

The trouble with “the”: Uniqueness Assumptions

“The” is the most frequently used word in the English language. Grammatically it functions to indicate that the speaker has a specific and identifiable noun in mind, such as “the solution.” When you compare using “the” with using an indefinite article, such as “a” or “an,” you begin to see how “the” functions: “a solution” is different than “the solution.” Once you become alert to the trouble with “the,” you will see that this little article actually matters in a big way, hiding uniqueness assumptions in your work.

WHERE DOES “THE” COME FROM?

Our brains rely on patterns and shortcuts, which is why assumptions matter so much. Remember that assumptions are embedded in language, conveying what we take for granted. The word “the” is part of an important mental pattern: distinguishing singular and specific from plural or non-specific. As a definite article in English, the word “the” indicates that a speaker has one specific item in mind and presumes that the listener knows and can identify that specific item. In languages that lack one or both of the articles (e.g. Japanese, Korean, Mandarin, Russian), listeners use context and background knowledge to help determine number and specificity.

Having a ubiquitous definite article, as we do in English, contributes to the trouble with “the” because we unthinkingly convey uniqueness assumptions as a habit of speech. Remember that uniqueness assumptions are those that suggest that there is only one of something. In complex business and organizational environments, uniqueness assumptions are often false—there is rarely only one risk, one downside, one cause, one solution, one consideration, one benefit, and so on. Because “the” is so common in languages like English, though, uniqueness assumptions are ubiquitous as well. Therein lies the trouble with “the”: it conveys singularity where complexity is likely, hiding oversimplifications in our thinking and discussion.

Once we realize that “the” can disguise oversimplification, we are well on our way to being more precise questioners and answerers. Our use of the definite article “the” becomes less of a habit and more of an indicator of valid uniqueness assumptions. For precision questioners and answerers, overly zealous use of “the” begins to signal the potential for unsupported simplifications, flagging credibility concerns.

This month’s practices help build our awareness of uniqueness assumptions and oversimplification that lurks behind use of “the.” Focusing on the trouble with “the” helps us identify moments when relying on a singular or definite “the” is a habit rather than a conscious choice. With more conscious choice and awareness, we begin asking new questions about simplification that get around the trouble with “the,” such as:

- Is there only one?
- Have we actively ruled out additional possibilities?
- Can I identify a single instance?
- Are we truly referring to a single, specific, and identifiable object, idea, or situation?

CREDIBILITY AND THE TROUBLE WITH “THE”

As the world becomes more complex, unwarranted uniqueness assumptions are more likely to raise credibility flags in executive or senior-level presentations. With excessive use of “the,” a Precision Q+A oriented executive reviewer is likely to ask: “One cause? One expense? One risk?” High credibility in these settings requires that we have done the thinking in advance and have consciously chosen the right level of simplification for the presentation, purpose, and audience.

When we are concerned about misleading people with oversimplification, we build credibility by building precision. We might say: “I’m looking for some solutions,” instead of “I’m looking for the solution.” When we respond to questions that contain uniqueness assumptions, such as: “What is the downside?” we don’t jump to a single point in response, but consider a full list and respond with multiple points that convey the appropriate level of complexity. When we hear ourselves conveying a risky uniqueness assumption, we can revise our thinking by asking ourselves: “Is there only one?”

This Month's Practice

The pervasive nature of “the” in languages like English can make uniqueness assumptions difficult to see, like fish not being able to see water. The first stage in managing the trouble with “the” is building awareness. We can’t relentlessly root out uniqueness assumptions, however, so look for particularly important, unsupported, or dangerous oversimplifications.

PRACTICE 1: ASKING QUESTIONS THAT AVOID THE TROUBLE WITH “THE”

Consider a meeting you run that has, as its backbone, a sequence of core questions—for instance: project management, problem solving, requirements gathering, or interviewing. Use this practice in those meetings. After doing this for a few meetings, you will notice heightened sensitivity to both uniqueness assumptions and oversimplification.

- In advance of the meeting or session, identify three core questions that typically deserve multiple bullet-point answers.
- Write down the questions you will ask in order to draw out multiple bullet points.
- Write down follow-up questions that will solicit additional bullet points if somebody gives you a singular answer. Some examples: “That’s interesting. Is there only one?” “Before we look at that factor, I’m wondering, are there any others?”
- After the meeting, debrief on how well you drew out the appropriate level of complexity or simplification through the use of your questions and answers.

PRACTICE 2: BUILDING AWARENESS OF THE TROUBLE WITH “THE”

As you ask and answer questions in the upcoming week, listen carefully for “the” in the question. Build your awareness of questions that conceal oversimplification, such as: “What is the cause?” For several days in a row, try to spot questions that use “the” in ways that create oversimplifications. Write them down. After you’ve written five or ten, you’ll notice you are more aware of the trouble with “the.”

We’re here to help. If you have questions, comments or suggestions for future topics, email us at QuestionMaster@vervago.com.

You may also join our LinkedIn group for Precision Q+A alumni by visiting us here at [LinkedIn](#).