Use of *The* before *Last* and *Next*

I. Ø last year or the last year?

   (1) *I went to China last year* (= "a calendar year," i.e. from January to December).
   (2) *I've been working on this project for the last year* (= "the past 12 months").

II. What does *the last century* mean?

   (3) *The social connections of Americans have changed during the last century* (Frodesen & Eyring, 2000, p. 8).
   (4) *This was well known during the last century* (Collins COBUILD English Usage, 1992, p. 347).
   You do not use last like this in front of 'decade' or 'century'. You do not say, for example, that something happened 'last decade'. You say that it happened in the last decade or during the last decade (Collins COBUILD English Usage, 1992, p. 347).

III. However,

   (5) *"Last century, cuabas were the great cigar of the world"* (1996 NYT).
   (6) The vineyard, founded in 1889, looks pretty much like it must have looked last century (1996 NYT).

IV. So, when do we say Ø last/next or the last/next?

- Before nontemporal nouns (NonTN's) and plural temporal nouns (PluTN's), always use the last.
- Before singular temporal nouns (SgTN's),
  1. Use Ø last when the SgTN refers to a whole unit and is understood from "now."
     e.g. *I arrived in France last week.*
     (= in the week before this one)
  2. Use the last
     a. when last means "past," or when the SgTN refers to its individual members.
        e.g. *I've been here for the last week.*
        (= for the past seven days)
     b. when last means "final."
- Use the previous when the temporal noun is understood from "then."
  e.g. *I must add at once that these animals are what we call "queens," young females that have mated in the previous summer or autumn* (Brown).
- Decade and century are PluTN's, so they always combine with the last/next.

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Figure 1. Rules for (the) last
• Before NonTN's and PluTN's, always use the next.

• Before SgTN's
  1. Use Ø next when the SgTN refers to a whole unit and is understood from "now."
      e.g. I'm going to Korea next year.
          (= in the year after this one)
  2. Use the next
      a. when the SgTN refers to its individual members.
         e.g. I'll be here for the next week.
             (= for the next seven days)
      b. when the SgTN is understood from "then."
         past:    e.g. She said she would file her dissertation the next week.
         present: e.g. One day he is happy, and the next day he is depressed.
         future:  e.g. Isaiah is going to Korea the third week of June, and he'll go to Japan the next week.

Figure 2. Rules for (the) next

V. What are temporal nouns?

• Temporal nouns refer to a point or period of time.
• Time is not a temporal noun, so both Ø last/next time and the last/next time are acceptable without a change in meaning.
  e.g. “I'd like the room I had the last time.” “Sounds exactly like last time.” (Brown)

VI. What are singular temporal nouns?

(a) dates, e.g. last Nov. 1
(b) seven days of the week, e.g. last Monday; twelve months of the year, e.g. last June; four seasons of the year, e.g. last fall
(c) other temporal nouns such as weekend, week, month, year, and season.

VII. How is “understood from ‘now’” different from “understood from ‘then’”? 

(7) Three weeks ago, Matthew said he would go to Spain next week.
(8) Three weeks ago, Matthew said he would go to Spain the next week.

• Which sentence implies that Matthew has already gone to Spain?
• (7) is understood from “now,” which is also called “deictic,” while (8) is understood from “then,” which is also called undeictic.
VIII. Deictic shifts with time adverbials in reported speech (The Grammar Book by Celce-Murcia & Larsen Freeman, 1999, p. 697)