Spanish sounds La pronunciación

Good news: Spanish is written as it sounds. Learn these letters and you can read any word aloud. Orange hints spell the sound:

PEH-rroh	capitals: the part you stress	**r**	one quick tap, like the tt in American better
ah eh ee oh oo	a e i o u: father, bed, see, hot, food, short and pure	**rr**	a rolled r, page 3
ay eye oy ow	two vowels in one beat: say, eye, boy, how	**b d g**	softer between vowels, page 3
y w	as in yes and wet: bien is byehn	**k**	c before a, o, u, and qu
h	the throaty h of j and soft g; the letter h is silent	**ch**	as in chip
s	pink s: th as in think in most of Spain, s elsewhere	**s**	always s, as in see, even between vowels
ny	the ñ, as in canyon	◡	two words said as one, page 5

The alphabet: what the letters are called

A a **ah**	B be **beh**	C ce **seh**	D de **deh**	E e **eh**	F efe **EH-feh**	G ge **heh**	H hache **AH-cheh**	I i **ee**
J jota **HOH-tah**	K ka **kah**	L ele **EH-leh**	M eme **EH-meh**	N ene **EH-neh**	Ñ eñe **EH-nyeh**	O o **oh**	P pe **peh**	Q cu **koo**
R erre **EH-rreh**	S ese **EH-seh**	T te **teh**	U u **oo**	V uve **OO-beh**	W uve doble **OO-beh** **DOH-bleh**	X equis **EH-kees**	Y ye **yeh**	Z zeta **SEH-tah**

Other names you'll hear: **ve**, **ve corta** or **ve chica** for V, **doble ve** or **doble u** for W, and **i griega** for Y. In Latin America B is often **be larga** or **be alta**, to tell it apart from V.

Letters that don't sound like English

h	silent, always hora **OH-rah**, ahora **ah-OH-rah**
g + e, i	the same throaty h gente **HEHN-teh**, página **PAH-hee-nah**
ll, y	y in yes, for most speakers llamar **yah-MAHR**, calle **KAH-yeh**, yo **yoh**
qu	k: the u is silent queso **KEH-soh**, aquí **ah-KEE**
c	k before a, o, u and consonants cosa **KOH-sah**, clase **KLAH-seh**
r · rr	r a tap · rr and a first r rolled cara **KAH-rah** · torre **TOH-rreh**, rosa **RROH-sah**
j	the throaty h jamón **hah-MOHN**, mujer **moo-HEHR**
g	g in go · gue, gui: the u is silent · gü: gw guitarra **gee-TAH-rrah**, pingüino **peen-GWEE-noh**
ñ	ny, as in canyon año **AH-nyoh**, niño **NEE-nyoh**
c + e, i · z	the pink s: th or s, see below cena **SEH-nah**, cielo **SYEH-loh**, zona **SOH-nah**
v, b	both b: v is never the English v vino **BEE-noh**, boca **BOH-kah**
x	ks · h in México and a few names taxi **TAHK-see** · México **MEH-hee-koh**

c and z: th or s?

In most of Spain, c before e or i and z sound like th in think. In Latin America, the Canary Islands and parts of southern Spain, a plain s. Both are correct; the hints show it as a pink s:

cinco SEEN-koh · azul ah-SOOL

ll and y: one sound for most

Most speakers say ll and y the same, like y in yes. In Argentina and Uruguay both sound like sh or the s in measure: **llave YAH-beh** is SHAH-beh or ZHAH-beh. A few areas keep ll apart, a bit like lli in million.

j and soft g: the throaty h

In much of Spain it's a strong rasp, as in Scottish loch. In many parts of Latin America it's softer, close to English h.

Either way keep it breathy, never a k.

This sheet is neutral Spanish: what Spain and Latin America share, with the differences marked. Pick the accent your shows use.

Vowels Las vocales

Five vowels, always the same: Spanish has just five vowel sounds, and each letter always makes its own. Keep them short and pure. English go ends in a little w and say in a little y: Spanish o and e stop dead, so hold your mouth still.

The five vowels

a	a in father, short	mapa **MAH-pah** map	taza **TAH-sah** cup
e	e in bed	verde **BEHR-deh** green	tren **trehn** train
i	ee in see, short	isla **EES-lah** island	fin **feen** end
o	between hot and go, lips round, no w at the end	ojo **OH-hoh** eye	solo **SOH-loh** alone
u	oo in food, short	uno **OO-noh** one	luna **LOO-nah** moon

Never uh: English blurs the vowels it doesn't stress into uh. Spanish never does: **banana** **bah-NAH-nah** has three identical a's, and every vowel of **chocolate** **choh-koh-LAH-teh** is full.

