Grammar

Grammar is what helps us make meaning that others in the community can understand. We all use grammar, even if we don't know what all the various grammatical concepts are called. But it can be tricky to recognise and fix your own grammatical mistakes if you haven't been taught formal grammar and don't have an explicit knowledge of the grammatical conventions of English.

Tense

A simple sentence represents a process or relationship, and a verb is the most important word group (see 'Sentence structure' PDF, 150 kB). When you represent a process or relationship in a sentence, you can choose to describe it as being in the present, past, or future by using a particular form of the verb. We call this feature of the verb its 'tense'. For example:

Example	Tense
Nurses in many hospitals were required to perform the jobs of more than one person due to understaffing.	**Past tense:** you could use this form to report on what you found in investigating the effects of understaffing on how nursing work is distributed in hospitals.
Nurses in many hospitals are required to perform the jobs of more than one person due to understaffing.	**Present tense:** you could use this form to make a claim about what is generally true about staffing in hospitals.
Nurses in many hospitals will be required to perform the jobs of more than one person due to understaffing.	**Future tense:** you could use this form to predict how understaffing in hospitals might affect nursing work distribution in the future.

(Examples adapted from Inglis, 2007, p.263)

You can use the different tenses for different purposes in your writing. You should consider the purpose of the sentence or paragraph you are writing when selecting what tense to use.

Here are some general guidelines about using tense:

Past tense

→ Use past tense when reporting on a procedure you carried out (e.g. the Method section of a research report or in reflective writing), the results of your research (e.g. the Results section), or when explaining/describing a historical event, e.g.
  → Method: 'A dilution series **was performed**…'
  → Results: 'It **was found** that 46% of children in the school catchment area spoke a language other than English at home.'
  → Historical event: 'News reports from East Timor initially **brought** "the audience into the story" (Sheridan Burns, 2002: 53) by giving graphic accounts of the killing of the five Australian

journalists who, in 1975, were reporting on the political unrest in the tiny Indonesian province.'

- If you are reviewing old literature and want to explicitly comment on the validity of the writer's claim, it may be appropriate to use past tense for the reporting verb (said, argued, claimed), etc., and then switch to present tense to evaluate it. For example:
  - 'A study carried out between 1979 and 1983 (Sydney Water) **identified** sewage effluent as a major source of pollution that affects the water quality in the Hawkesbury Nepean River, a river that supplies up to 65% of Sydney's drinking water… Although sewage treatment has improved significantly, sewage effluent **is** an ongoing concern with pollution that enters waterways.' (Adapted from HALL, n.d. Engineering Critical Writing, p. 138)

Present tense

- Use present tense in essays and other text types when discussing theory and general principles (e.g. 'These occupational health hazards include the risk of back injuries, stress, and the dangers of radiation and infection.') or when previewing the content of your essay or report (e.g. 'This paper argues that violence against nurses is a serious problem for hospitals and thus a serious occupational hazard.').
- When reporting on what the literature says, it's generally appropriate to use present tense, e.g.
  - 'Cone (2001) argues that the challenge for educators in a complex, global society is to provide active learning environments that build the relevant skills of independent learning, problem solving, communication and team work.'

Future tense

- Use future tense sometimes in the introduction when previewing the content of an essay or report, e.g.
  - 'The work of two prominent adult educators, Malcolm Knowles and Paulo Freire, will be explored to develop this understanding.'
- Use future tense sometimes in the introduction to present the background to a problem where it involves predictions of an increasing trend, e.g.
  - 'There has been a massive increase in the use of personal mobile phones over the past five years and this will most likely continue. According to Black (2002) by 2008 almost 100% of working people in Australia will carry personal mobile phones.'

(Example adapted from RMIT Learning Skills Unit, n.d., p.1)

In general

- Be consistent. If you use present tense in one sentence, you should probably use present tense in the rest of the paragraph. You need to have a good reason to change tense.

Subject-verb agreement

As well as having tense, verbs also relate to the other words in the sentence, especially the Subject. The Subject and verb are in a very close relationship, and in English we see this in the way the verb form changes depending on certain characteristics of the subject.

