

Class Notes

The Definite Article

Forms of the Definite Article

	Masculine	Feminine
Singular	el toro	la vaca
Plural	los toros	las vacas

1. The usual forms of the definite article in Spanish are shown in the chart above.
2. The form, **el** is used instead of **la** immediately before a feminine singular noun that begins with a stressed [a] sound (spelled **a** or **ha**).¹

el agua	<i>the water</i>	el hambre	<i>the hunger</i>
el arma	<i>the weapon</i>	el hacha	<i>the ax</i>
el ala	<i>the wing</i>	el habla	<i>the speech, language</i>

These nouns are indeed feminine, and the feminine form of adjectives agrees with them: **el agua fría**, *the cold water*, **el ala rota**, *the broken wing*, and so on. The plurals take **las** as expected; **las armas**, *the weapons*, **las hachas**, *the axes*.

3. The prepositions **a** and **de** contract with **el** to give **al** and **del**: **al mercado**, *to the market*. **del mercado**, *from the market*.² There is no contraction, however, when **el** is part of a proper name: **a El Paso**, *to El Paso*, **de El Paso**, *from El Paso*.

Uses of the Definite Article

In general, the definite article is used in Spanish essentially the same way it is in English. Spanish uses it in some cases, however, where English doesn't. The following are the most important differences.

1. In a sentence like "The dinosaur is extinct" we do not understand "the dinosaur" to refer to a particular dinosaur, but rather to the class of dinosaurs as a whole. In English we can express the same meaning with "Dinosaurs are extinct" with a plural noun and no definite article. In Spanish, on the other hand, the definite article is used with both singular and plural nouns that refer to a class of things as a whole rather than to specific members of the class,

Las vitaminas son necesarias para la salud.	<i>Vitamins are necessary for health.</i>
El perro es el mejor amigo del hombre.	<i>Dogs are a man's best friend.</i>

Examine the following contrast:

Me gusta el pan ; como pan todos los días.	<i>I like bread; I eat bread every day.</i>
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The article is used before **pan** in the first clause because one can like bread *in general* (though perhaps disliking some particular kind); but it is not used in the second clause because one can eat only *some* bread at any given time.

¹The letter names **la a**, *the a*, and **la hache**, *the h*, are exceptions.

²The **el** used with feminine nouns beginning with stressed **a** also contracts: **el agua fría**, *to the cold water*; **del agua fría**, *from the cold water*.

2. When people are referred to by name and an accompanying title, the definite article precedes the title in Spanish.³

La señorita Abreu acaba de llegar.
Los doctores Elías y Pérez lo vieron.

Miss Abreu just arrived.
Dr. Elías and Dr. Pérez saw him.

On the other hand, when people are *directly addressed* by title and name, the article is not used.

Buenos días, profesora Núñez.

Good morning, Professor Núñez.

Nouns referring to streets, avenues, and other “landmarks” work just like personal and professional titles in that they require the definite article when followed by a proper name.

la calle Atocha	Atocha Street
el túnel Lincoln	Lincoln Tunnel
la estación Buenavista	Buenavista Station
el estadio Azteca	Azteca Stadium
el parque Güell	Güell Park

3. The definite article is used with various time expressions in Spanish.

- a. The hours of the day:

Era **la** una de la tarde.

It was one o'clock in the afternoon.

El tren sale a **las** siete.

The train leaves at seven.

Singular **la** is used only with **una**; all other hours require plural **las**.

- b. The days of the week:

El lunes es un día malo para mí.

Monday is a bad day for me.

El tren va **los** domingos.

The train goes on Sundays.

The article is not used, however, when the days are listed, as in a calendar, and when they are simply equated with time words like **hoy, mañana, ayer, ya, ahora**.

Los días de la semana son lunes, martes,
miércoles...

*The days of the week are Monday, Tuesday,
Wednesday...*

Ayer fue domingo.

Yesterday was Sunday.

¿Es viernes ya?

Is it Friday already?

- c. The seasons of the year:

La primavera es preciosa aquí.

Spring is lovely here.

Detesto **el** invierno.

I detest winter.

- d. Time phrases with the equivalents of next and last:

Llegarán **la** semana que viene.

They will arrive next week.

Don Luis llegó **el** mes pasado.

Don Luis arrived last month.

- e. At (age):

Murió a **los** noventa años.

He died at age 90.

Pepita aprendió a leer a **los** dos años.

*Pepita learned to read when she was two
years old.*

4. Spanish requires the definite article in prepositional phrases containing nouns that refer to common social institutions like school, jail, church, and so on.

Ya salen **para la** escuela.

They're leaving for school already.

¿Cuántos años estuvo **en la** cárcel?

How long was he in jail?

Van **a la** iglesia todos los domingos.

They go to church every Sunday.

³The titles **Don, Doña, San, Santo, Santa** are exceptions.

The definite article may or may not be used with casa and clase.

Vamos **a casa** / **a la casa**.

Let's go home / to the house.

Estamos **en clase** / **en la clase**.

We're in class / in the class.

5. The definite article is an inseparable part of the name of the country **El Salvador** and of the cities **El Cairo, La Habana, El Havre, La Haya, La Paz**. Usage varies with other geographic names. The article is frequently, but not always, used with the following: **la Argentina, el Brasil, el Canadá, el Ecuador, los Estados Unidos, la Gran Bretaña, el Japón, el Perú**.
6. The definite article is used with the names of all meals.
A Pepe le encanta el aguacate; lo come en **el** desayuno, en **el** almuerzo, en **la** comida y en **la** cena.

Pepe loves avocado; he eats it for breakfast, lunch, dinner, and supper.