



Grammar: articles and determiners

... or, how to say which and how many

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What are articles and determiners?

Articles and other determiners give information about 'which' and 'how many/much'.

Not every language contains articles and determiners, but in the English language, they are important.

my cat



two apples



You use articles and determiners before a noun (naming word), or sometimes instead of a noun. The excerpt below, from a real student essay, shows an example of their use in academic writing. As you can see, when writing, you are likely to use articles and other determiners. Therefore, it's important to know how to use them correctly.

As a primary source, the 'The Cult of the Individual' speech has a significant historical usefulness not only in its content but in its delivery and response. This essay will examine the text's content and context, reception and historical significance, and attempt to identify problems that the primary source may pose for historians.

Articles

the
a
an

Some examples of other determiners

some	five	your
many	this	their
all	each	its

This is a quick guide to get you started. It won't cover all examples of determiners, nor every way they can be used. You can find a link to more in-depth information at the end of this document.

TIP: If you think you know which word to use but aren't sure, try putting your most likely possibilities as a phrase into an Internet search by putting quote marks around them. Like this:

"an apple" "a apple"

or

"some apple" "some apples"

Checking through the results will give you an idea of which option to use.

Is it a specific thing? (the, a & an)

The words 'the', 'a', and 'an' tell the listener/reader whether the thing you are talking/writing about is a specific thing known to them.

The technical term for these words is 'articles'.

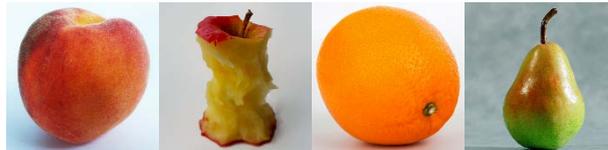
The

The technical term for 'the' is 'definite article' because it IS definite which specific thing is being referred to.

I ate the apple.



I ate the apple.



Say 'the' if you are sure that your listener knows which specific thing you are referring to.

For example, if they know there was only one apple, or perhaps one apple and some other fruit.

The spotlight effect and the illusion of transparency are two social psychological concepts that demonstrate the importance of our sense of self in our everyday lives.

In this example, the student has first used 'the' because they are referring to two specific named concepts. The student also immediately states which specific importance ("the importance of ...")

You also use 'the' when your listener knows there is only one, or only one in that place.

I saw the moon.



We are in the kitchen.



The White Australia Policy, which remained until 1973, was an act determined to keep Australia a racially white British country and to keep the coloured people out.

This assignment excerpt is an example of using 'the' when there is only one, because there was only one White Australia Policy.

A, an

The technical term for 'a' and 'an' is 'indefinite article' because it's NOT definite which specific thing is being referred to.

I ate an apple.



If your listener doesn't know which specific apple you ate, say 'an apple' instead of 'the apple'.

For example, if there were several apples and you could have eaten any one of them.

You also say 'a' or 'an' if there is more than one of a thing.

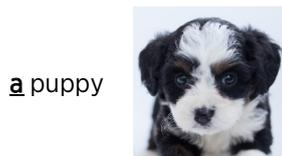
A key aspect of sociological studies is the study of communication.

The use of 'a' in this example indicates that there is more than one key aspect, instead of one particular key aspect.

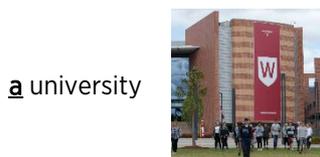
A or an?

When do you say 'a' and when do you say 'an'?

It depends on the starting sound of the next word. If it starts with a sound like a 'vowel' (in English, the letters a, e, i, o, u), use 'an'. Having the 'n' of 'an' makes it easier to say and hear the separate words. If the next word doesn't start with a vowel sound, use 'a'.



Some words look different from how they sound. For example, 'university' ('yuniversity') and 'hour' ('our'). Do you use 'a' or 'an'? Use the word that's correct for how the word sounds.



An economic analysis of the pet care industry has highlighted **a** decline in dog healthcare spending.

This student has used 'a' or 'an' depending on the starting sound of the next word.

When you refer to a thing more than once

I chose **an** apple.
I ate **the** apple.



When you write, you may find that you first mention a thing, then refer to it again. When this happens, choosing between 'a'/'an' and 'the' can sometimes be confusing.

