

Determiners in English

A comprehensive guide for 2nd-year college students studying *Oxford English Grammar*. This lecture explores one of the most fundamental — and frequently misunderstood — areas of English grammar, equipping you with the tools to use determiners accurately and confidently in both spoken and written English.

OXFORD ENGLISH GRAMMAR

2ND YEAR COLLEGE

ENGLISH LANGUAGE



What Are Determiners?

The Specifiers of Nouns

A **determiner** is a word placed before a noun to specify its reference — indicating whether the noun is specific or general, singular or plural, near or far, owned or quantified. Determiners are essential for grammatical accuracy and clarity.

Key Characteristics

- Always appear **before** the noun they modify
- Cannot usually be combined with one another
- Agree with the noun in number (singular/plural)
- Signal whether the noun is **definite** or **indefinite**

Determiners in Context

Compare these sentences:

- ~~Student asked question.~~ ❌
- **The** student asked **a** question. ✅
- **Some** students asked **several** questions. ✅

Without determiners, English noun phrases feel incomplete and ungrammatical.

Types of Determiners

A Brief Overview

English determiners fall into several distinct categories, each serving a unique grammatical function. Understanding the full system helps you make precise, natural choices in both academic writing and everyday speech.



Articles

a, an, the — the most common determiners, marking definiteness



Demonstratives

this, that, these, those — indicate proximity and number



Possessives

my, your, his, her... — show who owns or relates to the noun



Quantifiers

some, many, few, all... — express amount or degree



Numbers & Ordinals

one, two, first, second... — count and order nouns

Articles: *a, an, the*

Specifying and Generalising

Indefinite Articles: *a / an*

Used with **singular, countable nouns** when the noun is not yet identified or is one of many.

- *a* + consonant sound: **a** book, **a** university
- *an* + vowel sound: **an** apple, **an** hour
- First mention: "*I saw **a** dog in the park.*"
- General class: "*She is **a** teacher.*"

Definite Article: *the*

Used when the noun is **already known**, unique, or previously mentioned.

- Second mention: "***The** dog was friendly.*"
- Unique things: **the** sun, **the** internet
- Superlatives: **the** best student
- Specific groups: **the** British, **the** poor

❏ Zero article ($\emptyset$) is used with plural and uncountable nouns for general statements: " $\emptyset$ Students need $\emptyset$ practice."

Demonstratives: *this, that, these, those*

Pointing the Way

Demonstratives indicate the **distance** (physical or psychological) between the speaker and the noun, as well as its **number** (singular or plural).

	Singular	Plural	Example
Near	<i>this</i>	<i>these</i>	<i>This book is mine. / These ideas are new.</i>
Far	<i>that</i>	<i>those</i>	<i>That building is old. / Those students are late.</i>

Physical Distance

*"**This** pen in my hand works well, but **that** pen on the desk is broken."*

Psychological Distance

*"**These** findings support our hypothesis, but **those** earlier studies had limitations."*

Possessives: *my, your, his, her, its, our, their*

Showing Ownership and Relationship

Possessive determiners indicate **who the noun belongs to** or with whom it is associated. They agree with the **owner** (possessor), not with the thing owned.



First Person

my — singular: "**My** essay is due tomorrow."

our — plural: "**Our** team presented well."



Second Person

your — singular & plural: "**Your** answer is correct."

Context determines whether one or more people are addressed.



Third Person

his / her / its — singular: "**Her** research is impressive."

