

Part III

Learning academic English

Chapter Nine

Talking about things

Grammar Focus. Nouns and determiners

Introduction.

So far we have focused on the action part of the sentence, the verb. Let us turn our attention to how we talk about who and what the action is about. When we talk to each other, we indicate to each other how the information expressed through the nouns is related to what has been said and to our knowledge of the world around us. **Determiners**, words like *the, a, this, that, my, your, and some*, play an important role in establishing this chain of reference. In fact, determiners play such an important role in English grammar that they are some of the most common words in the English language.

Yet determiners, in particular the **articles** *the* and *a*, are probably the most persistent problem for English language learners. One cause of this problem is cross linguistic. Most Asian and Slavic languages and many African languages do not have articles. Languages that have determiners, such as French, Spanish, Scandinavian languages, and the Semitic languages, don't use articles in the same way that English does. For example, whereas English would say *money is power*, many other languages would say *the money is the power*. In other words, many English language learners don't see why we need articles, while others use them in ways that are appropriate for their language but not for English.

Perhaps a more basic problem stems from the saliency of articles and their pattern of use. In other words, how obvious is the pattern for English

language learners? Since *the* and *a* are two of the most frequently used words in the English language, we might expect their pattern of use to be quite salient.

Let's see if this is so in Awareness Activity 7.1.

Awareness Activity 7.1. Hearing determiners.

As we learned in Chapter Two, when we listen to spoken English, we hear beats or stresses, much in the same way that we hear beats when we listen to music. These beats tend to be placed on the nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs, the major parts of speech, rather than on the function or structure words, such as the auxiliary verbs, prepositions, pronouns, and determiners. As we saw with elliptical questions in Chapter Six and the disappearing negative in Chapter Eight, when syllables in English are unstressed, they tend to disappear as they blend in with the sounds around them, making certain grammatical patterns more difficult to learn when street English is the primary input.

Let's see the consequences of learning English on the street in the following passage written by a native speaker of Korean who learned English by interacting with others after coming to the United States as a high school student. First read the passage silently taking note of when *the* and *a* seem to be used incorrectly or are missing. Ignore her other mistakes.

Personally, I really don't like English too much. I've been in United States about three and half years. I think that's kind of long time. I have no trouble to communicate. I learned my English when I first got to America. I

went to high school. I guess I learned a lot from high school grammar class. I think I learned how to speak English from speech class I took in high school. I was very scared to speak out loud because of my accent, but speech class really helped me to speak out loud when I speak English.

Did you notice that several *a*'s and *the*'s are missing? You have probably had a teacher tell you that if you read your compositions out loud, you will be able to hear your mistakes. Let's see if that will work in this case. Have someone read to you in a conversational rather than in a carefully enunciated manner the following sets of sentences which are based on the passage you just read. One sentence in each set is the original from the passage. The others are possible revisions. Listen to see how well you can hear which one sounds correct.

- I've been in United States about three and half years.
I've been in the United States about three and a half years.
- I think that's kind of long time.
I think that's kind of a long time.
- I guess I learned a lot from high school grammar class.
I guess I learned a lot from the high school grammar class.
I guess I learned a lot from a high school grammar class.
- I think I learned how to speak English from speech class I took in high school.

I think I learned how to speak English from a speech class I took in high school.

I think I learned how to speak English from the speech class I took in high school.

- but speech class really helped me
- but a speech class really helped me
- but the speech class really helped me

Spoken English reduces the pronunciation of unstressed structure words and links the consonants that end one word onto the next word. As a result, did you notice how *a* and *the* not only sound very much alike but tend to disappear? Because of this, how to use *the* and *a* correctly can be hard to learn simply by listening to spoken English. Language learners need to interact with written text where the differences are more apparent.

Awareness Activity 7.2. Deciding if it needs a *the* or an *a*.

How do you know if a noun needs a *the* or an *a* or nothing, sometimes called the **zero determiner** or \emptyset ? The following passage is a notice I received from our university library. I have removed all *the*'s and *a*'s and have put a blank before every noun. Based on your gut feelings about how English works, add *the* and *a* in the appropriate spots. Of course, some blanks are best left empty.

(Remember the \emptyset determiner.)

Enclosed is ____ list of ____ library items which must be renewed or returned by ____ October 1. Please follow ____ instructions below exactly if you wish to renew any of ____ items without bringing ____ books to ____ library at this time.

Did you have trouble deciding how to fill the blanks? Here are the answers so you can check how you did.

Enclosed is a list of ∅ library items which must be renewed or returned by ∅ October 1. Please follow the instructions below exactly if you wish to renew any of the items without bringing the books to the library at this time.

Were your answers correct? How would you explain to an English language learner what you did? Let's take a look at the grammar that underlies the use of determiners before we turn to some pragmatic issues.