When choosing between 'the' or 'a', ask yourself, "Does the listener/reader know which thing I'm referring to? Have I mentioned it already?"

In this example, when you first mention apples ('I chose an apple'), you could choose any apple, so there is no specific apple for your listener to know about. That is why you say 'an apple'. The second time, you say 'the apple', because you have already mentioned the apple (that you chose).

Pollack and Matous (2019) conducted **a** case study to learn whether **a** standard team building intervention would improve communication in a team. **The** study found that **the** intervention increased communication frequency and comfort for team members.

In this example, the writer first mentions 'a' case study, and 'an' intervention. The second time, the writer refers to them as 'the' study and 'the' intervention, because they have already mentioned them.

The difference between 'at university' and 'at a university'

It can be confusing when sometimes people say 'at university' or 'in hospital', instead of 'at a university' or 'in the hospital'.

I am at university.



My sister went to hospital.



These examples don't use articles. They only tell us the type of place. However, not using an article like this says that the people are there for the place's purpose. "At university" – I am a student; "to hospital" – my sister is a patient.

THINK: What other examples can you think of, where the people are there for the place's purpose and an article is not used? (Hint- one of them is also a place of study.)

I am at a university.



Here, the university could be any university. The person saying it could be there for any purpose, for example, a visitor.

My sister went to the hospital.



If the listener knows which hospital, you would say 'the hospital', for example, if they know your sister works at, or is visiting, a particular hospital. You are not saying that your sister is a patient. (American English is different: 'to the hospital' can be used for either patient or worker/visitor.)

Some practical changes I have made include decluttering my study space and making the most of quiet study spaces while at university, like the library.

In this excerpt from a reflective learning journal assignment, the student has not used an article for 'university' because they are at the university for its purpose – to study.

Which thing or things? (this, that, these, those)

Some determiners tell your listener which specific thing or things you are referring to. They could 'point' to specific objects, or say whose they are.

Pointing

I ate this apple.



I ate those apples.



Use the words 'this', 'that', 'these' and 'those' only when your listener or reader knows which thing or things. When you write, you can 'point' to a thing if you have already mentioned it.

Be careful, because you have to be clear when using words to point.

I ate
a green apple.



Then I ate
a red apple.



This was my
favourite.



Which apple was your favourite?

The language data for **this** analysis was collected from a native speaker of Standard German.

At left is a typical example where the document refers to itself. Other examples include “This essay argues ...” or “This research has shown ...”.

The locations they used to shoot the film were the actual locations of the events of the murder. **This** was the film’s way to inject authenticity to the film by recreating rather than representing.

The example here demonstrates the word ‘this’ referring to the information immediately before it. That is, ‘this’ refers to the act of shooting the film at the locations of the events of the murder.

TIP: A common writing mistake is to use unclear pointing words.

Always check that your reader can clearly tell which thing the word is pointing to.
You could ask someone to check it for you if you are not sure.

How much? (things you can’t count)

I ate applesauce.



You can’t count applesauce. Often, when you can’t count the thing, you don’t use a determiner. If you are not sure, try using ‘a’ or ‘an’ before the word.

Alternatively, you can use some quantifiers to say how much there is, even when it’s uncountable. Some quantifiers can be used for both countable and uncountable things, like in these two examples.

I ate **some** applesauce.



I would like **more** applesauce.



'Research' is an example of a noun that is generally regarded as uncountable. However, you can count 'research studies' and 'research projects'.

In the academic context, instead of using a phrase like "Two researches found that ...", you might write, "Two research studies found that ...". Below, you can see more examples.

Research has been done into the factors that lead to attraction between people. Much research has been done into the factors that lead to attraction between people. Little research has been done into the factors that lead to attraction between tomatoes.	These examples are all acceptable. The first example doesn't specify how much research, which is sufficient if that information is not needed. The second and third examples comment on the amount of research.
Many researches have been done into the factors that lead to attraction between people. Many research have been done into the factors that lead to attraction between people.	These examples would be improved if changed to "Much research has been done ..."
More researches should be done into the factors that lead to attraction between people.	This example would be improved if changed to "More research should be done ..."
Many research studies have been conducted to investigate the factors leading to attraction between people.	This example is acceptable, because you can count how many studies.

More information

For in-depth information with many examples, try the 'Education First' pages about [Determiners](#), part of a free collection of English learning resources.

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