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Correct Use of Articles and Prepositions in Academic Writing: Advice for Non-Native English-Speaking Researchers

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In academic writing, precision and clarity hold the utmost importance. Utilizing articles and prepositions correctly enhances the capacity to accurately convey ideas and improves manuscript readability. To effectively write manuscripts, researchers, particularly those who are not native English speakers, need to have strong writing skills, including a good understanding of vocabulary, grammar, and other aspects of writing.¹

The most commonly used words in English are pronouns, articles, and other function words²; however, non-native English-speaking researchers often find it challenging to use articles and prepositions correctly.^{3,4} This may be due to linguistic and cultural factors, as some languages do not have the direct equivalent of the above grammatical categories of English, and differences in grammatical structures between English and the researcher's native language can lead to errors.^{1,3}

Practice is required for non-native English-speaking researchers to overcome challenges in academic writing in the English language, as writing is affected by previous learning patterns.⁵ Previous studies in the literature on difficulties and errors in academic English writing among non-native English-speaking students have shown that native language interference is a continuing problem in the use of prepositions and articles.⁶

As medical editors in Japan, we find that non-native English-speaking researchers have difficulty using articles and prepositions correctly in their writing. As the Japanese language does not have the grammatical category of articles, they particularly find the correct use of articles very difficult, including which article is the most appropriate, and whether or not an article is required at all. Later in the article we will introduce some examples taken from actual manuscripts written by Japanese researchers that we have edited (with modifications as appropriate), to demonstrate how articles and prepositions should be used correctly in scientific/medical writing.

The Role of Articles and Prepositions

An article, such as “a”, “an”, and “the” always comes before the noun it describes and before any other adjectives that also describe the noun. Articles are used to show whether or not the noun refers to a specific person or thing.⁷

A preposition is a word that shows direction, location, or time, or that introduces an object. Prepositions, such as “among”, “between”, and “through” are used to help readers grasp how ideas, actions, and objects fit together. They also help to make sense of the context by connecting different parts of the text, making it easier to interpret the information. Prepositions are typically followed by an object, which can be a noun, noun phrase, or pronoun, and can make the flow of sentences smoother and clearer for readers to understand, thereby preventing confusion and improving the overall quality of writing.⁷

The Definite Article and Indefinite Article

Proper use of articles contributes to concise, precise, and effective communication in scholarly writing. In English, there are 3 main articles: “a”, “an”, and “the”, which provide clarity and specificity to the nouns they modify. The definite article “the” is used when referring to a specific noun(s) or a noun that has been previously mentioned.⁷

Since “the” is used to refer to specific or previously introduced nouns, it should be avoided when a noun is being introduced for the first time, or when referring to something non-specific. Moreover, if a noun is used to make generalizations, such as when saying something true of an entire species of animals, or if the noun is uncountable, there is no need to use articles.⁷

Contrary to the definite article, the indefinite articles “a” and “an” are used when referring to non-specific nouns. Furthermore, in general, “a” is used for nouns that begin with a consonant, and “an” is used before singular nouns that start with a vowel sound. However, this may also depend on the actual sound of the first letter of the noun.⁸

Instructions on the Use of Articles in Various Manuscript Style Guidelines

It is important to follow manuscript style guidelines when preparing manuscripts.^{9,10} The ACS Style Guide published by the American Chemical Society provides guidance on ethics, grammar, and reference styles, which can be useful when preparing scientific papers.⁸ The AMA Manual of Style published by the American Medical Association provides detailed information on manuscript preparation, grammar and punctuation, correct usage of words and phrases, etc., for authors and editors involved in medical and scientific publishing.¹¹

Here are some examples shown from the third edition of the ACS Style Guide and the latest edition of the AMA Manual of Style.

The ACS style guide states the following:

- “Choose the articles “a” and “an” according to the pronunciation of the words or abbreviations they precede. For example, a nuclear magnetic resonance spectrometer, an NMR spectrometer.”
- “Use “a” before an aspirated “h” but use “an” before the vowel sounds of a, e, i, o, “soft” or “short” u and y. Examples given are, a house, a history (*but* an hour, an honor), a union (*but* an ultimate), and a yard (*but* an yttrium compound).”
- “Choose the proper article to precede B.A., B.S., M.A., M.S., and Ph.D., according to the pronunciation of the first letter, such as: a B.S. degree, an M.S. degree, a Ph.D.”⁸

Furthermore, another important point that is mentioned in the style guide is that the definite article “the” should be omitted at the beginning of titles and subtitles.⁸ We also find that articles are generally omitted in titles, as this helps to increase the impact on readers as well as reduce the number of words.