Grammar.

Before we can talk about the rules for determiners, we need to be sure that we can identify **nouns**. We live in a world of nouns. Everything we can see around us is a noun. That's why they are often defined as a person, place, or thing. However, many nouns can't be seen (e.g. *envy*, *decision*, *knowledge*). Therefore, as with the other major parts of speech, it's a good idea to use meaning, endings, and frames to make sure that something is a noun.

One way to use **meaning** is to use the wh-question words *who* and *what* to find nouns. We saw in Chapter Six how an uninverted wh- question is formed. Simply substitute *who* or *what* for the word you suspect is a noun and see if the

resulting sentence makes sense as an uninverted question. Let's try it with part of a previous sentence: *It's a good idea to use meaning, endings, and frames.*

- *What's* a good idea to use meaning, endings, and frames? (it)
- *It's a *what* idea to use meaning, endings, and frames? (*good)
- It's a good *what* to use meaning, endings, and frames? (idea)
- *It's a good idea to *what* meaning, endings, and frames? (*use)
- It's a good idea to use *what*, endings, and frames? (meaning)
- It's a good idea to use meaning, *what*, and frames? (endings)
- It's a good idea to use meaning, endings, and *what*? (frames)

We've identified *it*, *idea*, *meaning*, *endings*, and *frames* as nouns. The first of these, *it*, is actually a **pronoun**, a function word that substitutes for nouns. In a spoken or written discourse, pronouns generally refer to information known to everyone taking part in the discussion (*I*, *you*, *he*, *she*, *we*, *they*, *it*) and are used to avoid repeating information. In this case the *it* in the subject position simply serves as a space holder. English requires subjects for sentences. This sentence doesn't have one that refers to anything in the real world so *it* was put in as semantically empty space filler, in much the same way that *do* is inserted into a sentence when there is no auxiliary for forming questions or negatives. *Good* and *use* were found not to be nouns. We have to be careful with the *who/what* test for nouns. Sometimes *who* and *what* can substitute for verbs or even whole phrases or clauses as we can see below.

- Let's try it.

Let's *what*? (try it)

or Let's *do what?*(try it)

- It's a good idea to use meaning, endings, and frames.

It *what?* (is a good idea to use meaning, endings, and frames)

- We live in a world of nouns.

We *what* in a world of nouns? (live)

We *do what* in a world of nouns? (live)

- She said she wants to finish her homework first

She said what? (she wants to finish her homework first.)

As we can see with these examples, using the *who/what* test alone is not enough. We also have to look at endings and frames to confirm that our *who/what* test worked since *what* can also be used to identify verbs, phrases, and even clauses as nouns.

As with verbs, there are two kinds of **endings** that identify nouns, inflectional and derivational. The two **inflectional** endings are the *plural –s* and the *genitive - 's*. We saw the plural on *endings* and *frames* in the example sentence *It's a good idea to use meaning, endings, and frames*. The plural ending may be useful for confirming that something is a noun but it is limited in its usefulness for finding nouns as many nouns have only a singular form (*humor, apathy, furniture*). Even the genitive - 's is not particularly useful as it is not very common and is mostly limited to animate things (*the dog's tale, the man's hat, Peter's book* but **the table's leg*).

Derivational endings are useful for identifying as nouns the longer words that characterize academic English. Some common ones include *–ment* (*judgment,*

measurement), -ness (*blindness, preparedness*), -ity (*sanity, purity, vanity*), -tion (*nation, alteration*), -er/-or (*worker, governor*), -ery (*bakery, imagery*) -age (*mileage, breakage*) -ant (*assistant, coolant*), -ism (*Marxism, realism*) and -ship (*relationship, citizenship*). Another common ending, -ing, is the one we saw making verbs into present participles to be used as adjectives. It also makes verbs into **gerunds**, verbs used as nouns (*Swimming is so much fun.*).

However, because of the trend in present day English to use any word we wish as a noun, verb, or adjective without changing the endings (*Mary is running.* Next we brick the driveway--verb, *The running dog, the brick driveway--adjective, *My running is slowing down, The brick looks fine--noun*) we also need to look at **frames** to make sure that a word is functioning as a noun in a sentence. The most common frame is based on the **determiner**. It looks like this: *DET _____ is necessary.* In other words, whenever we hear a determiner, our expectancy grammar tells us to expect a noun. The determiners in English include the following types:*

