



**Remember to watch the video first!** Then read the conversation between Sophie and Emma, an English student who Sophie met in Switzerland. Sophie's helping Emma understand the definite article.



**Grammar  
Snacks**

We use *the*, the definite article, before a singular or plural noun. We use *the* to show people that they know (or they will soon know) what we are talking about.



**Emma**

Can you explain with examples?

Of course. The definite article, *the*, can refer backwards in a conversation or text to something already mentioned.

*... my sister hid a little parcel in my suitcase, so when I was unpacking **the** case I had a really cool surprise ...*

It can also refer forwards to something which is going to be mentioned or explained.

*Could you bring me **the** knife which you gave me?  
**The** friend of hers who's looking after us ...*



**Sophie**



Does *the* always refer backwards or forwards?

No, it can also refer to shared knowledge or general knowledge. Both the listener and the speaker (or the writer and the reader) know what is being referred to.

*But I'll try to connect from **the** hotel every evening.  
I think Mum is hoping to see George Clooney at **the** bus stop.*



OK, I understand those rules, but I've seen lists of different uses of *the*.

All right, I can give more specific examples, but they fit into the three areas I've given you. We use *the* when there is only one of something (in the world, the country, your town, the house, etc.), and we know what it is.

*And is **the** internet connection good?  
They're like ... like **the** poster you've got in your room, Daisy.*

We use *the* with superlatives – again, we are talking about one thing.

***The chocolate here is the best in the world.***

With some adjectives which refer to one thing – for example *first*, *last*, *next* – we also use *the*.

*... this is the third day ...*

When referring forwards, we often use a relative clause.

***That's the friend who is looking after us.***



Isn't *the* used with musical instruments, like 'I play *the* guitar'?

Yes, we sometimes use *the* in fixed expressions for musical instruments, entertainment and transport.

*He plays the piano brilliantly.*

*They're going to the opera tonight. (also: the cinema, the football, the shops, etc.)*

*We took a taxi to the airport. (also: the bus stop, the station, etc.)*



So even if there are three cinemas in my town, I would still say 'I went to **the** cinema last night'?

Yes, you would. We also sometimes use *the* to talk about groups of people or types of animals or things in general.

***The unemployed*** are asking for more help from ***the government***.  
(also: ***the poor***, ***the old***, ***the homeless***, ***the deaf***, etc.)

***The wolf*** is the largest member of the dog family. (formal)

***The Swiss watch*** is an amazing piece of engineering.



And we can use *the* with nationalities, like '**The Swiss** make great chocolate'?



Yes, that's right. You're good at this!

What about talking about things in general? Can I say '*The* life is very expensive' or 'I love *the* sport'?

No, we don't use the definite article to generalise about abstract things. You'd say: '*Life is very expensive*' and '*I love sport*'. If we're generalising about things we usually use the plural form (for countable nouns) or singular (uncountable nouns).

*She's frightened of spiders.* (= spiders in general)  
*Lasagne is delicious!* (= lasagne in general)  
*Thanks for dinner. The lasagne was incredible!* (= one particular lasagne)



But you used '*the wolf*' earlier to talk about wolves in general.

Yes, but that was more formal language, for example what you would read in an encyclopaedia. We usually use no article to generalise.



What about geography words? Words for rivers and seas and things?

Ah, you mean proper nouns or names of things. Here are some categories where we use *the*, with examples:

*Rivers: the Thames*  
*Mountain ranges: the Alps*  
*Oceans and seas: the Pacific / the Red Sea*  
*Deserts: the Sahara*  
*Islands (groups): the Bahamas*  
*Countries if + political term / plural: the UK / the USA / the United Arab Emirates*  
*Political institutions: the Government / the Monarchy*  
*Newspapers (usually part of the title): The Times / The Guardian*  
*Cinemas / theatres / hotels: the Odeon / the Holiday Inn*



So we don't use *the* before lakes, forests, cities or towns?



No, not usually. And not usually before streets in towns.

Well, there's more to *the* definite article than meets *the* eye!

Mm, that reminds me, *more than meets the eye* – there are a lot of idioms with *the* too. For another time!



Watch the video on our website!

