



Chapter 2: The Very Basics of Spanish

Grammar

Grammar is the Art of speaking and writing correctly in any language.

In Spanish, grammar is divided in: **Morphology, Syntax, Prosody** and **Orthography**.

- **Morphology:** Refers to the grammatical classification of words.
- **Syntax:** Links the words coherently within an idea.
- **Prosody:** Refers to the correct pronunciation of words.
- **Orthography:** Refers to the correct way for writing.

The Alphabet

Spanish: **Alfabeto/Abecedario**

The alphabet.—Designates a series of letters which represent sounds of a tongue. Spanish alphabet is formed by 29 letters: *a, b, c, ch, d, e, f, g, h, i, j, k, l, ll, m, n, ñ, o, p, q, r, s, t, u, v, w, x, y, z*.

Ch and *ll* are digraphs representing each a different sound. These are considered part of the alphabet.

rr, is not considered a letter since its sound is pretty much the same as the one represented by *r* (It does not represent a different sound as *ch* and *ll*).

LETTER	NAME	SOUND	SPANISH	ENGLISH
a	A	[a]	árbol	apple
b	Be	[b]	beso	boat
c	Ce	[k], [s]	Crecer, cielo	Coat, census
ch	Che	[tʃ]	chimenea	Chimney
d	De	[d]	dedo	Daniel
e	E	[e]	elefante	Elefant
f	Efe	[f]	feo	Finger
g	Ge	[g]	gato	Goat
h	Hache	[not pronounced]	hola	-
i	i	[i]	Inés	Illusion
j	Jota	[x]	jefe	Hello
k	Ka	[k]	kilo	Kenia
l	Ele	[l]	leon	Lion
ll	Doble ele	[ʎ]	llave	Joy
m	Eme	[m]	mamá	Mom
n	Ene	[n]	nuevo	Neon
ñ	Eñe	[ɲ]	Niña	canyon
o	O	[o]	oso	Oregon
p	Pe	[p]	pelota	Pineapple
q	ku	[q]	queso	Question
r	Erre	[r]	radio	Radio
rr	Doble erre	[r]	tierra	Terrain
s	Ese	[s]	sol	Sun
t	Te	[t]	tortuga	Turtle
u	U	[u]	uva	Loose
v	Ve	[v]	vestido	Vanity
w	Doble u	[w]	whisky	Way
x	Equis	[ks]	examen	Taxi
y	y griega	[dʒ]	yo	Yoyo
z	zeta	[θ]	zoológico	cellophane

Syllabic Division

- **Sounds**, which support spoken language, are represented in written Spanish by **letters**.
- **Letters** are graphic representation of **sounds**.
- A **syllable** is the sound or sounds pronounced in each voice emission. Those sounds are not independent from one another but a complement between themselves.
- Sounds/Syllables in Spanish can involve a **vowel** or a **consonant**.
- Syllables can be just one vowel but not just one consonant: a-mor.
- Consonants must be accompanied by 1, 2 or 3 vowels.
- Two vowels can be found in one syllable, this is called a **diphthong**: U-ru-guay
- Three vowels can be found in one syllable, this is called a **triphthong**: Cuauh-té-moc . . .
- Two vowels are written together but in different syllable, this is called a **hiatus**: ca-er.
- A consonant between two vowels goes with the 2nd syllable: lá-piz . . .
- Two consonants between vowels; one goes with the previous syllable, the other one with the syllable next to it: gim-na-sia. Except for these groups that go together: pr, pl, br, bl, fr, fl, tr, dr, cr, cl, gr, gl: a-**gra**-de-cer, **flo**-tar, tem-**blar** . . .
- If the second consonant is l or r and is part of one of the groups that go together (pr, pl, br, bl, fr, fl, tr, dr, cr, cl, gr, gl), both go with the vowel that's next to them: ha-**blar**.
- If we find three consonants in a syllable, the two first go with the previous vowel and the third go with next one: **ins**-ti-tu-to . . .
- If there are 4 consonants together, they're split; 2 go with the previous syllable and the other 2 with the next one: **ins**-**truir** . . .
- This words are considered one word: ch, ll, rr. They don't split: fe-**rro**-ca-**rril**; **cha**-**rro**.