- **articles:** *the, a.* *The* is called the definite article since it is used with a noun when its identity is definite. Everyone in the discussion knows which one it is (*I see the cow.*) *A* is called the indefinite article because although the speaker or listener may know which item is being referred to, someone in the conversation doesn't know for sure. Hence its identity is indefinite (*I see a cow.*)
- **possessives:** *my, your, his, her, its, our, their.* These possessive determiners are sometimes called possessive adjectives because they

come before nouns in the same way that adjectives do. (*My friend is coming tomorrow.*). Closely related are the possessive pronouns, *mine, yours, his, hers, ours, theirs*, which can serve as pronouns in the same way as *I, me, you, he, him, she, her, it, we, us, they, them*. (*Do they see me? Do they see mine?*) There is also a wh-possessive determiner *whose*. (*Whose car is that?*)

- **genitives:** The **genitive -'s**, sometimes called the **possessive -'s**, most commonly appears on nouns referring to humans, in particular on personal names (*John's, the man's*). It can also be used with other animates (*the bear's den*), with units of time (*this year's calendar*), and inanimate objects which have power to do things (*the machine's roar*). Inanimate nouns more commonly have no genitive marking and either are placed ahead of the noun as in a compound (*the table leg, the seat cover*) or are placed after the noun following an *of* (*the leg of the table, the color of the seat*) in what is called the **periphrastic genitive**. Similar *of* phrases are common to indicate quantities and measurements (*a deck of cards, a drop of water, five gallons of gas, an ounce of prevention, a spoonful of sugar, a box of cereal*), special shapes (*an ear of corn, a bunch of grapes, a loaf of bread*), and groups of people and animals (*a herd of cattle, a school of fish, a swarm of bees, a gang of thieves.*)
- **demonstratives:** *this, that, these, those*. *This* is the most common, though *that* also appears frequently in conversation. Both can only be used with singular nouns. *These* also appears frequently in academic

prose. *These* and *those* can only be used with plural nouns. (*These truths are self evident.*)

- **quantifiers:** The most common quantifiers are *all, much, many, some, any* and *no*. They indicate the quantity of the noun. In much the same way that modals scale in their intensity in relationship with verbs, quantifiers scale according to the quantity they imply with nouns.

- **All**

- **Inclusive** *all, both, each, every.*
- **Large amounts** *many, much, more, most, and a lot of.*
- **Moderate** *several, some, a few, a little*
- **Small** *few, little, a couple of*
- **Exclusive** *any, no.*

- **None**

Sometimes the quantifiers are classified as **post determiners** since they can be used after *the* (*the many books, the few times*). Sometimes *all* and *both* are classified as **predeterminers** since they may appear before the word *the*, often followed by an *of* (*all the people, all of the people*).

- **numbers. Numerals** and **ordinals**, *one, two, three, etc. first, second, third, etc. next, last, another, etc* are sometimes classified as **post determiners** since they can be used after *the* (*two cars, the two cars, the second time, next year, the next year*). **Multipliers**, *double, twice, three times* and **fractions**, *half, one third* are considered **predeterminers** since

they may appear before *the*. Fractions may be followed by *of* (*half the time, half of the time*).

The above are considered determiners because they fit in the same position in the sentence, substituting for each other (*A book is on the table. My book is on John's table.*) Except for those that can also be predeterminers or post determiners, they can not be used together, in the same way that two modals cannot be used together. (**the my book, *the this book.*)

Categories of nouns. Based on the determiner frame, nouns divide into two general categories, **proper** and **common**. **Proper nouns** or **names** are inherently definite since they refer to only one thing and as a general rule do not occur with determiners, especially in the singular (*Roger, Joseph, *the Roger, *the Joseph*). In the plural they have a *the* (*The Thompsons*). Sometimes a common noun is used as a name of an object or institution. In that case *the* is used (*the Gainesville Regional Airport*). When names which are based on common nouns are used frequently, sometimes the *the* drops and name become a proper noun (*Gainesville Regional Airport*). The opposite can also happen, especially with brand names (*Kleenex* (brand) becomes a *kleenex* (any paper tissue)). *The* is also used with plural geographic names (*the Alps, the Rockies*), names of rivers, seas, and canals (*the Mississippi, the Atlantic, the Suez Canal*) and public institutions such as hotels (*the Ritz*), theaters (*the Hippodrome*), and names of newspapers (*the Gainesville Sun*). Also any name that includes an *of* has a *the* (*the University of Florida*). Proper names can be used as common

nouns when seen as a product or when viewed as a category (*That is definitely a Thompson.*).

As you can see, the use of determiners with names or proper nouns is not particularly predictable, just adding to the confusion when language learners are trying to figure out the pattern. English language learners simply need to be reminded that names and proper nouns follow their own special rules. However, if names are excluded, the pattern for using determiners with nouns, in particular the pattern for using the articles, is more straight forward, though with some hidden surprises.

