

Determiners

(From: Ascher, Allen. *Think About Editing: An ESL Guide for the Harbrace Handbooks*. Boston: Thomson/Heinle, 2004. Pp. 133-58.)

What are determiners? “A determiner is a word that comes before a noun and gives some basic information about that noun” (135).

Perhaps the most common determiners are the articles: *a (an)* and *the*.

Some other determiners are:

Possessives:

my
our
your
their
her
his
its
Pat's
Kevin's
America's

Demonstratives:

this
that
these
those

Quantifiers:

some
a few
lots of
several
each
every
any
most
many
all
much
no

Rules for Determiners (136-7):

- **Singular Count Nouns:** If a noun is a **count noun** (that is, a noun that can be counted) in the **singular** form, **it must have a determiner** before it.

I walk a dog every day.
I walk the dog each day.
I walk this dog any day.
I walk every dog on this day.
I walk dog on day.

Note that the italicized sentence is incorrect. Why? Because “dog” is singular and a count noun (“dog” can be counted: “one dog, two dogs, three dogs...”) and has no determiner before it. The same is true for “day.”

I drink water with every meal.

What is wrong with this sentence according to the rule above? Nothing. The first noun in the sentence is not a count noun (“water” cannot be counted: “one water, two waters, three waters...” is silly). However, the second noun, “meal,” is a singular count noun, so it has a determiner.

- **Plural Count Nouns:** A plural count noun **does not have to have a determiner**, which means it might or it might not.

Most cities have many train stations.
Books can be expensive.
She gave him some cups.

Each of these sentences is correct. Notice that sentences one and three have determiners before plural nouns and sentence two does not. This follows the rule.

- **Non-Count Nouns:** A non-count noun **does not have to have a determiner**, which means it might or might not.

He gave her furniture.

He gave her some furniture.

Each of these sentences is correct. “Furniture” is a non-count noun (one can count tables and chairs, but not “furniture”). The first sentence does not have a determiner and the second does, according to the rule.

So, the table below summarizes our rules so far:

Singular Count Noun	Must always have a determiner
Plural Count Noun	Sometimes has a determiner; Sometimes does not have a determiner
Non-Count Noun	Sometimes has a determiner; Sometimes does not have a determiner

More Rules for Determiners: the definite article (*the*) and demonstratives (*this, that, these, those*):

- When a **plural count noun** or **non-count noun** refers to something **specific**, **it must have a determiner**. That determiner will be *the* or a demonstrative: *this, that, these, those*. When it refers to something **general (not specific)**, **it will not have a determiner**.

Oil isn't cheap.

The oil I put in my car wasn't cheap.

Both sentences are correct. In the first sentence, "oil" is not specific. It speaks of oil in general, so it needs no determiner. In the second sentence, "oil" is specific – it is "the oil I put in my car" – so it needs a determiner. We have used "the" in the example, but "this" or "that" would also work.

English words are interesting.

Those English words on the front page of this book are interesting.

Both are correct. In the first sentence, "English words" is not specific and so no determiner is needed. In the second sentence, "English words" is specific, as is "book." We have given each a demonstrative as determiner. Also, "front page" is specific. It is preceded by "the."

More Rules for Using *the* and *a/an*:

Rule #1: Introducing New Information

If you are introducing new information to the reader, use the indefinite article *a*. After this information has already been introduced to the reader once, you should use the definite article *the* (148).

Example: I saw *a man* go into *a store*. *The store* was on Main Street. *The man* was wearing *a black coat*. *The coat* was long and looked very old.

Rule #2: Using the Article *the* in Superlative Sentences

If you are comparing something to everything else using the *-est* or *-st* form of an adjective (the superlative: tallest, best, worst, least, most...), you must use the article *the* (148). This is a version of the “specific” use of the determiner we discussed above.

Example: It is *the highest* mountain in the world.
She is *the best* singer in Japan.

Rule #3: Using the Article *the* with Proper Nouns

Use *the* with a proper noun if any ONE of the following are true (149):

1. It is plural: the Philippines; the United States
2. It has the word “of”: the Republic <i>of</i> Korea
3. It includes a political word: the United <i>Kingdom</i> ; the old Soviet <i>Union</i>
4. It includes a geographical word: the Atlantic <i>Ocean</i> ; the Red <i>Sea</i>
5. It is the name of a geographical place: the Northwest; the South
6. It includes a word that is an organization or group for education, business, or government: the Supreme Court; the Ford Foundation

Exceptions to #4: Singular forms of *lake, bay, mountain, hill, island, and park*:
Examples: Lake Michigan; Hudson Bay; Central Park

Exceptions to #6: universities (Ohio University); colleges (Hunter College); and school nicknames (U.C.L.A.). However, if the name of the school has “of,” refer to Rule #2 in which there must be the article (the University of Texas).

Rule #4: Using *an*

Change *a* to *an* if the first sound of the noun begins with a vowel sound (149).

1. a + consonant sound = a man, a hat, a useful book, a one-hour meeting
2. an + vowel sound = an apple, an hour, an umbrella, an orange