Rules for Stress in Spanish

Stressed Syllables

Spanish: **Sílaba Tónica**

- Not all the syllables are pronounced with the same voice intensity.
- The higher intensity in one of the syllables is called: **accent**.
- Sometimes the accent is graphically represented when we write a certain word, some others, the accent is not represented and just pronounced, this is called: **phonetic accent**.
- The syllable with the phonetic accent or the orthographic accent is called: **stressed syllable**: ca-mi-sa.
- The syllables with no phonetic accent on it are called: **unstressed syllables**: ca-mi-sa.
- In Spanish, all the words just have **one stressed syllable**, which is the one pronounced with higher intensity.
- In other languages, like French, they can have 2 stressed syllables.
- Depending on the place where the stressed syllable is, words are classified in 4 categories: **Agudas, Graves, Esdrújulas** and **Sobreesdrújulas**.
- Whenever the stressed syllable must go with a graphic accent written on it, There are certain rules to follow, depending on the category of the word, which is explained in the following chart:

CATEGORY	STRESSED SYLLABLE	EXAMPLES	GRAPHIC ACCENT	EXAMPLES
Agudas	The last one.	Co-mer Ca-fé	When they end with n, s or a vowel .	Can-ción Mos-cú
Graves	One before the last one.	Me-sa Dé-bil	When they end with any consonant except for n or s or any vowel .	Ál-bum Ár-bol
Esdrújulas	Two before the last one.	Te-lé-fo-no Mé-di-co	Always.	Pá-ja-ro
Sobreesdrújulas	Three or more before the last one.	Llé-va-te-lo Fá-cil-men-te	Always.	Á-gil-men-te

- When the stressed syllable is the last one, the word is called ‘aguda’. It will be written with a graphic accent any time it ends with the letters **n, s** or any **vowel**.
- When the stressed syllable is one before the last one, the word is called ‘grave’. It will be written with a graphic accent any time it ends with any **consonant**, except *n* or *s*.
- When the stressed syllable is two before the last one, the word is called ‘esdrújula’. Those are always written with an accent.
- When the stressed syllable is three or more before the last one, the word is called ‘sobreesdrújula’. Those are always written with an accent as well.

Capital Letters

Spanish: **Mayúsculas**

During your evaluation, you may find almost identical answers, the only difference being the right usage of Capital Letters. The following are the main rules:

- The first letter in any text
- The first letter in any paragraph
- After a period: *Mañana hará frío. No tengo abrigos.*
- After exclamation and question marks: *¡Viva México!*
- Names and Surnames: *John Smith, María Martínez*
- Roman Numerals: *El Papa Juan Pablo II, Siglo XXI*
- Titles or Divine Attributes: *Los Reyes de España, El Mesías, Director, Ministro*
- Historic times: *La Revolución Francesa*
- Toponymy: *El Amazonas, La Cordillera Central*
- Article as part of the name: *Viña del Mar*
- Abbreviations: *Sr. Juan, S.A. (Sociedad Anónima)*
- Organizations, Institutions: *Gobierno Nacional, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México*
- Titles of books, movies, masterpieces, art: *La Mona Lisa, Shrek, Harry Potter*
- Acronyms: *ONU, UNESCO, URSS, UAE, BMW*
- **NO CAPITAL LETTERS ON:** days of the week, months and seasons: *lunes, verano, agosto.*

Therefore, if you find the following options, which one do you think is the best answer?

- (A) El Sr. Ramón compró un auto BMW en agosto.
- (B) el sr. ramón compró un auto bmw en agosto.
- (C) El Sr. Ramón compró un auto BMW en Agosto.
- (D) El sr. Ramón compró un auto Bmw en Agosto.

