old information. Additionally, they are all singular, and potentially unique, and yet Bartholomae (1980) has not used a definite for any of them, indicating that they do not meet the criteria for uniqueness. Why not?
The answer to this question draws on the author’s rhetorical intention, rather than anything inherent to the nouns themselves or even the context in which they occur, which permits an anaphoric interpretation like the one we saw for “the term.” In fact, Bartholomae (1980) is deploying the nouns “phenomenon,” “activity,” and “course of instruction” to offer new ways of describing, and thus thinking about, Basic Writing, and it does not matter if there are other phenomena, activities, and courses of instruction in the world. Therefore, the flowchart’s Line 3, which describes the uniqueness criterion, is not relevant; the use to which the author wants to put these nouns—signaling newness—is more relevant to the decision of how to mark the noun phrase than is the potential uniqueness of the nouns in the context. In fact, indefinites are never technically unique (this is a hard-and-fast maxim; newness and uniqueness are incompatible in English). So for these nouns, we choose the “no” branch on Line 3, leading to Line 4 in the flowchart.

The question in Line 4 asks whether the noun phrase gives information that the reader should treat as shared knowledge. When a writer wants to refer to something that is shared, he or she is making assumptions about what the reader can be expected to know. The amount of shared knowledge that a writer assumes a reader will share with him or her depends on what the writer knows about the audience he or she is writing for. Shared status is marked by a definite.

This criterion makes the decision for the first definite description of the passage, “all the current interest in Basic Writing,” along with uniqueness (Line 3). Either Line 3 or Line 4 could choose the definite for the noun phrase. For ESL writers, choosing which criterion to use in order to test which article is appropriate depends on their comfort with both of these concepts. That is, does shared knowledge or uniqueness make more sense, and which is more useful? For Bartholomae (1980), shared knowledge was probably the prime motivator. He uses this noun phrase to indicate to readers the background knowledge they will need in order to make sense of his discussion. If he uses the definite here, he implies that readers would know about all the current discussion, and if they do not already know, the fact that
he uses this noun phrase at this point in his article means that readers can assume that this interest is a necessary part of shared knowledge.

The question deferred earlier, about the difference between old information and shared information, arises again here. Old information is information that has been explicitly introduced into the discourse by the speaker or writer: Ellen Prince’s (1992) *discourse-old*. The definite description “the term” brings in old knowledge because it refers to a noun phrase that Bartholomae (1980) had already introduced into the discourse. Shared information, on the other hand, is information that has not been introduced explicitly, but that the speaker or writer can reasonably expect the addressee to know about: Prince’s *hearer-old*. “All the current interest in ‘Basic Writing’” draws on knowledge that the writer assumes he shares with the reader. The distinction between these two is a subtle one, but both categories are necessary to give a more precise definition of where the definite is used and to distinguish between cases of anaphora, where reference is established within the discourse, and shared knowledge, where the information to make common reference work must be retrieved from outside the discourse.

Although Line 4 is useful for confirming the use of the definite for this first noun phrase, it is not applicable to “phenomenon,” “activity,” and “course of instruction.” Bartholomae (1980), as we see in the passage, wants to signal the opposite of shared knowledge with these terms; he wants to indicate that he is contributing something new to the discussion, rather than drawing on information or analyses that readers would already be familiar with. For this reason, Line 5 is necessary to decide which article, if any, is appropriate for these three nouns.

Answering the question that Line 5 asks makes the decision for these three noun phrases. At this point, all definite options are exhausted, and for a singular noun only the indefinite or the bare noun is possible. For the noun phrases that we have been looking at, the bare noun is inappropriate because these are not abstract or mass nouns, so the indefinite is the only possible article for these singular nouns.
Line 5 also makes the decision for the two remaining unanalyzed noun phrases: “little attention” and “Basic Writing.” None of the questions in Lines 1 to 4 yielded a “yes” answer, so the flowchart did not lead to choosing a definite. Therefore, the choice is left to Line 5. Both of these noun phrases yield a “yes” answer to the question in Line 5: “Is the noun phrase an abstract or mass noun?” Here we return to a focus on the inherent meaning of the noun. “Basic Writing” and “little attention” can be classified as abstract nouns that describe concepts, rather than as concrete entities. They are also noncountable, so the singular-versus-plural choice does not apply to them. Therefore, the decision is made in Line 5 of the flowchart. Because these nouns are abstract, the only option remaining is to use a bare noun and thus to choose no article at all.

Table 3 summarizes the preceding analysis of how one might understand the decisions Bartholomae (1980) makes about the articles for each of his noun phrases.

The passage is included again here; the superscripts indicate which row of the flowchart makes the decision for each noun phrase.

It is curious, I think, that with all the current interest in “Basic Writing,” little attention has been paid to the most basic question: What is it? What is “basic writing,” that is, if the term is to refer to a phenomenon, an activity, something a writer does or has done, rather than to a course of instruction. (Bartholomae, 1980, p. 253)

CONCLUSION

Clearly, it is one thing to reverse-engineer a piece of writing, when we have their whole texts right in front of us in order to figure out what Bartholomae (1980) and Watson and Crick (1953) were thinking when they chose which articles to use. It is another thing entirely to write using articles correctly when a writer has few or no

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10 Bartholomae (1980) switches the capitalization in the passage from upper to lower case between his first and second instance of this phrase. For consistency within this article, when not quoting directly from Bartholomae, the capitalized form is used when referring to Basic Writing.

11 I could argue that “Basic Writing” is a name and that therefore these rules do not apply; they are for regular, common nouns, rather than names.
native-speaker intuitions about which article to choose in each context. The latter part of this article provides a shared vocabulary that encompasses all the types of information that speakers and writers draw upon when deciding which article to use with a given noun phrase or whether an article is appropriate at all. It is important to note that the flowchart presented in Figure 1 can be approached from three perspectives: based on the content of the noun phrase, based on the context of use, or based on the rhetorical stance that writers want to adopt with respect to the information that they are presenting. Having these three points of entry to working with definite articles is useful to ESL writers because it allows them to work from their strengths in comprehension and move to an understanding of the elements of the use of definite descriptions that are more difficult for them to grasp or more unfamiliar. The best possible result from using this flowchart would be that students’ knowledge of how definites work would expand, based on the use of the tool. Rather than students using it as a checklist, it could be used as a self-teaching tool that shows the interaction of the different elements that go into article use in a transparent way.

This work is not easy. But for ESL graduate students in particular, the stakes are so high that tools that will help them do the language work that they need to do are necessary, even if the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Noun Phrase</th>
<th>Article</th>
<th>Reasoning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>all the current interest</td>
<td>definite</td>
<td>unique referent, shared information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the most basic question</td>
<td>definite</td>
<td>unique referent (due to superlative), shared information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the term</td>
<td>definite</td>
<td>old information, unique referent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a phenomenon</td>
<td>indefinite</td>
<td>new information, not an abstract or mass noun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>an activity</td>
<td>indefinite</td>
<td>new information, not an abstract or mass noun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a writer</td>
<td>indefinite</td>
<td>noun phrase is the subject of an individual-oriented generalization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a course of instruction</td>
<td>indefinite</td>
<td>new information, not an abstract or mass noun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>little attention</td>
<td>bare noun</td>
<td>abstract noun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basic Writing</td>
<td>bare noun</td>
<td>abstract noun, or name</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

TABLE 3. Article Decisions in the Passage From Bartholomae (1980)
tools are challenging. After all, they are no more or less challenging than thinking in English is.

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