Most nouns in English are **common nouns**, but they divide into two categories, **count** and **non-count**. Often you can classify the nouns into these two groups according to meaning or appearance in the real world. Most nouns are count nouns. Generally an object labeled as a **count** noun has a recurring shape that can be considered a unit in itself that can be counted (*trees, books, and chairs, 2 trees, 3 books, 5 chairs*) Nouns labeled as **mass** or **non-count** generally have no definite shape (*water, flour, air*), are materials or substances (*coal, iron, pork*) or are abstractions (*love, courage, truth*). Gerunds (verbs being used as nouns e.g. *swimming, conditioning, flying*) are also non-count.

Determining countability. Knowing the countability of a common noun is basic to using determiners. A countable noun is viewed as a separate entity that can be counted using numbers. (*two dogs, three chairs*). When used with a quantifier such as *some*, it appears in the plural (*some dogs, some chairs*). In the

singular it can be used with *a*, which technically means *one*. *An* was the number *one* in Old English. In other words, a **count** noun can be both singular and plural.

Non-count nouns are often called **mass** nouns since they have no defined shape but are viewed as a mass, a material, a substance, or an essence (*beef, wine, freedom, kindness*). To be counted it has to be put into a shape (*a slice of beef*), a container (*a bottle of wine*), or a category (*three types of freedom*). When it is used with a quantifier such as *some*, it has the singular form (*some beef, some wine, some freedom, some kindness*). A non-count noun can not be used with the article *a* since, as mentioned earlier, *a* is technically a number.

Some nouns can be both count and non-count with a slight change in meaning. Non-count *aspirin* is a medicine, *an aspirin* is a serving. The non-count *paper* is what you write on, *a paper* is what you read. You can buy *two watermelons* or *two slices of watermelon*. The first is a count noun, the second is the substance that assumes the shape of a slice when it is served. Count nouns predominate in English, reflecting the tendency of English to view everything in separate units.

At times, visual generalizations for determining whether a noun is mass or count do not work. Notice the following series of semantically related items.

money (non-count) dollars (count) dimes (count) nickels (count)

noodles (count) spaghetti (non-count) ravioli (non-count)

advice (non-count) information (non-count) opinions (count) views (count)

We count money but money is a non-count noun. I doubt that anyone at the dinner table counts noodles, but I do know that children count their ravioli to make sure they got their fair share, yet noodles are count and ravioli is non-count.

Because the boundary between count and non-count at times seems arbitrary and many words switch categories, perhaps the most useful rule of thumb you can use to test if something is count or non-count is to apply the **how much/how many test**. Much and many are quantifiers. Much can only be used with non-count nouns, many with count (*how many tables*, **how many airs*, **how much table*, *how much air*). Note that after *many* the noun is always plural, after *much* always singular. As you use the *how much/how many* test, ask yourself if the meaning of the noun in the test frame is the same as the noun in the sentence you are examining.

For example, take the sentence *He is breathing air*. The *air* in *How many airs?* means *songs*, not the stuff we breath. The *air* in *How much air?* is the same as in the sentence. Thus *air* in this sentence is non-count. Another example: *We are moving a table*. The *table* in *How many tables?* is the same as the *table* in the sentence. The *table* in *How much table?* seems to be some sort of a substance, indicating perhaps that the table has been smashed into pieces and only some of it has been retrieved. Clearly, *table* in the original sentence is count. Many languages have count and non-count nouns, However, how the world is sorted into these categories may not be the same as in English. For example, in

Spanish *advice* is a count noun with a singular and plural, in English it is a non-count noun.

Quantifiers and numbers are not the only determiners and post and predeterminers that work differently with count and non-count nouns.

Demonstratives *this* and *that* can be used with both count and non-count nouns in the singular (*this table, that air*), but *these* and *those* can only be used with count nouns in the plural (*those tables, *those air*). The possessives can be used with either with no restriction (*my table, my tables, my air*). However, the articles *the* and *a* have other restrictions based not only on whether or not the noun is count or non-count but on whether certain discourse and pragmatic principles apply.

Rules of thumb. The how much/how many test for identifying count and non-count nouns.

Place the noun in question after *how much* and *how many*. Remember, after *how much* the noun must be singular in form, after *how many* plural. (**how much table, how many tables, how much fun, *how many funs*). Then ask yourself which sounds grammatically correct and has the same meaning that the word had in the sentence in question. *How much* identifies non-count and *how many* count nouns.

Pragmatics and Discourse.

Establishing a chain of reference. Usage of the articles *the* and *a* depends on the intersection of grammar, pragmatics, and discourse as a **chain**

of reference is established. *The* is called the **definite article** because it tells the listener or the reader that the upcoming noun has a definite identity. In other words, everyone involved in the discourse knows which one it is. This might be for discourse reasons. The noun has already been mentioned. This type of reference is called **anaphoric**. Sometimes the noun is definite because of information following it in a modifying phrase. This reference is called **cataphoric**. Other times our knowledge or observations indicate that there is only one possible identity. This is called **situational** reference. The **indefinite article** *a* indicates that these pragmatic or discourse principles have not yet connected the following noun to a point of reference. *A* indicates that the item to be mentioned is one of several possibilities but someone in the conversation doesn't know which one it is. In other words, it is new information and a chain of reference has not yet been established.