Person	Singular	Plural
1st person	I say	we say
2nd person	you say	you say
3rd person	he/she/it says	they say

You can see that there are two forms of these verbs in the present tense: say and says. Most of the time, the form is 'say'. But when the Subject is the 3rd person (not me or you, but something else) and singular, the form 'says' or 'has' is used.

This pattern works for almost every other verb as well. Here is another example:

Person	Singular	Plural
1st person	I have	we have
2nd person	you have	you(se) have
3rd person	he/she/it has	they have

In most types of academic writing, you'll mainly only need the third person forms anyway, because it's usually best to avoid using first and second person (I and you). Third person covers most of the Subjects you will use in academic writing, e.g. singular 'Smith says', 'the article says', and plural 'researchers have found'.

A major exception is the irregular verb 'to be', which is used frequently in academic writing, so it's worth writing out the paradigm for that one.

Person	Singular	Plural
1st person	I am	we are
2nd person	you are	you(se) are
3rd person	he/she/it is	they are

The pattern is almost the same as the one above (same form 'are' for everything except third person singular 'is'), but there is also a different form for 1st person singular, 'am'.

For past and future tense, the forms are all the same.

Past Tense

Person	Singular	Plural
1st person	I said	we said
2nd person	you said	you(se) said
3rd person	he/she/it said	they said

Future tense

Person	Singular	Plural
1st person	I will say	we will say
2nd person	you will say	you(se) will say
3rd person	he/she/it will say	they will say

That doesn't seem too hard, right? But the tricky part is making sure the Subject and verb 'agree'. That means getting the right verb form for the Subject of the clause. Sometimes it's hard to work out what the Subject is, and whether it's singular or plural. This is especially the case when you have long noun groups, which are quite common in academic writing. Here are some examples:

Fox's argument seems valid.
Subject: Fox's argument (singular)

Fox's arguments seem valid.
Subject: Fox's arguments (plural)

Nurses in many hospitals are required to perform the jobs of more than one person due to understaffing.
Subject: Nurses (plural); 'in many hospitals' is a description of 'nurses'.

Nurses in the emergency department are required to perform the jobs of more than one person due to understaffing.
Subject: Nurses (plural); 'in the emergency department' is a description of 'nurses'.

(Examples adapted from Inglis, 2007, p.263)

In the last example, even though the word immediately before the verb is singular ('department'), that word is not the Subject so it doesn't affect the verb form.

It can help to ask the question: 'who or what are required to perform the jobs of more than one person?' You should get the answer 'nurses' rather than 'departments' here. That tells you that 'nurses' is the subject of the verb.

Tip!

When proofreading, check the verb in each clause and ask the 'who or what' question above. When you find the answer to the question, which is the Subject, check whether it's singular or plural, and then check whether the verb form you've used 'agrees' with the form of the verb. If it doesn't, all you need to do is make a minor change, and it will make a major improvement to your writing!

If you're a native speaker of English, you probably haven't ever thought much about the little words like 'a', 'an', and 'the' that we call 'articles'. If you've learnt English as a second or other language, you've probably struggled with them!

Whether you're a native speaker of English or a speaker of another language, there are things you can learn about articles to improve your academic writing.

The basics

Articles are little words that go before nouns in English and some other languages. They help with cohesion, because they show whether or not the speaker is introducing something new or referring to a specific item that they have already mentioned.

Nouns have lots of different features, but the ones that are important for choosing the right article are: countability and definiteness.

Countable vs. uncountable

Countability refers to whether the noun is something that can be counted by numbers, e.g. one person/7 billion people, one mouse/three mice, one bottle/99 bottles; one idea/7 ideas; one day/365 days. You can use the articles 'a/an', 'the', and the counters 'some', 'many', and 'a few' with these words. You MUST use an article (or the word 'one') with a singular countable noun. Choose the right one depending on whether or not the noun is definite (see below).

