

Next week or the next week?

Learners of English often struggle with time expressions containing the words *next* and *last*, so when talking about something that will happen *sljedeći tjedan*, they might say ~~The next week we are launching special Christmas offers.~~ Likewise, when talking about *prošla godina*, they would produce a sentence like ~~The last year our turnover was £15m.~~

If you are one of these learners and you do not understand why these sentences are incorrect, the following rules and examples might help you to learn when to use the article *the* with *next* and *last*, and when not to.

First of all, let us start by saying that it is correct to say: Next week we are launching special Christmas offers. and The last year our turnover was £15m.

There are several potential sources of confusion for students. Firstly, the adjectives *next* and *last*, when they generally refer, respectively, to “the first one after the one just mentioned” and “the one coming or happening after all others or at the end”, are very often preceded by the definite article *the*.

- John is always *the last* one to arrive at a meeting.
- Your banner will be inserted in *the next* advertising period.

Secondly, not only in general contexts, but also in some time expressions, both adjectives can be preceded by *the*.

- If the deadline falls on the weekend and *the next Monday* is a holiday, Tuesday becomes the deadline.
- We ran two different radio ads during *the last week* of the campaign.

What is the difference then between *next Monday* and *the next Monday*, between *last week* and *the last week* in time expressions?

Use *next* to talk about the moment or period of time that will be the first one **after the present**. Use *last* to talk about the most recent or the one **before the present one**.

- I look forward to our meeting *next week*.
- The first audits will be undertaken by external auditors *next month*.
- *Last year*, the unemployment rate rose to 24.3%.
- The new fruit and vegetable stall opened for business *last Tuesday*, making healthy eating more affordable to local residents.

Use *the next* to talk about a moment or period of time **in the past, in the present and in the future** that immediately followed the moment or period of time just mentioned. In such cases, the word *next* can be replaced by the word *following*. Use *the last* to mean “**past**” or “**final**”. In the sentences where *the last* means “past”, the word *last* can be replaced by the words *past* or *previous*.

- The engineer said he would be in contact *the next day* to arrange a repair date.
- They will not receive a payment *the next month* but double the month after.
- The price movement in *the last month* was slightly negative. (past)
- Obama spent *the last day* of the campaign addressing crowds in Columbus. (=final)

To make the difference between the use of the adjective with or without *the* even clearer, have a look at the following two examples. In the first sentence, *last year* refers to the year 2012,

starting with January and ending with December. In the second sentence, *the last year* refers to the past twelve months, i.e. from July 2012 to July 2013.

- In 2013 car insurance quotes £250 more than *last year*.
- The CEO asked him about the two loans that the bank made to one of its largest borrowers in *the last year*.

In time expressions specifying duration, *next* and *last* are preceded by the definite article and a preposition.

- The car dealer expects to sell over 1500 cars *during the next year*.
- Power prices have moved higher *over the last two weeks* due to persistent economic gloom.

A Complete the following pairs of sentences with *the* where necessary.

1. a. I joined the company _____ last year.
b. I've been with the company for _____ last year.
2. a. The number of international visits to the coast grew 5.3% from _____ last season.
b. At the end of the season players will be ranked according to the most prize money earned in _____ last season.
3. a. Almost 60% of government employees witnessed violations of ethical standards or laws in their workplaces within _____ last year.
b. The response by the public _____ last year in the voting process exceeded expectations.
4. a. _____ next week they will have at least two presentations.
b. The effect of the campaign was so great that during _____ next week many new clients came to us.
5. a. In _____ last week two major government projects have been heavily criticized for being very expensive failures.
b. I wanted to thank all my colleagues for making the conference such a success _____ last week.

Key: 1. a. /, b. the; 2. a. /, b. the; 3. a. the, b. /; 4. a. /, b. the; 5. a. the, b. /