

Good Writing Practice

SECTION EDITORS



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Syntactic Grammar Distraction

Omission: Indefinite Article



Introduction

The indefinite article *a* functions as a determiner before a singular count noun, either tangible (*a human*) or abstract (*a trait*). This determiner indicates that the noun is either being mentioned for the first time or is general (indefinite) in meaning, or both. Its omission elicits a temporary gap to an English-as-a-first language reader because indefinite article usage, inherent to the language, is intuitively recognised. However, to an English-as-a-second-language reader, especially whose native language lacks articles, the omission of *a* is not intuitively recognised.

Two tests for identifying a singular count noun are it is (1) pluralisable (e.g., *humans*) or (2) precedable by another type of determiner: indefinite pronoun (*many humans*) or a numeral (*10 humans*). Another test is to read the sentence aloud. Often a reader will spontaneously add the article because the ear is more sensitive than the eye.

In contrast, a non-count noun (mass noun) cannot be pluralised (*informations*) nor preceded by another determiner: indefinite pronoun (*many information*) or a numeral (*10 information*).

The indefinite article is not as nuanced as is

the definite article, which can convey emphasis. One exception is whether the noun is to be marked by *an* because the first syllable of the noun is pronounced as a vowel.

Experimental sections

Part 1 – Results section: result statement/observation

Example: Article omission

Phagocytosis by dermal fibroblast increased.

Revision 1

*Phagocytosis by **a** dermal fibroblast increased.*

Revision 2

Phagocytosis by dermal fibroblasts increased.

Revision 3

*Phagocytosis by **the** dermal fibroblasts increased.*

Notes

Plurality is preferred (Revision 2) because the focus on a single fibroblast is unlikely. Furthermore, in the Results section, it is likely that the focus is on a specific group of already mentioned fibroblasts, justifying the usage of the inter-sentence continuity marker *the* (Revision 3).

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Part 2– Materials and Methods section: method

Example: Article omission

UWB Waveform was constructed by summing a complete, orthonormal, time-dependent basis set by using an optimal set of integers as the coefficients.

Revision

A UWB Waveform was constructed by summing a complete, orthonormal, time-dependent basis set by using an optimal set of integers as the coefficients.

Notes

Once recognised as a count noun, another consideration is whether the noun is pre-modified (post-modification does not affect indefinite article determiner usage). The presence of the

pre-modifier *UWB* should not obscure the singular countable nature of *Waveform*. The article *a* is required before *UWB* because *U* is pronounced as the consonant *yoo* (see Table). The same applies to *unique*. Another vowel-written but consonant-sounding word is *one* (pronounced as *won*) as in *a one-page report*.

Contextual Sections

Part 1 – Introduction section: research problem background

Example: Article omission

In human, the craniosynostosis trait is present in all individuals who carry the Pro7His mutation.

Revision 1

In a human, the craniosynostosis trait is present in all individuals who carry the Pro7His mutation.

Revision 2

In humans, the craniosynostosis trait is present in all individuals who carry the Pro7His mutation.

Notes

The revision options are: *In human* could be revised by addition of the *a* or conversion into the plural *humans*. In the context of the sentence constituent all individuals, the plural *humans* (Revision 2) seems to be appropriate.

Summary

Indefinite article usage decision guidelines may be summarised as follows:

Syntactic situation	Example	Guideline	Revision
A count noun	<i>Phagocytosis by dermal fibroblast</i>	Indefinite article addition	<i>Phagocytosis by a dermal fibroblast</i>
		Science: individual cell not being studied	<i>Phagocytosis by dermal fibroblasts</i>
		Section of journal article: in the Results section a specific group of fibroblasts were probably pre-mentioned in the Materials and Method section	<i>Phagocytosis by the dermal fibroblasts</i>
	<i>In human</i>	Unconventional	<i>In a human</i>
	<i>In a human</i>	Sentence context (<i>individuals</i>)	<i>In humans</i>
A count noun preceded by a noun premodifier	<i>UWB waveform was constructed</i>	The first syllable of the premodifier is pronounced as the consonant <i>yoo</i> not a vowel	<i>A UWB waveform was constructed</i>

Determinants of indefinite article A or An usage

Determinant	Pronunciation of first syllable	Choice of determiner
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Vowel-written and vowel pronounced syllable

<i>ATM network</i> ¹	A	An <i>ATM network</i>
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Consonant-written and consonant pronounced syllable

<i>Historic importance</i>	His	A <i>historic event</i>
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Vowel-written but consonant pronounced syllable

<i>One-page report</i>	Won	A <i>one-page report</i>
<i>Unique approach</i>	Yoo	A <i>unique approach</i>

Consonant-written but vowel pronounced syllable

<i>MTE membrane</i>	Em	An <i>MTE membrane</i>
<i>NEN-inhibited enzyme</i>	En	An <i>NEN-inhibited enzyme</i>
<i>Hour-long incubation</i>	Ohr	An <i>hour-long incubation</i>
<i>RCP</i>	Ar	An <i>RCP</i>
<i>SDS</i>	Es	An <i>SDS</i>

- For vowel-pronounced abbreviations, *an* is also common: *an ATM network*. A.T.M. is pronounced letter-by-letter (an initialism) rather than by syllables as is the acronym (e.g., RADAR).

Erratum: Ins and outs of environmental risk assessments (ERAs) of medicinal products for human use

An article that appeared in the March 2022 issue of *Medical Writing* mistakenly cited the wrong version of environmental risk assessment guidelines in two places and included incomplete information in the Acknowledgments section. The errors have been corrected in the PDF posted online for the article “Ins and outs of environmental risk assessments (ERAs) of medicinal products for human use”.

On p. 26, the heading in the third column incorrectly mentioned EMEA/CHMP/SWP/4447/00 Rev. 1 (2018). It should have said: EMEA/CHMP/SWP/4447/00/Corr2 (2006).

On p. 28, in the first column, Reference 7 was cited after the following sentence: “This is so that those in water management are able to monitor substances of concern.” It instead should have cited the following document:

EMA/CHMP/SWP/4447/00 Rev.1. Guideline on the Environmental Risk Assessment of Medicinal Products for Human Use. 2018 [cited 2021 Nov 12]. Available from: https://www.ema.europa.eu/en/documents/scientific-guideline/draft-guideline-environmental-risk-assessment-medicinal-products-human-use-revision-1_en.pdf

This document is now listed as Reference 15 in the online PDF.

On p. 29, the acknowledgments should have thanked Diana Radovan for peer review.

Reference

Nagarajan A, Uegaki K. Ins and outs of environmental risk assessments (ERAs) of medicinal products for human use. *Med Writ*. 2022;31(1):26-9.