**The correct answer will be A. Since we know abbreviations, names and acronyms are written in Capital Letters but months.

Grammatical Gender

Nouns, articles, adjectives, participles and pronouns in Spanish can be masculine or feminine. This characteristic is called: *Grammatical Gender*.

****Rule of thumb:** *words ending in—a are feminine, words ending in—o are masculine, usually; not always.*

Spanish: **Género: Femenino, Masculino.**

Verbs and adverbs are lack of gender, except for the participle forms and some other elements that are neutral.

We can find:

- Common nouns with the same form for both genders, “generic”: *el/ la psiquiatra, el/ la pianista, el/ la, concertista, un/ una profesional . . .*
Ramona es una pianista excepcional, Lauro es un pianista excepcional, Tengo cita con la psiquiatra, Tengo cita con el psiquiatra . . .
- Epicene Nouns or **Sustantivos Epicenos** (Spanish). They just have only one form.
- There are masculine epicene nouns: *el/ un personaje, el/ un tiburón, el/ un lince . . .* There is no feminine for these nouns, though.
- There are feminine epicene nouns: *la/ una persona, la/ una hormiga, la/ una víctima, la gente, la razón, la leche, la pirámide . . .* There is no masculine for these nouns.

Examples:

“Se encontraron un tiburón cerca de la playa”

“Había muchas hormigas en el jardín”

- There are masculine forms that indicate a collective where both, masculine and feminine, are represented.

“El hombre Neanderthal vivía en cavernas”.

Making reference to both genders where the Neanderthal women is included.

“Los alumnos de Secundaria han cambiado sus hábitos”

The last sentence is talking about students, both women and men.

However, for political purposes, is becoming more common to indicate both genders, which is grammatically acceptable as well.

In past years, it was common to hear Presidents say during their speeches: *“Queridos mexicanos y niños . . .”*

Now they refer to population as: *“Queridos mexicanos y mexicanas, niños y niñas . . .”*

Both forms are very acceptable. The first one indicates both genders, even though is in masculine form, while the second one actually indicates both genders, literally.

Words working indistinctively for both genders:

- Words ending in -e, -i or -u; *el/la gurí, el/la saltimbanqui, el/la comerciante, el/la dibujante, Yo soy Yaqui nativo(a)* . . .
- Words ending in -ar or -er; *el/la auxiliar, el/la militar, el/la chofer, el/la bachiller* . . .
- Words ending in -l or -z; *el/la cónsul, el/la portavoz, el/la juez, el/la capataz, el/la corresponsal* . . .
- Al military and naval ranges: *el/la cabo, el/la capitán, el/la sobrecargo, el/la coronel* . . .

Masculine Words:

- Most of the words ending in -o, -or. Also, some other words ending in -a or -e; *el tabaco, el cuaderno, el estudio, un año, un tenedor, unos muchachos* . . .
- Words ending in -aje or -an: *el coraje, el espionaje, el capitán* . . .
- Rivers, mountains, isthmus and canals: *el Amazonas, el Nilo, el Tigris, el Everest* . . .
- Months and days of the week: *fue un agosto caluroso, yo nací en un diciembre frío.*
- Musical notes: *el fa bemol, el sol va más agudo, necesitas afinar el la.*
- Aumentatives ending in -on, even if they come from a feminine word: *no sabes el noticia que te voy a dar.*
- Cardinal points: *el norte, el este, el oeste, el sur, el norponiente, el noroeste, el ocaso, el oriente* . . .
- Numbers: *el seis, el siete, el 48, el 54* . . .
- Colors: *el azul, el amarillo, el rosa* . . .