Note how these principles apply in the following conversation.

Speaker A. (Holding a bowl with one green and two red apples) Hey, do you want an apple with that?

Speaker B. Sure, I'll have the green one.

Speaker A is introducing new information so it is denoted by *an*, the indefinite article. Speaker B makes a selection. There is only one green apple so the speaker says *the* using situational reference since both participants in the conversation know which one that would be. Let's do the conversation a second time.

Speaker A. (Holding a bowl with one green and two red apples) Hey, do you want an apple with that?

Speaker B. Sure, I'll have a red one. Give me the one on the right.

Notice that this time the second speaker first used the indefinite article since there are two possibilities. Then the speaker indicates definitely which one is preferred by using cataphoric reference, so the *a* changes to *the*. Notice too that the speaker said *the* right not *a* right because everyone knows that there is only one right, even though it is being mentioned for the first time. This is situational reference.

Let's try the conversation again, but this time with applesauce.

Speaker A. (Holding a bowl of applesauce) Hey, do you want some applesauce with that?

Speaker B. Sure, I'll try some. Hmm, the sauce tastes great.

Notice that this time the first speaker used *some* instead of *a* to indicate that this is new information. That's because applesauce is a non-count noun (*how much applesauce, *how many applesauce*) and as such can't have an *a*, which is technically a number. The quantifier *some* often functions as an indefinite article when a non-count noun is the new information in a conversation. Notice that in the reply, *some* was used again since the amount is indefinite. Then when the speaker tastes the applesauce, the definite article is used because of anaphoric reference. Everyone now knows which applesauce it is.

Let's try the conversation one more time.

Speaker A. (Holding a bowl of applesauce) Hey, do you want applesauce with that?

Speaker B. Sure, I'd try some. Hmm, the sauce tastes great.

Notice that this time the *some* is missing. That's because with non-count nouns introduced as new information, the *some* is optional. However, notice that we don't have this option with count nouns.

Speaker A. (Holding a bowl with one green and two red apples) *Hey, do you want apple with that?

Speaker B. Sure, I'll have the green one.

Count nouns in the singular can never be used by themselves. They must always be preceded by a determiner. As we have seen, this is not the case with non-count nouns.

Let's look at one more pattern.

Speaker A. (Holding a plastic bag of apples) Hey, do you want some apples?

Speaker B. Of course I'd like some. (Looks inside) The apples look great.

Notice that this time several apples are the new information. *A* cannot be used because it means *one*. Therefore the quantifier *some* followed by the plural functions as the plural indefinite article for count nouns. Once the second speaker has the sack and looks inside, *the* substitutes for *some* since everyone knows which ones are being referred to.

Let's look at a variation of the last conversation.

Speaker A. (Holding a plastic bag of apples) Hey, do you want some apples?

Speaker B. Of course I'd like some. (Looks inside) They look great.

Notice how the pronoun *they* replaced *the apples* to continue the chain of reference. Maintaining the chain of reference with pronouns is a characteristic of conversation since everyone knows who and what is being referred to. Of course latecomers to the conversation would need to ask for clarification since they don't know what is in the bag. I'm sure you have entered a room where a telephone conversation is taking place and have wondered who or what the pronouns are referring to.

This then is the pattern for using the articles with nouns in conversations when referring to specific things. If everyone involved in the conversation knows exactly the reference, either because it has already been identified or general knowledge indicates that there is only one possibility, *the* is used with any noun, singular or plural, count or non-count or the reference is changed to a pronoun. However, if an upcoming noun is new information and someone involved in the conversation may not know exactly what is being referred to, *a* is used with singular count nouns and *some* with non-count nouns and plural count nouns.

Generic reference. Determiners appear so commonly before nouns that their absence usually signals a change in meaning. Notice the following:

Speaker A. Kids! Who wants eggs for breakfast? Who wants bacon? Who wants cheese grits?

(a few minutes later)

Speaker A. Kids, the eggs are ready. I'm cooking the bacon now. The grits will be ready by the time you get here.

Notice that when announcing the possible foods, no determiners were used. Instead the count nouns were in the plural (*eggs, grits*) and the non-count noun is in the singular (*bacon*). When nouns appear without a determiner in conversation, it usually means that the noun refers to something in general, in this case types of food. Once the food is ready, the rules for using determiners in reference to things around you apply again. Thus we see a new pattern for conversation. If we want to indicate that we are talking about things in general, do not use a determiner. Of course that means that count nouns have to be in the plural since singular count nouns must have a determiner.