Every vowel is said: a last e too, **noche** **NOH-cheh**, **tarde** **TAHR-deh**. Two of a, e and o side by side are two beats: **leer** **leh-EHR**, **idea** **ee-DEH-ah**, **teatro** **teh-AH-troh**.

Two vowels in one beat: the diphthongs

i and u are the soft vowels: next to a, e or o they glide into the same beat, i as a y and u as a w. At the end of a word y is the vowel i.

ai, ay
eye

aire **EYE-reh**
air

hay **eye**
there is

ei, ey
ay, as in say

veinte **BAYN-teh**
twenty

rey **rray**
king

oi, oy
oy, as in boy

oigo **OY-goh**
I hear

hoy **oy**
today

au
ow, as in how

auto **OW-toh**
car

causa **KOW-sah**
cause

eu
eh and oo in one beat

Europa **ehoo-ROH-pah**
Europe

deuda **DEHOO-dah**
debt

ie
yeh

bien **byehn**
well

tiempo **TYEHM-poh**
time, weather

ue
weh

bueno **BWEH-noh**
good

nueve **NWEH-beh**
nine

io
yoh

adiós **ah-DYOHS**
goodbye

radio **RRAH-dyoh**
radio

And the rest: ia **gracias** **GRAH-syahs**, ua **agua** **AH-gwah**, ui **muy** **mwee**, iu **triunfo** **TRYOON-foh**. Every vowel is still said; they just share one beat.

An accent splits them: an accent on i or u makes it a full vowel with a beat of its own: **día** **DEE-ah**, **país** **pah-EES**, **río** **RREE-oh**.

Across words too: vowels and consonants run on into the next word, so a whole line can sound like one long word. Page 5 shows how.

Consonants Las consonantes

Full or soft: b (and v), d and g are full at the start and after m or n, and d after l too. Between vowels they go soft: your mouth almost closes but lets the air slide through. Nobody writes it, but everyone does it.

Soft b, d and g

b and v: one sound

Full, lips closed: **vamos** BAH-mohs · **hombre** OHM-breh · **invierno** een-BYEHR-noh, where n before v sounds like m.

Soft, lips almost touching: **beber** beh-BEHR · **uva** OO-bah

d: soft like th in this

Full, tongue on the back of the top teeth: **donde** DOHN-deh · **falda** FAHL-dah

Soft, the tip just touching the teeth: **nada** NAH-dah · **todo** TOH-doh · **cada** KAH-dah

g: soft between vowels

Full, as in go: **tengo** TEHN-goh · **gol** gohl

Soft, the back of the tongue barely touching: **lago** LAH-goh · **amigo** ah-MEE-goh

Same sound, different word: b and v, the silent h, ll and y

tuvo	TOO-boh	had	tubo	TOO-boh	tube		
hola	OH-lah	hello	ola	OH-lah	wave		
hecho	EH-choh	done	echo	EH-choh	I throw		
rallar	rrah-YAHR	to grate	rayar	rrah-YAHR	to scratch		

The two r's

r: one tap

Flick the tip of your tongue once against the ridge behind your top teeth, like the tt in American better. At the end of a word it's still a tap.

mira MEE-rah · **color** koh-LOHR · **tres** trehs

rr: a roll

Several quick taps in a row: the tip of your tongue flutters. Written rr between vowels, and a single r at the start of a word or after n or l.

rojo RROH-hoh · **tierra** TYEH-rrah · **Enrique** ehn-RREE-keh · **alrededor** ahl-rreh-deh-DOHR

Can't roll it yet? Say a quick d d d with your tongue loose just behind your top teeth, then push more air through. Until it comes, a strong tap is understood, but pero and perro are different words: practise them on page 6.

Word ends

d at the end: very soft

At the end of a word d is so soft it's often hardly heard: **verdad** behr-DAHD, **usted** oos-TEHD, **Madrid** mah-DREED.

In casual speech, especially in Spain, -ado often loses its d: **cansado** kahn-SAH-doh can sound like **cansao**. Written, it's always -ado.

s at the end: in some places, a breath

In the Caribbean, the Canary Islands, much of southern Spain and many coasts, an s before a consonant or at the end of a word turns into a soft h or fades: **¿Cómo estás?** can sound like cómo ehtá. Elsewhere every s is clear. Both are normal Spanish.

Stress El acento

The spelling tells you: Spanish has three stress rules, and they always work. Learn them and you'll never have to guess. The stressed part is pink.