Words like 'water', 'sugar', 'sunshine', 'poverty', and 'wisdom' are uncountable. You can't use numbers to count these: 'three waters' (unless 'a water' stands for 'a bottle of water' e.g. at a shop), 'five sunshines', '25 poverties'. Normally, these words are not used in plural form. You can use the article 'the', and the counters 'some', 'any', and 'much' with these words. You don't have to use an article with an uncountable noun. Check whether or not the noun is definite (see below) in order to decide whether it needs an article.

If you're not sure whether a word is countable or not, check it in a dictionary, e.g. the Oxford Learner's Dictionaries. The dictionary will show you all the meanings of that word and whether each one is treated as countable or not.

Definite vs. indefinite

Definiteness refers to whether or not the writer is referring to a specific instance of that noun that both the writer and reader already know about. This relies on the context of the writing and what has already been introduced. If the specific instance is known to both writer and reader, then it is definite. If the specific instance hasn't been introduced yet and the writer is mentioning it for the first time, then it's indefinite. Here are some examples:

> 'According to a 2015 study…' – 'study' is countable, so it has to have an article. It is indefinite, because the writer is introducing it for the first time.

The next time the writer mentions the same study, they will say:

> '**The** study found that…' because the writer and reader both know which study is being referred to.

‘Research has found…’ - ‘research’ is uncountable, so it doesn’t need an article. The amount of research is unspecified here, and the research hasn’t been mentioned before so it is indefinite and doesn’t need an article at all.

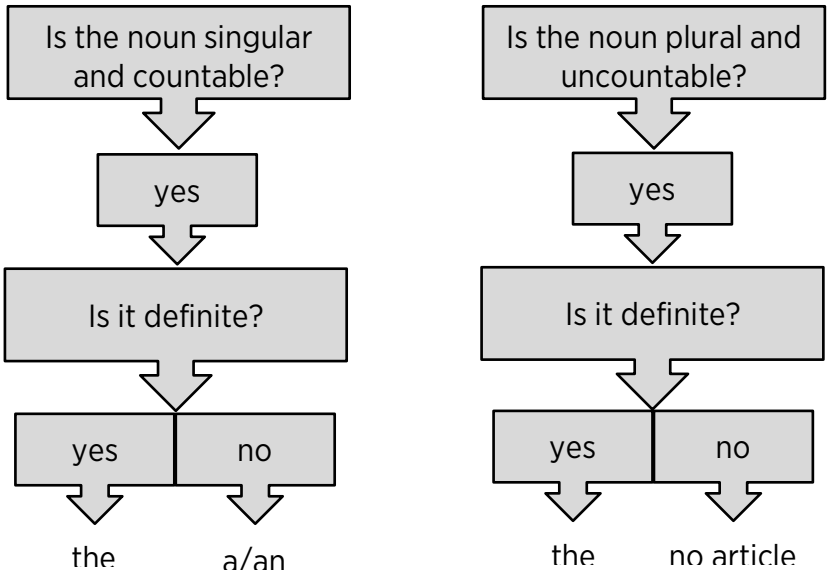
The next time the writer mentions the same research, they will say:

‘The research showed…’ - ‘research’ is uncountable, so it doesn’t need an article. But the writer has already introduced it so they use the definite article ‘the’.

‘**Much** research has been conducted recently to investigate…’ – ‘research’ is uncountable, so it doesn’t have to have an article. If you want to indicate the extent of the research, use the counter ‘much’ because that can be used with uncountable nouns.

Flow Chart

Here is a helpful flow chart to help you work out whether you need an article or not:



(Adapted from University of Adelaide Writing Centre, n.d., p.1)

More Information

→ Academic Literacy Pod 1 from the School of Humanities and Communication Arts introduces some of the language skills needed for academic communication.
→ The PDF Learning Guides from Adelaide University’s Writing Centre include Articles in English Grammar, Objective Language, and Verbs for Reporting.
→ Grammarly Handbook section on Verb Tenses has short, simple articles explaining the different verb tenses in English.
→ Grammarly Handbook section on Punctuation has short, simple articles to help you use different punctuation marks appropriately.

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