Example

Before revision:

The analysis of metabolite profiles of XX cancer patients

↓

After revision:

Analysis of metabolite profiles of XX cancer patients

The title before revision would be appropriate as part of a sentence in the main text of the manuscript, but removing the definite article “The” from the beginning is considered more appropriate as a title, and it also increases the impact of the title.

The AMA gives the following definition and examples:

“The definite article “the” describes a specific object. It can be used to describe both singular and plural nouns as well as both common and proper nouns.

The paper has been accepted.

The journals are organized by issue number.

Have you read the research reports in *The Lancet* this week?”¹¹

“The indefinite articles “a” and “an” indicate a nonspecific object. Their use is exclusively for singular items; nonspecific plural nouns drop the article.

A paper has been accepted.

Have you read an issue of the journal this week?

Journals are organized by issue number.”¹¹

A closer look at examples

We will now introduce a few examples taken from actual manuscripts, to demonstrate how articles and prepositions are used correctly.

Example 1: correct use of the definite article “the”

Before revision:

AA infection was diagnosed in all patients using a BB test and a CC test.
(BB and CC are specific names of tests.)

↓

After revision:

AA infection was diagnosed in all patients using the BB test and the CC test.

As the BB test and the CC test are specific names of tests, and not general names for a group of tests, the definite article “the” should be used in this sentence rather than the indefinite article “a”.

This also applies when using “the” to show a connection with processes.

Example

- The patient showed remarkable progress after rehabilitation.
- The patient showed remarkable progress in the rehabilitation program.

The latter shows that the patient made progress by participating in a specific rehabilitation program.

The definite article “the” also gives a different nuance when used in connection with disease terms.

Example

- Many patients who are infected with influenza develop serious complications.
- While the effectiveness of vaccines may vary, research shows the influenza vaccine reduces the risk of infection by 40% to 60%.

The word “influenza” in the first example does not require a definite article because it is noncountable, and also because it is being used to give a generalization.

As definite articles are used to talk about a specific noun, and are placed before the noun, in the second example, “the” is used to specify the type of vaccine, which is the influenza vaccine.

Example 2: correct use of the indefinite article “a”*Before revision:*

XX is retrospective evaluation of anxiety in childhood.
(XX is one of many types of retrospective evaluations available.)

↓

After revision:

XX is a retrospective evaluation of anxiety in childhood.

An indefinite article is required in this sentence, as XX is one of many types of retrospective evaluations that are available. As the word “retrospective” begins with a vowel, the correct indefinite article to use here is “a” rather than “an”.

Example 3: correct use of the indefinite article “an”

Before revision:

This was the only patient without *MEXX* gene variant.

(There are many gene variants that the patient could have. The gene symbol starts with “ME”, and is pronounced as “em-ee”.)

↓

After revision:

This was the only patient without an *MEXX* gene variant.

An indefinite article is required in this sentence, as there are many *MEXX* gene variants that the patients could have. The difficult point here is whether the indefinite article should be “a” or “an” in this sentence. As explained earlier, the general rule is that for acronyms and abbreviations, the indefinite article should be chosen depending on how the acronym or abbreviation is pronounced, and not how it is spelled. Therefore, in the above sentence, as this gene is pronounced as the letters are spelled out (i.e., “em-ee...”) and hence begins with a vowel sound, the correct article to use is “an” rather than “a”.

Whether to use the indefinite article “a” with the word “few”, i.e., whether it should be “few XX” or “a few XX” can be confusing, particularly for non-native English-speaking researchers. “Few” without the indefinite article implies that there were not as many as desired or expected, i.e., “Few people attended the important meeting”. On the other hand, “a few” more straightforwardly means “some”, i.e., “It rained for a few minutes”.

Example 4: “few” vs “a few”

Before revision:

This disease is relatively common in adults, but there are a few reports of this disease in children.

↓

After revision:

This disease is relatively common in adults, but there are few reports of this disease in children.

In this sentence, the authors’ intention was not to say that there are some reports of this disease in children, as is implied in the original sentence, but that there are fewer reports of this disease in children than they expect (because it is relatively common in adults), as is implied in the revised sentence.

