



The Little Word "The" Gets Four Jobs in Spanish

English makes life easy when it comes to the definite article. We have exactly one: **the**. Spanish needs four: **el, la, los, las**.

Why four? Because the Spanish word for "the" has to agree with its noun in both **gender** and **number**. Once you understand that idea, choosing among the four is surprisingly easy.

The Four Ways to Say "The"

For a masculine singular noun, use **el**:

el libro - the book **el niño** - the boy

For a feminine singular noun, use **la**:

la mesa - the table **la chica** - the girl

When the noun becomes plural, so does the article:

los libros - the books **los niños** - the boys **las mesas** - the tables **las chicas** - the girls

So the entire system can be reduced to this: **el** is masculine singular, **la** is feminine singular, **los** is masculine plural, and **las** is feminine plural. If you've already learned the gender of the noun along with its article - **el libro**, not just *libro* - you're halfway home.

Spanish Likes Its Articles

Here's where English speakers sometimes get tripped up. Spanish uses the definite article in some situations where English doesn't.

For example, English says:

Science is important.

Spanish normally says:

La ciencia es importante.

Literally, that's "The science is important," but we wouldn't translate it that way. The same thing happens when talking about ideas or things in a general sense:

Creo en la justicia. - *I believe in justice.* **Me gusta el café.** - *I like coffee.* **Los perros son buenos compañeros.** - *Dogs are good companions.*

English is perfectly happy to talk about *justice*, *coffee*, and *dogs* without "the." Spanish often wants the article.

Days of the Week Get Articles Too

Spanish normally uses a definite article with days of the week:

El tren sale el martes. - *The train leaves on Tuesday.* **Trabajo los lunes.** - *I work on Mondays.*

Notice another useful feature: Spanish doesn't need an -s on **lunes** here. The plural article **los** tells us we're talking about Mondays in general.

But when you're simply identifying the day with **ser**, no article is needed:

Hoy es martes. - *Today is Tuesday.*

What About Languages?

Spanish often uses the definite article when a language is the subject of a sentence:

El español es una lengua romance. - *Spanish is a Romance language.* **El inglés se habla en muchos países.** - *English is spoken in many countries.*

But after verbs such as **hablar**, the article normally disappears:

Hablo español. - *I speak Spanish.* **Ella habla inglés.** - *She speaks English.*

So don't say **hablo el español** when you simply mean "I speak Spanish."

Titles Can Be Different Too

Spanish commonly uses the definite article when talking **about** someone by title:

El profesor García enseña historia. - *Professor García teaches history.*

But when speaking **directly to** the person, drop the article:

Buenos días, profesor García. - *Good morning, Professor García.*

The distinction is easy to remember: when you're **talking about** him, use *el profesor*. When you're **talking to** him, use *profesor*.

Two Contractions You Should Know

Spanish doesn't like certain combinations of little words, so it contracts them:

a + el = al de + el = del

For example:

Voy al mercado. - *I'm going to the market.* **El maestro del chico habló con sus padres.** - *The boy's teacher spoke with his parents.*

You don't normally say **a el** or **de el**. Spanish automatically turns them into **al** and **del**. These contractions apply to **el**, but not to **la**, **los**, or **las**:

a la escuela - to the school **de la casa** - from the house

And Then There's "Lo"

Spanish has another useful little word that looks as though it belongs with **el**, **la**, **los**, and **las**: **lo**. But **lo** is different.

It doesn't go before an ordinary noun. Instead, it can turn an adjective into an abstract idea - something like "**the ___ thing**," "**what is ___**," or "**the ___ part**."

Lo importante es aprender. - *The important thing is to learn.* **Lo mejor de la casa es la cocina.** - *The best thing about the house is the kitchen.* **No sabes lo difícil que es.** - *You don't know how difficult it is.*

Don't worry about finding one perfect English translation for **lo**. There isn't one. Translate the **idea**, not the individual word.

Don't Translate "The" Word for Word

This is probably the most important point. Don't assume that every English **the** requires a Spanish article, or that every Spanish article should be translated as **the**. Instead, begin noticing the patterns:

La ciencia es importante. - *Science is important.* **Trabajo los martes.** - *I work on Tuesdays.*
Hablo español. - *I speak Spanish.* **Voy al mercado.** - *I'm going to the market.* **Lo importante es practicar.** - *The important thing is to practice.*

Spanish uses its definite articles more freely than English does. At first that can seem like another collection of rules to memorize. After you've read and heard enough Spanish, however, combinations such as **el libro**, **la casa**, **los lunes**, **al mercado**, and **del profesor** begin to sound natural.

And that is really the goal: not merely knowing which little word is correct, but reaching the point where the wrong one simply **sounds wrong**.