This is sometimes called the **generic** use of articles. It is closely related to indefinite reference and is often indistinguishable. The conversational pattern then is to use *a* and optionally *some* to begin a chain of reference when new information is being introduced to a conversation then switch to *the* once the identity has been established. Use no article to indicate that you are describing things in general. In other words, when we say “roses are red, violets are blue,” we are making a general description. When we say “the roses are red, the violets are blue,” we are referring to the flowers we can see in our garden. Below is a general summary of the general pattern for using articles in conversation according to the chain of reference. X denotes that no form exists. Ø denotes the “null” article. In other words the noun is used by itself. () means the form is optional.

	Definite	Indefinite	General
Singular count nouns	the	a	X
Plural count nouns	the	(some) Ø	Ø
Non-count nouns	the	(some) Ø	Ø

Conversation versus writing. Let's try a close reading of a paragraph from a newspaper to see how the patterns we have identified for deciding how to use determiners have been followed by the journalist. Such an exercise can be tedious, but is useful for helping English language learners see how the patterns work. To aid in our discussion, I have italicized the nouns and pronouns. As we identify each noun as count or non-count, we'll use the *how much/how many* test as a confirmation.

Nuclear-family *sitcoms* may be less popular than *they* were in the '80s, but the *end* of "*Home Improvement*" hardly constitutes the *death* of the *genre*, syndicated television writer David *Bianculli* said. "*I'm* not going to hold a *wake*," said *Bianculli*, now a New York Daily News *columnist* and a former television *writer* for The *Sun*. "*It's* just too durable a *format*." *Television* is cyclical, and the *decline* of traditional family *sitcoms* is just a *dip* in a longer *pattern*, *Bianculli* said.

The count noun *sitcoms* (*how many sitcoms*) is plural and without a determiner indicating that it refers to sitcoms in general. The pronoun *they* is anaphoric referring back to *sitcoms*. *The 80's* is a name and is plural so it needs *the*. The count noun *end* (*how many ends*) is preceded by the definite article *the* because of cataphoric reference to the name "Home Improvement" which follows *of*. The same cataphoric pattern applies to the next *the* preceding count word *death* (*how many deaths*). The following *of*-phrase makes the word *death* definite. The count word *genre* (*how many genres*) is preceded by *the* because of anaphoric reference to *sitcoms*, one of the genres. *Bianculli* is a proper name so it needs no determiner.

The pronoun *I* has anaphoric reference to *Bianculli*, the speaker. The count noun *wake* (*how many wakes*) is preceded by the indefinite article *a* because there are many possible wakes and a particular one hasn't been specified. The name *Bianculli* is repeated, again without a determiner. The indefinite article *a* is used with *columnist* and with *writer* to indicate that there are many columnists and writers at both locations and this fact is mentioned for the first time. *The* precedes *Sun* because it is a common noun used as a name thus requiring the definite article. The pronoun *it* has anaphoric reference to the genre of sitcoms. *A* is used with the count noun *format* (*how many formats*) to indicate that there are many different formats and this is just one.

The non-count *television* (*how much television* i.e. the media not the set) has no determiner to indicate this is television in general. The definite article *the* before the count noun *decline* (*how many declines*) is cataphoric because of the

following preposition *of* with its plural count noun *sitcoms* (*how many sitcoms*).

Sitcoms has no article to indicate that it refers to sitcoms in general. The indefinite article *a* introduces both *dip* and *pattern* to indicate that there are several possible dips and patterns and that these particular ones are being mentioned for the first time.

Other patterns. The general rules of thumb that we used in our close reading of a paragraph usually work. However, some alternatives have developed. Sometimes with count nouns we use *the* to indicate that we have specific things in mind and no determiner to indicate that we are referring to conditions in general. (*The dinner was great.* but *Let's meet for lunch.* *We go to the church over there* but *We go to church.* *We sat in the car* but *We came by car.*) In other words sometimes we use count nouns as though they were non-count to refer to a general condition. Sometimes general locations associated with activities use *the* implying that the location is known to everyone even though there may be several possibilities (*Let's go to the beach, the movies, the park, the bank, the doctor*).

Academic English at times also uses a different pattern for referring to count nouns as a general rather than a specific reference. The general pattern in conversational English is to use determiners when talking about both count and non-count nouns in the chain of reference. Use no determiner with the plural of count nouns and the singular of non-count (*Indians, horses, heart, roses, automobiles, hatred, greed*) to indicate that you are talking about things in general whether in the chain of reference or not..

