

# Using articles and tense

## Improving grammar; focusing on articles and verb use

Grammar is essential in communicating your message to the reader. This flyer provides strategies to help improve your use and understanding of **articles**, **subject verb agreement** and **tense**.

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### Articles

Articles in English are the words '**a**', '**an**', and '**the**'. Their use can be difficult because there are many rules governing their use. Some of the most common rules for article use are set out below.

#### Using an indefinite article - a/an

The article **a/an** is used with nouns that are not specific, or not definite, to the reader. 'A/an' has a similar meaning to 'one', therefore, it is only used with a singular countable noun. For example:

*I have read **a** book on this topic.* (i.e. one of several books, but we do not know which book)

#### Using the definite article - the

The definite article '**the**' implies that the reader knows which noun is being referred to. This may be because:

- The noun has been mentioned before, e.g.:

*Some schools have **a** career counselor. **The** counselor has important roles and responsibilities.* (i.e. in the second sentence, we know it is the 'school counsellor' that is being referred to again.)

- There is a word, phrase or clause that comes before or after the noun and makes it specific. Often, this is in the combination of noun / preposition / noun or adjective / noun, e.g.:

***The** results for October are above average.* (i.e. the results specifically for *October*, not another month)

***The** Communicative approach was favoured by most teachers.* (i.e. in contrast to other teaching approaches)

The definite article can also be used with **countable nouns** (nouns with a plural form, e.g. *the report* → *the reports*, *the essay* → *the essays*) and **uncountable nouns** (e.g. *research*, *homework*, which do not usually have a plural form)

***The** books relating to the class homework are in **the** reading guide.*

#### Strategies to determine the appropriate article

Underline the nouns in a text you have written and check whether they need an article. Ask yourself:

- Is the noun countable or uncountable?\*
- If it is a countable singular noun, you need to either add an article or make it plural
- If uncountable, then you may need either 'the' or you may not need an article.
- Is the noun something specific?
- If so, then you may need 'the'.
- We need to get to **the** lecture by 10am.*
- Is the noun singular or plural?
- If plural, it may need either 'the' or no article.

\* Check if a noun is countable (C) or uncountable (U) via <http://dictionary.cambridge.org/>.

### Subject verb agreement

Another area to be careful about is the use of the verb in relation to its subject. The verb chosen must agree with the subject. Some examples of issues with subject-verb agreement are shown below:

✗ *John live in France.*

✓ *John **lives** in France.*

The subject **John** (singular 'he') 'agrees with' the third person singular form of the verb *to live* - **lives**.

✗ *The arguments is sound and well supported.*

✓ *The arguments **are** sound and well supported.*

The subject **arguments** (plural 'they') requires the third person plural form of the verb *to be* - **are**.

#### Five general usage rules

Following are five general rules about subject-verb agreement. The subject of each sentence is in **bold**. It can be useful to consider what pronoun could perform the same function as the subject; these are shown in brackets where applicable.

1. Singular subjects joined by the word 'and' are generally plural (*They*).

**Both the Art teacher and the students** enjoy a student centered approach.

2. Indefinite pronouns (*someone, anyone, no-one, anybody, somebody, nobody, one, either, neither*) usually take a singular verb.

**No-one** likes to fail at university.

3. Nouns used with a quantifier (*some, any, all, most*) can be singular or plural. This depends on whether the noun is countable or uncountable.

**Some of the policies** (They) were rejected whilst others were approved. (policies = countable noun)

**Some of the research** (It) was conducted at the University of Melbourne. (research = uncountable noun)

4. After a subject joined by 'either...or', 'neither...nor', or 'not only...but also', the verb tends to agree with the subject nearest to it.

**Neither the lecturer nor the students** want to reschedule the class. (**want** agrees with students)

5. 'There is' and 'there are' agree with the noun that follows.

There is **flexibility** in this kind of management structure.

There are many **advantages** to this kind of management structure.

## Tense

It is useful to consider the function and use of various tenses in your writing.

### Present perfect

The present perfect is often used to link the past to the present. It is useful for introductions when you are giving the general background to a subject. E.g.:

Over the last decade schools **have experienced** significant change in technology.

### Past simple tense

Past simple tense is used to describe a finished action in the past. It can be used to describe what you saw on a practicum or particular research that has been conducted. For example:

While at the centre, I **observed** that the children **played** collaboratively.

The findings **revealed** that Group A in the study **remembered** 67% more items.

### Present tenses

The **present simple** is especially useful if you want to talk about something that is true or factual. It is also used to generalise from past research or make conclusions based on observations. For example:

These observations **indicate** that when teachers **show** enthusiasm, student motivation **increases**.

If you are using a **continuous** tense include the *be* verb. E.g.:

He **is studying**.

### Future aspect – 'will'

Probably the most common form of looking at the future in academic writing is present tense '**will**' plus the **base form of the verb**. For example:

If the current trend continues, the figures **will increase** significantly.

### Passive Voice

The passive voice is commonly used to describe processes or procedures. For example:

Students **are then asked** to discuss the issue at this point in the lesson.

### Other important points to remember:

- When changing tenses in a paragraph, 'signalling words' or time phrases are useful, e.g. *Since then, currently, now, in the past, for example*.

**Previous** research **indicated** that grammar-translation was an effective way to learn a second language.

**Currently**, however, researchers **believe** that an eclectic approach can be more effective.

(In this example, '**previous**' refers to the past and so the verb – **indicate** – is in the past simple form.

In contrast, '**currently**' shows a shift in time to the present, and so the verb – **believe** – is in the present simple.)

### Editing for tense

- Look at each paragraph and ask:
  - what is the **main time focus** of the paragraph? (past, present, future, connecting past to now)
  - are time words and verbs used consistently?
- Now find the verbs and ask yourself for each sentence:
  - does the verb tense used agree with the time focus of the paragraph and/or time words used in the sentence?

## Further resources

Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary  
<http://dictionary.cambridge.org/>

Darling's Guide to Good Grammar: A comprehensive guide to all aspects of grammar and syntax  
<http://grammar.ccc.commnet.edu/grammar>

## Academic Skills