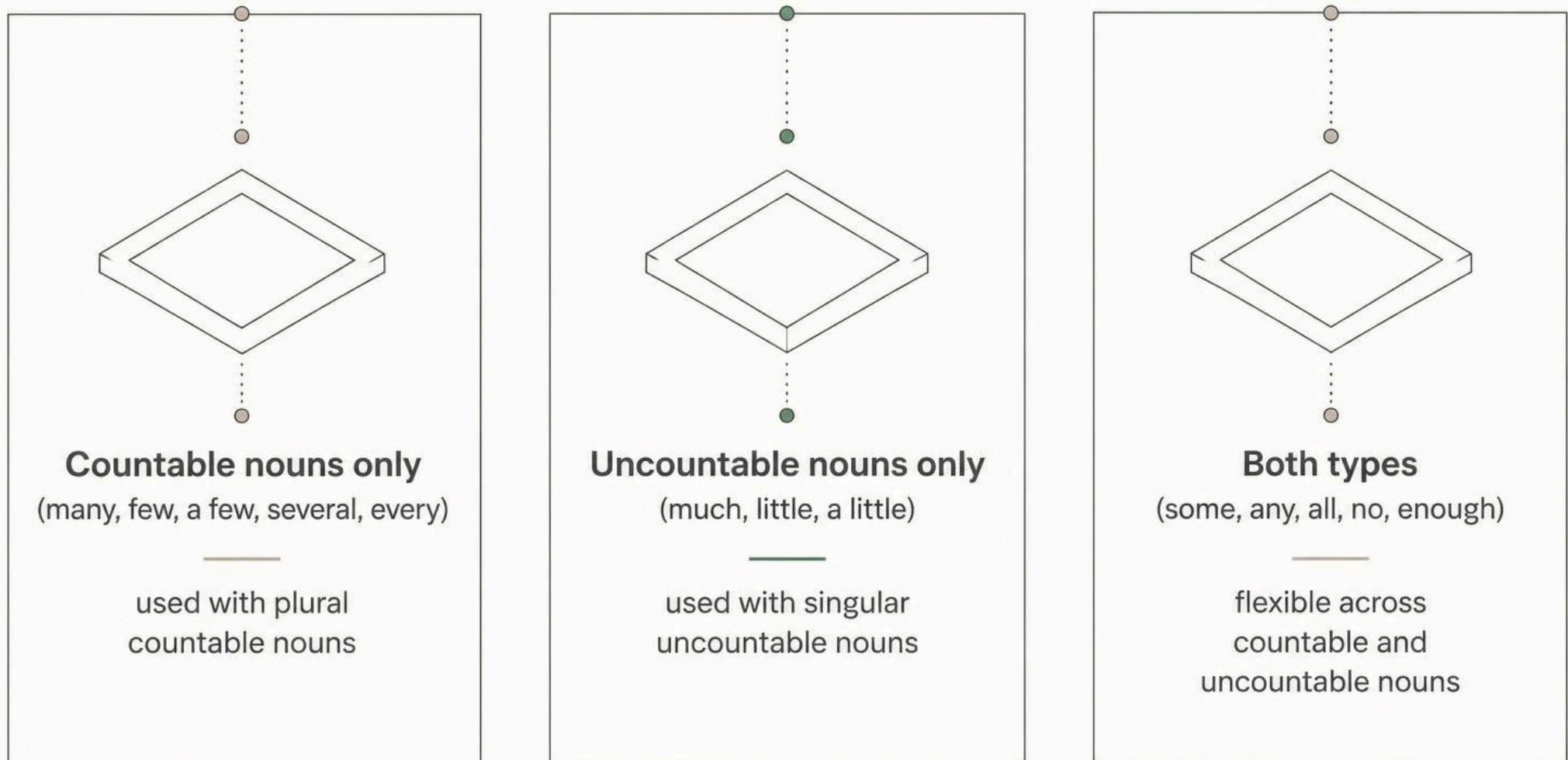
their — plural: "**Their** results were published."

- ❏ **Common confusion:** Do not confuse possessive determiners (*your, their*) with possessive pronouns (*yours, theirs*). Determiners are followed by a noun; pronouns stand alone.

Quantifiers: *some, any, much, many, few, little, all, every*

How Much? How Many?

Quantifiers express **amount** or **quantity**. The correct choice depends on whether the noun is **countable** or **uncountable**, and whether the context is **positive**, **negative**, or **interrogative**.



Key Distinctions

- **few / a few:** *few* = not enough (negative); *a few* = some (positive)
- **little / a little:** *little* = not enough; *a little* = some
- **some** in positive sentences; **any** in negatives and questions

Examples in Context

- "She has ***few*** friends." (not enough)
- "She has ***a few*** friends." (some, positive)
- "Do you have ***any*** questions?"
- "***Every*** student must submit work."

Numbers and Ordinals

Counting and Ordering

Cardinal Numbers

Used for **counting** and specifying exact quantities.

- *one, two, three, four...*
- *"**Three** students were absent."*
- *"She wrote **five** essays."*

Cardinals answer: **How many?**

Ordinal Numbers

Used for **ordering** and ranking items in a sequence.

- *first, second, third, fourth...*
- *"He was the **first** to arrive."*
- *"This is my **second** attempt."*

Ordinals answer: **Which position?**

- ❑ Ordinal numbers almost always require the definite article:
the first, the second, the third.

1st

First Mention

Use indefinite article or cardinal

2nd

Subsequent

Switch to definite article

3rd

Ranking

Always use ordinal + the

Common Errors and How to Avoid Them

Troubleshooting Determiner Mistakes

Even advanced learners make predictable errors with determiners. Recognising these patterns is the first step towards eliminating them from your academic writing.

✗ Missing Article

~~"I am student."~~ → ✓ *"I am **a** student."*

Singular countable nouns always need a determiner.

✗ Wrong Article with Uncountables

~~"I need an information."~~ → ✓ *"I need **some** information."*

Uncountable nouns cannot take *a/an*.

✗ Confusing *few* and *a few*

~~"I have few friends."~~ (negative) vs ✓ *"I have **a few** friends."* (positive)

The article changes the meaning entirely.

✗ Double Determiners

~~"This my book."~~ → ✓ *"This is **my** book."* or *"**This** book is mine."*

Two determiners cannot modify the same noun directly.

Practice: Mastering Determiners

Strategies for Academic Success

Consistent practice and conscious attention to determiners will significantly improve the accuracy and fluency of your academic English. Use these strategies to build lasting competence.

Practice Activities

01

Gap-Fill Exercises

Complete sentences by choosing the correct determiner from a given set.

02

Error Correction

Identify and correct determiner mistakes in sample academic texts.

03

Controlled Writing

Write short paragraphs deliberately using each type of determiner.

04

Peer Review

Exchange essays and highlight all determiners — check for accuracy together.

Key Takeaways

- Every singular countable noun needs a determiner
- Choose articles based on definiteness and first/second mention
- Match quantifiers to countable or uncountable nouns
- Possessives agree with the *owner*, not the thing owned
- Never stack two determiners before the same noun
- Read widely — notice how determiners are used in academic texts

- ✓ Regular review of these rules, combined with active practice, will make correct determiner use automatic in your academic writing.