

The Many Reasons for the Word 'The'

The 1995 film *Dead Man* has a strange opening **scene**.

Actor Johnny Depp is sitting on a train. A man sits down across from Depp's character, and speaks to him:

"Look out the window. And doesn't this remind you of when you were in the boat, and then later that night, you were lying, looking up at the ceiling, and the water in your head was not dissimilar from the landscape..."

Today we will explore the word 'the.'

Yes, the word 'the.' You heard it many times in the audio from the movie.

English speakers use this word for several reasons – some of which we will discuss in this program.



everyday grammar

Today, we will show you how Americans use 'the' in everyday speech, writing, and even in the arts, such as literature or movies.

But first, we need to give you a few definitions.

What are articles?

Articles are words that go before nouns. They tell if the noun is general or specific.

When an article is specific, it is called a definite article. The word 'the' is a definite article.

English speakers use 'the' when both the speaker and the listener know what is being **referred** to. They can have this shared understanding for any number of reasons.

Sometimes the noun is already known, for example. Sometimes the speakers are referring to nouns that are unique. At other times, the situation makes it clear what the noun refers to.

#1 Thing being referred to is known from the context

One of the main reasons Americans use the word 'the' when they are speaking is because the noun being referred to is clearly understood. The noun could be something seen or heard in an area around the speakers, or it could be a part of their daily lives.

Let's listen to an example. You can hear the speakers use 'the' in an everyday situation – at the dinner table.

1: *The pasta turned out great!*

2: *Thank you!*

1: *Would you mind passing me the butter?*

2: *Sure thing!*

1: *Oh, I just remembered I forgot to let the dog outside! I'll be right back.*

In the example, you heard the speakers use the word 'the' three times: 'the pasta;' 'the butter;' and 'the dog.'

The reason the speakers used 'the' is because the nouns they were referring to were clear in the context – in this case, the dinner table. The speakers all understood that they were eating pasta, and that there was butter nearby.

The meaning of 'the dog' is clear to them because the animal is a part of their daily lives. Even if it is not in the room at the time, both speakers know what 'the dog' is referring to.

#2 Modifiers of the noun specify the thing being referred to

One of the common reasons you will see the word 'the' in writing is because **modifiers** of the noun specify what is being referred to. The modifiers of the noun change it from a general noun to a specific noun.

Although more common in writing, you can hear examples in films. Let's listen to this example from the 1955 film *Seven Year Itch*.

*"The island of Manhattan **derives** its name from its earliest inhabitants - the Manhattan Indians."*

In the film, the speaker said 'the island of Manhattan' because the modifier, the words "of Manhattan", gives information about the noun 'island.' The word 'island' could be a general or specific noun, but when it is modified it becomes a specific noun – the island of Manhattan.

In the example you heard, the modifier came after the noun. However, sometimes the modifier can come before the noun.

For example, you might see a story about buildings in the United States. The story might say, "Chicago has the tallest building in America."

Here, 'tallest' modifies the noun 'building.' This is a specific noun because only one building can be the tallest.

#3 Presenting something as familiar

The last reason speakers and writers use the word 'the' is for **stylistic** purposes. This is most common in **fiction** writing and movies.

By using the article 'the', the writer or speaker is able to make the reader or listener more interested in the story. People are likely to show an interest because the writer or speaker is presenting information as if it is understood - even if it is not!

Let's listen again to the opening lines from *Dead Man*.

"Look out the window. And doesn't this remind you of when you were in the boat, and then later that night, you were lying, looking up at the ceiling, and the water in your head was not dissimilar from the landscape..."

In the film, the strange man uses specific language – the boat, the ceiling, and so on. This language is not understood by those of us watching. Viewers start asking themselves questions like ‘Which boat is the man talking about?’ And, ‘Which ceiling?’

In other words, the viewer or listener is more curious about the story because they do not know what the man is talking about.

This is a common technique you will see often in films and books, such as **thrillers** and mystery stories.

What can you do?

The next time you are watching films or talking with an English speaker, try to listen for examples of the word 'the'. Ask yourself why the speaker is using 'the' instead of a different article – such as ‘a’ or ‘an’.

The process of recognizing and understanding articles can be a difficult one. However, with time and effort, you will use them with no trouble. And we will be here to help!

I'm Alice Bryant.

And I'm John Russell.

John Russell wrote this story for Learning English. George Grow was the editor.

Words in the Story

scene – *n.* a part of a play, movie, story, etc., in which a particular action or activity occurs

refer – *v.* to have a direct connection or relationship to (something) often + to

modifier – *n. grammar* : a word (such as an adjective or adverb) or phrase that describes another word or group of words

derive – *v.* to take or get (something) *from* (something else)

stylistic – *adj.* of or relating to an artistic way of doing things

fiction – *n.* something invented by the intention; written stories that are not real

thriller – *n.* a very exciting book or movie