However, in technical writing when using a count noun to define or classify humans, animals, body parts and organs, plants, and human inventions in a general sense, *the* is used with the singular (*the Indian, the horse, the heart, the rose, the automobile*). In speech and in less formal writing *a* may be used with the singular (*an Indian, a horse, a heart, a rose, an automobile*). However in all cases non-count nouns when referred to in a general sense must be without a determiner (*hatred, greed*). Thus technical writing prefers “The lion is a dangerous animal” whereas conversation prefers “Lions are dangerous animals.” The chart below compares the conversational and the academic patterns. X on the chart denotes that no form exists. Ø means use the noun by itself.

	Generic in general conversation	Generic in informal writing	Generic in technical writing
Singular count nouns	X	A a horse	The the horse
Plural count nouns	Ø horses	X	X
Non-count nouns	Ø electricity	Ø electricity	Ø electricity

This then is how expectancy grammar works based on the principles of conversational English. If there is no article before a noun, it is either a non-count noun, a plural count noun, or a proper noun. This means it is a name or a general description or category. If it follows *the* and is not a name, either it has previously

been mentioned, it is common shared knowledge, or the following phrase will identify it. If the noun follows the article *a*, it is being mentioned for first time and has not been specified in the chain of reference. Occasionally it may mean that it is a general classification.

Can you see why determiners, in particular the definite and indefinite articles are so hard to teach? When they are broken down into rules of thumb, each generalization is fairly easy, as we saw in our close reading of a newspaper article. However, the rules of thumb refer not only to the type of word (count and non-count) and the discourse context (anaphoric and cataphoric reference), but to the speaker's knowledge of the real world and the semantic relation of the word to the real world (situational reference), a new dimension for grammar decisions.

Writing the way you speak does not work in academics except as a first step. Instead English language learners need to be doing a lot of reading to see how the patterns work in writing. As a teacher, you need to worry less about making sure the student consciously understands the rules. From time to time ask "Did you notice?" as you draw their attention to patterns. Focus instead on having them do lots of reading so they will get a feeling for how the principles that govern determiners and chains of references work. Then they can write the way they read.

Reflections.

Some concepts.

- Determiners are used to show how nouns relate to the rest of the flow of information in a discourse.
- Basic to using determiners in English is knowing if a noun can be counted or not.
- The use of determiners may be better reinforced through reading.

Tips for finding nouns.

- **Meaning.** Since nouns are traditionally called person, places, or things, look for words that are elicited by the questions words *who* or *what*. (*John eat cabbage. Who? John. What? cabbage*)
- **Endings.**
 - **Inflectional:** plural –s (cows, chairs, clouds) genitive –'s (Henry's, the boy's)
 - **Derivational:** –ment (*judgment, measurement*), –ness (*blindness, preparedness*), –ity (*sanity, purity, vanity*), –tion (*nation, alteration*), –er/-or (*worker, governor*), –ery (*bakery, imagery*) –age (*mileage, breakage*) –ant (*assistant, coolant*), –ism (*Marxism, realism*) and –ship (*relationship, citizenship*), –ing (*swimming, fighting*)
- **Frames.** The _____ is necessary. (*The cake is necessary. The alteration is necessary. The air is necessary.*)

Some key terminology.

- **determiners**-function words that indicate a noun is coming up. Used to create a chain of reference.

- **articles**—determiners that relate a noun to a chain of reference
definite (the) indefinite (a)
- **demonstratives**—determiners which direct attention or point to
the noun (*this, that, these, those*)
- **genitive 's**—ending to show ownership of names and animate
things. (*John's, the dog's*)
- **periphrastic genitive**—alternative way to show ownership by
using *of* rather than 's (*the name of the book*)
- **possessives**—determiners that indicates who owns something
my, our, your, his, her, its, The possessive pronouns are mine,
ours, yours, his, hers, its.
- **post determiners**—numbers and ordinals that can come after
the (*the first cat, the five dogs*)
- **predeterminers**—quantifiers, fractions, multipliers that can
precede *the*, often followed by *of* (*all the boys, all of the boys,*
half the boys, twice the number)
- **quantifiers**—determiners that indicate the quantity, (*some,*
much, many)
- **common nouns**—nouns in English that refer the ideas and things in
the world around us. (*air, house, land, hate*) These are in two
categories, **count** and **non-count**, sometimes called **mass**. Count
nouns have a singular and plural. Non-count have only a singular.
They can be identified by the **how much/how many test**. **How much**

identifies non-count (*how much money, how much air, how much business*). **How many** identifies count nouns (*how many computers, how many friends, how many ideas*)

- **proper nouns**—nouns that are names (Penny's, Bill)
- **reference chain**—linking the information expressed by nouns and pronouns to earlier information (**anaphoric**) (*I saw Henry. He was...*) or later information (**cataphoric**) (*the name of the man* i.e. the name refers to the man) in the text or to information outside the text (*She's sitting in the car.* i.e. we know which car it is because we know the situation) (**situational**)

Some reflective activities.