Example 5: prepositions “in” vs “into”

Before revision:

A laryngectomy tube was inserted in the operative field.

↓

After revision:

A laryngectomy tube was inserted into the operative field.

In this sentence, the preposition “in” was changed to “into”, because “in” demonstrates the present state, i.e., that something is inside something, whereas into demonstrates movement. Here, insertion of the tube was not performed “in” the operating field, as is suggested by the original sentence, but the tube was moved toward the operating field until it reached the operating field, which is accurately described by the revised sentence using “into” instead of “in”.

Example 6: prepositions “in” vs “at” (for location)

Before revision:

The second conference was held in the National Institutes of Health (NIH) in Bethesda.

↓

After revision:

The second conference was held at the National Institutes of Health (NIH) in Bethesda.

In this sentence, the first preposition “in” was changed to “at”, because when referring to a location, “at” is used for smaller places (e.g., an institution, town, etc.), whereas “in” is used for bigger places (e.g., a city, state, country, etc.). As NIH is an institution, the correct preposition to use is “at”. On the other hand, as Bethesda is a large region, the preposition “in” is correct in this sentence.

Example 7: prepositions “on” vs “at” (for time)

Before revision:

Mouse embryonic fibroblasts were harvested from mouse embryos at embryonic day 14.5.

↓

After revision:

Mouse embryonic fibroblasts were harvested from mouse embryos on embryonic day 14.5.

In this sentence, the preposition “at” was changed to “on”, because regarding time, “at” is used when indicating a precise time (i.e., “at 8:00 a.m.”), whereas “on” is used for indicating days and dates. As the preposition in this sentence is being used to indicate a particular day (embryonic day 14.5), the correct preposition to use is “on”.

Example 8: prepositions “between” vs “among”

Before revision:

In addition, an association among physical activity for leisure and depressive symptoms between Japanese workers was also reported.

↓

After revision:

In addition, an association between physical activity for leisure and depressive symptoms among Japanese workers was also reported.

The AMA manual of style states that “among” usually pertains to general collective relations and always in a group of more than 2, and that “between” pertains to the relation or association of 1 item and 1 other item.¹¹ In this sentence, as the first preposition pertains to the association of 2 specific items, the preposition “between” should be used rather than “among”. On the other hand, the second preposition is referring to the association within a collective group of people (i.e., Japanese workers) and hence the correct preposition is “among”, rather than “between”.

Closing

In general, non-native English-speaking researchers must overcome linguistic and stylistic hurdles to effectively write manuscripts in English. The difficulties of grasping nuances in writing style and encompassing elements such as the correct usage of articles and prepositions, may stem from the researchers’ mother language, culture, and environment. Nonetheless, skills for effective manuscript writing can be attained through education and much practice.

Due to the complexity of preparing scholarly manuscripts in English, many non-native English-speaking researchers turn to writing and editing assistance.¹² Recently, the process of manuscript preparation has become much easier with developments in artificial intelligence technology; however, relying too heavily on external support can be potentially dangerous, as authors themselves are fully responsible for the manuscript that is published. Therefore, it is essential that authors have the knowledge to distinguish between slight nuances in the English language. We hope that the information and examples introduced here, and our summary of the main points (**Table 1**) will help non-native English-speaking researchers improve the quality of their writing.

Table 1. Key points regarding the correct use of articles and prepositions in research manuscripts

Item	Details
Articles	
“The” (definite article)	Used when referring to a specific noun or a noun that has been previously mentioned. Should not be used when referring to a noun for the first time. Should not be used when referring to something nonspecific. Usually not used at the beginning of a title.
“A/An” (indefinite article)	Used when referring to non-specific nouns or those not previously mentioned. “A” is used before nouns beginning with a consonant (or consonant sound). “An” is used before nouns beginning with a vowel (or vowel sound).
Prepositions	
“In” vs “Into”	“In” indicates the present state, i.e., that something is inside something. “Into” indicates movement, i.e., that something is moving towards something and entering it.
“In” vs “At” (for location)	“In” is used when referring to bigger places, i.e., a city, state, country, etc. “At” is used when referring to smaller places, i.e., an institution, town, etc.
“On” vs “At” (for time)	“On” is used for indicating days and dates, i.e., “on Wednesday”. “At” is used when referring to a precise time, i.e., “at 8:00 a.m.”.
“Between” vs “Among”	“Between” is used for associations between 2 specific items. “Among” is used for associations of more than 2 items.

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