

DETERMINERS

STUDYNOTES

What are determiners in English?

Determiners are a kind of noun modifier; they precede and are necessarily followed by nouns. While adjectives perform a similar function, the term 'determiner' refers to a relatively limited set of well-established words that can be said to 'mark' nouns.

The function of determiners is to 'express reference'; i.e. they clarify what a noun is referring to. For example, when one says 'that box', the listener knows which box is being referred to.

Types of Determiners

There are many types of determiners:

Articles

There are three articles: a, an, and the.

Indefinite Articles

A and an are indefinite articles that serve the same purpose, but they cannot be used interchangeably, because 'a' is only used before words that begin with consonants, and 'an' is used only before words that begin with vowels. (Note: 'an' before 'h' when it is silent, as in 'hour' and 'honour'; 'a' before 'u' and 'eu' when they sound like 'you', as in 'European' and 'university'.

The uses of the indefinite article are as follows:

1. To refer to some member of a group, class or category. For example, He is a doctor (profession)/an Indian (nationality)/a Hindu (religion).
2. To refer to a kind of or example of something. For example, He has a large nose/a thick beard/a strange aunt.
3. Preceding singular nouns, with the words 'what' and 'such'. For example What a car! Oh, that's such a shame!
4. To mean 'one' object, whether a person or thing. For example, The thieves stole a necklace and a portrait.
5. To refer to something that is being mentioned for the first time. For example, There was a chill in the air.

Note:

1. We usually say a hundred, a thousand, a million, etc.
2. 'A' is not indiscriminately used to refer to singular objects; 'one' is used when emphasis is required. For example, There is only one way out of this mess.

Definite Article

'The' is known as the definite article in English. Its uses are as follows:

1. When something is being referred to that has already been mentioned. For example, I saw a pretty girl at the mall today. The pretty girl did not, however, see me.

2. When both parties involved in the conversation are aware of what is being discussed. For example Where is the restroom?
3. To refer to unique objects. For example the sun, the moon, the Earth, the Taj Mahal.
4. With superlatives and ordinal numbers (numbers used to rank a set of objects). For example, Mt Everest is the tallest mountain on earth, Neil Armstrong was the first man on the moon.
5. To refer to groups of people, geographical areas and oceans, and with decades or groups of years. For example the Americans, the Sahara/Pacific, the fifties/sixties/seventies/eighties.

Quantifiers

What are quantifiers?

Quantifiers form a sub-class under determiners. They are adjectives or phrases that serve to answer two possible questions:

1. How many?
2. and How much?

Quantifier Usage:

- It is used to describe quantity.
- It is used to express attitude.

For examples:

- much
- a little/little/very little *

- a bit (of)
- a great deal of
- all
- enough
- many
- a few/few/very few **
- a number (of)
- ...

Demonstratives

This, that, these and those are known as demonstratives; they describe the position of an object, seen from the speaker's viewpoint.

This and these (used for singular and plural nouns respectively) refer to objects that are close by. For example: Whose car is this? Whose cars are these?

That and those (used for singular and plural nouns respectively) refer to objects that are further away. The closeness can be physical or psychological. For example: Who lives in that house?

Numbers

Numbers are cardinal (one, two, three, etc) and ordinal (first, second, third, etc). Cardinal numbers are adjectives that indicate quantity (There are five apples on the table), and ordinal numbers indicate rank or order (This is the first time for me on a plane).

Distributives

The words all, both, half, each, every, either and neither are known as distributives.

All, Both, Half – These three words can be used in the following ways:

All +

Uncountable Noun:

- Don Bradman is the greatest batsman of all time.

'the' + uncountable noun/countable noun in plural form

- We have all the time in the world.
- All the people in the hall went quiet.

'my', 'your', etc + uncountable noun/countable noun in plural form

- All my life I have been waiting for this moment.
- All your friends have been invited to the party.

'this', 'that' + uncountable noun/'these', 'those' + countable noun in plural form

- Look at all this dust!
- I do not have time for all these formalities.

Both +

'the' /'my', 'your', etc/'these', 'those' + countable noun in plural form (note: used only when two objects are being referred to).

- Both the dogs have passed away.

- Both my ankles have been hurting since I jumped from the balcony.
- Both these books must be returned within the week.

Half +

'a' + uncountable noun

- We bought half a kilo of rice.

'the'/'my', 'your', etc/'this', 'that', 'these', 'those' + noun

- Half the village perished in the floods.
- I spent half my inheritance on travelling the world.
- You may have half (of) this cake.
- Only half (of) those points are relevant.

Possessives

Possessive pronouns and adjectives indicate who an object belongs to.

The pronouns are:

- mine (first person: This car is mine = I own this car)
- yours (second person: This car is yours = You own this car)
- his, hers, and its (third person: This cars is his/hers = He/she owns this car).

The corresponding adjectives are:

- my

- your
- his, her, and it

Difference Words

‘Other’ and ‘another’ are ‘difference words’; they refer to something different, or remaining, or more. ‘Other’ is used with singular and plural nouns, while ‘another’ is used strictly with singular nouns.

- What other colours can I get this in?
- Is there another colour that this is available in?

Defining Words

Which and whose are ‘defining words’; they indicate which thing or person is being referred to.

- This is the house which I used to live in as a child.
- This is the man whose window you broke.

Question Words

There are a number of words in the English language that are used primarily to make questions; these words are ‘question words’, sometimes known as ‘WH question words’, owing to the fact that all of them start with the letter ‘w’, except one which starts with ‘h’.