

# Making English Grammar Meaningful and Useful

## Mini Lesson #11

### Determiners: Little Words, Big Problems

The **purpose** of this lesson is to outline the **Determiner System** of English with reference to the 3 kinds of English **Nouns**.

English **Nouns** are nearly always preceded by a specific kind of word which is sometimes referred to as a **Determiner**. **Singular Nouns** must always have a **Determiner**, the most common one of which is the word **'a'** (**'an'** with nouns beginning with vowel sounds). **Plural** and **N-N Nouns** do not always require a **Determiner**, but they usually are accompanied by one, the most common being the word **'some'**.

English has 5 kinds of **Determiners**: **Simple Determiners** (usually referred to as **Indefinite Articles**), **Definite Determiners** (usually called **Definite Articles**), **Possessive Determiners** (usually called **Possessive Adjectives**), **Place Determiners** (often referred to as **Demonstratives**), and **Quantifying Determiners** (often called **Quantifiers**).

**SIMPLE DETERMINERS:** The **Simple Determiners** are **'a'**, **'an'** and **'some'**. They are given the title **'simple'** because they do not have a specific meaning except to determine the kind of noun they are used with. Other **simple determiners** include **'another'**, **'each'** and **'every'** for **Singular Nouns**; **'other'**, **'some other'** and **'all'** for **Plural** and **N-N Nouns**. All **Singular Nouns** must have a **Simple Determiner** unless another kind of **Determiner** is used. Most **Plural** and **N-N Nouns** are also accompanied by **Simple Determiners** unless another kind of **Determiner** is used with them.

**DEFINITE DETERMINERS:** The most common English **Definite Determiner** is the word **'the'**. It is called the **Definite Determiner** because when it is used, it enables to speaker to refer to a particular thing with a definite reference. **'The'** can be used with all 3 kinds of **Nouns**. The uses of **'the'** in English are quite numerous and in some cases, somewhat unpredictable.

**POSSESSIVE DETERMINERS:** **Possessive Determiners** refer to the person to whom a **Noun** belongs. They are all pronouns, and each Possessive Determiner can be used with all 3 kinds of **Nouns**.

**PLACE DETERMINERS:** English has 4 **Place Determiners**, **'this'**, **'that'**, **'these'** and **'those'**. Their use is determined both by **Noun** type and the proximity to the speaker either in location or reference. **'This'** is used with **Singular** and **N-N Nouns** to refer to things physically near the speaker or things the speaker has recently made reference to. **'These'** is the corresponding **Place Determiner** for **Plural Nouns**. **'That'** refers to things physically distant from the speaker or something other than what the speaker has made verbal reference to. It is used with **Singular** and **N-N Nouns**. **'Those'** is the corresponding **Place Determiner** for **Plural Nouns**.

**QUANTIFYING DETERMINERS:** English has several **Quantifying Determiners**, each with specific and sometimes restrictive uses.

**3 Quantifying Determiners** are used with **Singular Nouns**: ‘**one**’, ‘**no**’ and ‘**any**’. **One** is self-explanatory. ‘**No**’ and ‘**any**’ are interesting because they can be used with all 3 kinds of **Nouns**. ‘**Any**’ can be used in questions and negative sentences. ‘**No**’ gives a negative meaning in a grammatically positive sentence.

“Is there **any** book on the table?” “No, there isn’t **any**.” “No, there is **no** book there.”  
“Are they **any** books on the table?” “No, there aren’t **any**.” “No, there are **no** books there.”  
“Is there **any** dust on the table?” “No, there isn’t **any**.” “No, there is **no** dust there.”

The **Quantifying Determiners** with **Plural** and **N-N Nouns** are used in several, specific ways. They are often contrasted with each other. The quantifiers ‘**many**’, ‘**much**’ and ‘**a lot of**’ (**lots of**) all refer to a large quantity or amount of something. **Many** is used with **Plural Nouns**, and **much** is used with **N-N Nouns**. Both of these quantifiers are used in questions and negative sentences. Strangely, neither is used regularly in simple, positive contexts. By contrast, **a lot of** is used with both **Plural** and **N-N Nouns**, and it is used in both positive and negative sentences and in questions.

“Are there **many** restaurants in town?” “Yes, there are **a lot of** restaurants in town.”  
“Is there **much** crime in the area?” “Yes, unfortunately there is **a lot of** crime in the area.”

‘**Some**’ is often used as a **Simple Determiner** as mentioned above. It is also used as a **Quantifying Determiner** as well. It is used with both **Plural** and **N-N Nouns**, and it gives the meaning of a significant number or amount, but fewer or less than **a lot of**. When used to express a quantity, the word is usually pronounced with some stress.

“We have had **some** rain this summer. We usually do.” (no stress on ‘some’)  
“We have had **some** rain this summer, but not very much.” (Stress on ‘some’)

‘**Few**’ and ‘**a few**’, ‘**little**’ and ‘**a little**’ refer to quantities or amounts that are not large. Both **few** and **a few** are used with **Plural Nouns**; **little** and **a little** are used with **N-N Nouns**. What is difficult for ELLs to understand is that **few** and **little** (often preceded by the word ‘very’) emphasize the **smallness** of the quantity or amount, while **a few** and **a little** in contrast are used to express the **significance** of the quantity or amount. The meanings are almost the opposite in the intent that the speaker is trying to convey.

“The man has very **few** friends and very **little** money.” (He is lonely and poor.)  
“The man has **a few** friends and **a little** money.” (He is not lonely and not poor)

These 5 kinds of **Determiners** in one way or another accompany nearly every English **Noun**. **Simple Determiners**, **Definite Determiners** and **Quantifying Determiners** are particularly difficult for ELLs to master.