1. What went wrong? Name the rule of thumb that was broken in the following.
 - *The dog is in garage.
 - *She has a mud on her shoes.
 - *Could you give me some advices?
 - *?The table's leg is a bit wobbly.
 - *The cats were first domesticated in Egypt.
2. Some teachers tell their students to use *a* the first time they use a noun in a composition and *the* from then on. Why is this advice incomplete and misleading?

3. Testing for countability. Use the *how much/how many* test to decide if the following words are countable or not. Can some be in both categories? If so, what is the difference in meaning?

news movies desk furniture beer soda hate love war politics turkey

4. Clues for countability. What are the clues in the following sentences as to whether the nouns in italics are countable (i.e. have a singular and plural) or are non-count or mass (i.e. are always singular)? Remember that *a/an* means *one* and thus cannot be used with a non-count or mass noun. Note too that some quantifiers can only be used with count nouns (*several chairs, many chairs*), some only with non-count/mass nouns (*much sand*). Others are used with count nouns in the plural (*some chairs, most chairs, more chairs, a lot of chairs*) and with non-count nouns in the singular (*some sand, most sand, more sand, a lot of sand*).

- How many *classes* are you registered for?
- There's not much *money* in that deal, just *nickels* and *dimes*.
- Boy, does she have *class*!
- How much *duck* would you like?
- Several *guys* are coming over.
- How many *deer* did you see?
- There's plenty of *bacon* and *eggs* for everyone.
- You caught him with *egg* on his face.
- We'd like four *salads*, two *bowls* of *soup*, some *jello*, and *eggrolls*.

5. The pronunciation of *the*. We all know that the indefinite article *a* changes its pronunciation to *an* when the following word begins with a vowel sound, not a vowel spelling (*a cow, an animal, an honor, a university*). But what about the pronunciation of *the*? Does it change its pronunciation under the same conditions? Test your pronunciation on the following phrases.

- in the morning
- in the early morning
- in the late afternoon
- in the every day affairs of men
- in the open
- in the sink
- in the oven
- in the afternoon

Does *the* sometimes sound like *thee*? When? If you have sung in a choir, you have probably been told to follow that rule.

6. Tutoring. You have been hired as a tutor to help students who do not speak English as their native language. Your first two students ask for your help with the following passages. How will you help each one understand how English determiners are used?

Student A. (Farsi speaker)

Moon is only planet which rotates around earth. It is about 10 million kilometer from earth. It takes 29 days for moon to rotate once around earth. Moon is shiniest object after sun.

Student B. (Korean speaker)

A kimchi is Korean vegetable which is a pickled cabbage spiced with red pepper, garlicks, and ginger. It is pickled in the big container which is buried in ground during winter. To make delicious kimchi, it is essential that a cabbage be spiced and pickled well.

Grammar detective 7. Reinforcing determiners through reading.

Try your hand at checking how the general principles that we have discussed for using determiners, especially articles, work for creating a chain of reference.

Instructions:

- Make a copy of a page from one of your textbooks and select one paragraph.
- Circle all the nouns and pronouns in the **first three** sentences of the paragraph. Don't circle nouns used as adjectives or parts of a compound, i.e. nouns between the determiner and the noun as in *the brick store* or *the initiation ceremony*.
- Using the *how much/how many* test, classify the nouns as count (c) and non-count (nc).
- Start at the beginning and proceed one noun and pronoun at a time and note how the determiners, especially the articles link the nouns into a chain of reference as we did in this chapter.
- In a one-page report, summarize your findings. Did the general principles for using *the* and *a* work? Were there any problems? What are the implications of this grammar detective for classroom teachers?

Teaching Ideas.

1. **What do you remember?** Bring a sack full of different items, some count some non-count (e.g. some sand, a key, a car, a book, some paper, some water, some rocks). Spread them out on a table to show the class. Put them away and have the students remember what they saw, using *some* and *a* as appropriate.
2. **What's missing?** Select an article from the newspaper that deals with a subject of interest to the students, perhaps about sports, a current event, or a new movie. Retype a very short section leaving out all the articles (*the, a*). Give your edited version to the students and have them work in pairs guessing what words are missing. Then give them a copy of the original and as a class compare the original with their answers and discuss the differences.
3. **Let's go grocery shopping.** This is a variation of the popular alphabet game. The students one at a time say, "I went to the grocery store and I bought..." The first student names an item that starts with A, using the appropriate determiner (e.g. *an apple* or *apple juice*). The next student repeats what the first student says, including the A item and adds a B item (e.g. *some blueberries*). The game continues through the class with each adding another item from the food store and repeating all the other items. Of course since modern grocery stores sell more than food (e.g. pencils, carnations, motor oil, floor polish) the students are not limited to food items.