Articles, Nouns & Adjectives

Definite Articles

Have you noticed that many words in Spanish—all of the nouns, in fact—are preceded by the words "el", "la", "los", and "las"? Why is that?

These words are called Definite Articles because they refer to defined (specific) items and they mean "the". That's right: there are four ways to say "the" in Spanish. Why? Good question.

All Spanish words have a gender. Some words are masculine (male, ♂) and others are feminine (female, ♀). This does not affect the meaning of a word itself and has no association whatsoever with the person(s) using it.

For example, the word "libro" (book) is masculine, because it is preceded by the article "el" or but that does not mean that books are read or written only by men. The word "policía" (police force) is a feminine word because it is preceded by the article "la" but that does not mean that policing is only a feminine profession.

So, the Definite Articles exist to identify a word as masculine or feminine. Why is that necessary? Well, a word's gender affects other parts of speech, such as adjectives—words that describe nouns. In Spanish, the gender of the adjective must match the gender of the noun it describes. For example:

   el libro bueno   la policía buena

Notice how the word "bueno" (good) has been changed to "buena" to match the feminine word "policía" which it describes.

Also notice that in Spanish, the noun always comes first, then the adjective. This establishes what we are talking about first (the book), then what it is like (good). This may sound strange to us, but to Spanish speakers, it's only logical to say "book good" or "girl pretty" or "car fast."

Number is also important in Spanish, for the same reasons. If the noun is plural, we use "los" or " las" as you see below, and the adjectives must also match:
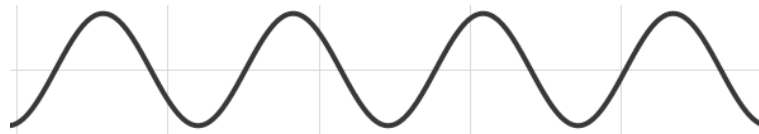
   los libros buenos   las policías buenas

We don't say "the goods books" or "the prettys girls" in English, but they do in Spanish. This symmetry, this matching of sounds called "noun agreement" makes Spanish a musical, pleasant-sounding language, as in this sentence:

   Las colinas amarillas de la Mancha son bonitas.

Notice how, in Spanish words, the vocal emphasis is usually on the second-to-last syllable of a word. This creates rhythm. The vowel and consonant sounds alternate to create a series of soft peaks and valleys:

Las colinas amarillas de la Mancha son bonitas.

Please note: changing the gender of an adjective to match a noun only works on adjectives that end with the letter "o". If the adjective ends with any other letter, it cannot be changed. The rule for number remains the same. For example:

   el libro grande   la policía grande
   los libros grandes   las policías grandes

Please note: if a noun ends with a vowel in Spanish, you simply add "s" to make it plural, but if it ends with a consonant, you must add "es". For example:

   el mar profundo y azúl   los mares profundos y azules
   the deep, blue sea   *the deep, blue seas*

Tips

Most of the time, if a word (in its singular form) ends with an "o", it is masculine, and if it ends in an "a" it is feminine.

Words ending with *-aje, -or, -ambre, -án,* or a stressed vowel like *-ú* are **masculine**.

Most words ending with the letters "R", "L", or "N" such as *el valor, el manantial,* and *el cañón* are **masculine**.

Words of Greek origin such as *el planeta, el cometa, el sistema,* and el *programa* are **masculine**.

Words ending with *-ción, -sión, -dad, -tad, -tud, -umbre,* and *-cia* such as *la lección, la explosión, la identidad, la libertad, la actitud, la cumbre,* and *la distancia* are **feminine**.

Words ending with "e" such as el pupitre, la clase, el coche, and la serpiente have to be learned with their articles.

Indefinite Articles

You have probably seen "un", "una", "unos", or "unas" used instead of the Definite Articles. Why? These words are called <u>In</u>definite Articles because they refer to general (rather than specific) items, and they mean "a" or "some". For example:

un libro bueno   *a good book*
unas policías buenas   *some good cops*

Notice that the Indefinite Articles function exactly like the Definite Articles. The difference, though subtle, lies in meaning. For example:

<u>La</u> policía buena siempre detiene el ladrón.
The good cop (e.g. Officer Jones) always catches the thief.

<u>Una</u> policía buena siempre detiene el ladrón.
A good cop (in order to be one, must) always catches the thief.

Definite Articles

	singular = "the"	plural = "the"
♂	el	los
♀	la	las

el libro   los libros
la mesa   las mesas

Indefinite Articles

	singular = "a"	plural = "some"
♂	un	unos
♀	una	unas

un libro   unos libros
una mesa   unas mesas