Feminine Words:

- Most of the words ending in -a. Also, some other words ending in -o or -e; *la boda, la barriga, la taza, la sastre* . . .
- Words ending in -dad, -tad and -ed: *la libertad, la mitad, la pared, la lealtad* . . .
- Nouns ending in -ción, -sión, -zón, -dez and -iz: *la decisión, la razón, la incisión, la honradez* . . . (with some exceptions as *el corazón*) . . .
- Name of diseases ending in -tis: *la colitis, la gastritis, la artritis* . . .
- Letters: *la o, la hace, la y griega*
- Most nouns have their form in feminine, as for professions: *el arquitecto—la arquitecta, el licenciado—la licenciada.* These wasn't acceptable some years ago, as it became more common for women to develop a profession, these are now the correct terms, now culturally and politically correct and accepted.

Some words have a different meaning or refer to different objects, situations or subjects depending on their gender, most common ambiguous words on examinations are:

el radio: refers to the device.

la radio: refers to a broadcaster company.

el policía: refers to the police officer.

la policía: refers to the police system.

**If you want to refer to a women that is a police officer, you must say: *la mujer policía* or *la oficial de policía*.

el cura: priest

la cura: the cure (disease)

el Papa: Pope

el papá: dad

la papa: potatoe

manzana: apple

manzano: apple tree

How am I supposed to know/remember all this during my examination?

Easy. Your best resource will be context. As well as other useful hints on correct usage of grammar forms.

For example: If we have a sentence on the test like this one: “*El Papa le dió la bendición a mi papá*”

We know the first ‘*El Papa*’ refers to the Pope, because is written in Capital Letters (see The Capital Letters section for review about this topic) and the second one, ‘*mi papá*’ refers to my dad, because it has a grammatical accent (see The Rules for Stress in Spanish section for more about this topic). If we go further, the noun ‘*bendición*’ refers to blessing, which is coherent with the word Pope.

Numbers

It's a category within grammatical morphology indicating plural or singular.

Singular: Refers to a single element; just one.

Plural: Refers to several elements; two or more.

Spanish: **Número: Singular, Plural.**

1. **Nouns** and **Adjectives** use the suffix -s or -es (in Spanish), denoting **plural**.

Words ending in -l, -n, -r, -d, -z, -y goes with the suffix -es, whenever they are in the plural form.

Azul – azules

Ojo – ojos

Ojo azul – ojos azules

Agua – aguas

Limpia – limpias

Agua limpia – aguas limpia

Camión – camiones

Tenedor – tenedores

Camión grande – camiones grandes

Tenedor filoso – tenedores filosos

2. Words ending in -z change to -ces when written in its plural form:

la voz – las voces

el lápiz – los lápices

una vez – unas veces

3. **Pronouns** and **verbs** have their own forms in **plural**.

Lo – los

Canta – cantan

Usted – ustedes

Quehacer – quehaceres

4. Not all nouns come in both singular and plural.

Some have no plural form. They are called: **Singularia Tántum**.

- | | | |
|-------------------------------|--------------------|---------------------------|
| • Collectives: | • Abstract names: | • Cardinal Points |
| <i>gente</i> | <i>la sed</i> | <i>Norte</i> |
| <i>la gente – correct</i> | <i>el hambre</i> | <i>Nortes – incorrect</i> |
| <i>las gentes – incorrect</i> | <i>el descanso</i> | <i>Sur</i> |
| <i>la población</i> | <i>la fe</i> | <i>Sures – incorrect</i> |
| <i>el público</i> | <i>la pereza</i> | |
| <i>la policía</i> | | |
| <i>el ejército</i> | | |

5. On the other hand, some others are written in ‘plural’ for both, the singular and plural form. The **number** will be indicated by the **article**.

This form is called: **Pluralia tántum**.

El Lunes me tengo que levantar a las 8 am.

Los Lunes me tengo que levantar a las 8 am.

¡Está lloviendo, tráete un paraguas!

¡Está lloviendo, tráete los paraguas!

el paréntesis – los paréntesis

el viernes – los viernes (this apply for all days of the week)

el virus – los virus

el cumpleaños – los cumpleaños

la crisis – las crisis

el bíceps – los bíceps