1 · Ends in a vowel, n or s: stress the second-to-last syllable

libro	hablan	zapatos	joven	examen
LEE-broh	AH-blahn	sah-PAH-tohs	HOH-behn	ehk-SAH-mehn
book	they speak	shoes	young	exam

2 · Ends in any other consonant: stress the last syllable

hablar	ciudad	español	feliz	papel
ah-BLAHR	syoo-DAHD	ehs-pah-NYOHL	feh-LEES	pah-PEHL
to speak	city	Spanish	happy	paper

3 · Breaks rule 1 or 2? A written accent shows the stress

café	canción	árbol	fácil	teléfono
kah-FEH	kahn-SYOHN	AHR-bohl	FAH-seel	teh-LEH-foh-noh
coffee	song	tree	easy	phone

Same stress, the accent comes and goes: add an ending and a different rule may apply: **joven** HOH-behn but **jóvenes** HOH-beh-nehs, **canción** kahn-SYOHN but **canciones** kahn-SYOH-nehs. The stress stays put; only the accent changes.

Same sound, different word: the accent tells you which

sí · si	tú · tu	él · el	más · mas	qué · que
see · see	too · too	ehl · ehl	mahs · mahs	keh · keh
yes · if	you · your	he · the	more · but (literary)	what? · that

Question words always take an accent, even inside a sentence: **¿Dónde vives?** Where do you live? **No sé dónde vive.** I don't know where she lives.

Move the stress, change the word

término	termino	terminó	hablo	habló	esta	está
TEHR-mee-noh	tehr-MEE-noh	tehr-mee-NOH	AH-bloh	ah-BLOH	EHS-tah	ehs-TAH
end	I finish	she finished	I speak	he spoke	this	is

Say the wrong syllable and you've said a different word. That's why the accent matters: it's not decoration, it's the stress.

Spoken Spanish El español hablado

One long word: Spanish runs words together, so you hear a stream of syllables, not separate words. That's a big part of why it sounds fast. The link mark joins two words said as one.

A consonant jumps to the next word

los◡otros
loh-SOH-trohs
the others

el◡agua
eh-LAH-gwah
the water

un◡amigo
oo-nah-MEE-goh
a friend

mis◡hijos
mee-SEE-hohs
my children

End in a consonant, next word starts with a vowel: the consonant moves across and starts the next syllable. A silent h doesn't stop it.

Two vowels melt into one beat

mi◡hija
MEE-hah
my daughter

la◡amiga
lah-MEE-gah
the friend (a woman)

de◡España
dehs-PAH-nyah
from Spain

su◡hermano
swehr-MAH-noh
her brother, his brother

The same vowel twice becomes one, and two different ones glide together in one beat. Spanish poetry counts its syllables this way.

Written, then what you hear in casual speech

WRITTEN
¿Para qué?
YOU HEAR
¿Pa' qué?
pah keh
What for?

WRITTEN
¿Para dónde vas?
YOU HEAR
¿Pa' dónde vas?
pah DOHN-deh bahs
Where are you off to?

WRITTEN
Está bien.
YOU HEAR
'Tá bien.
tah byehn
It's fine.

WRITTEN
Estoy aquí.
YOU HEAR
'Toy aquí.
toy ah-KEE
I'm here.

WRITTEN
Estoy cansado.
YOU HEAR
Estoy cansao.
ehs-TOY kahn-SAH-oh
I'm tired.

WRITTEN
¿Verdad?
YOU HEAR
¿Verdá?
behr-DAH
Right?

WRITTEN
¿Y usted?
YOU HEAR
¿Y usté?
ee oos-TEH
And you? (polite)

WRITTEN
No pasa nada.
YOU HEAR
No pasa na'.
noh PAH-sah nah
No worries.

Short forms: you'll hear **pa'** for **para** almost everywhere Spanish is spoken. **'tá** for **está** and **'toy** for **estoy** are most common in Latin America, **cansao** for **cansado** in Spain.

Subtitles tidy it up: they usually write the full words even when the actor says the short ones. These are what you hear, not how to write: always write the full forms.

Little words you'll hear in every scene

pues
pwehs
well...

o sea
oh SEH-ah
I mean

este
EHS-teh
um... (Latin America)

vale
BAH-leh
OK (Spain)

oye
OH-yeh
hey, listen

¿no?
noh
right?

Practice Práctica

6 · pairs, tongue twisters, ten sentences

How: say each pair slowly, then fast, until the two words sound clearly different.

Tap or roll?

pero **PEH-roh** but	perro **PEH-rroh** dog
caro **KAH-roh** expensive	carro **KAH-rroh** car (Latin America), cart
cero **SEH-roh** zero	cerro **SEH-rroh** hill

Which vowel?

peso **PEH-soh** weight	piso **PEE-soh** floor, flat
pelo **PEH-loh** hair	palo **PAH-loh** stick
dedo **DEH-doh** finger	dado **DAH-doh** dice

Where's the stress?

papa **PAH-pah** potato (Latin America)	papá **pah-PAH** dad
sabana **sah-BAH-nah** savannah	sábana **SAH-bah-nah** bed sheet
camino **kah-MEE-noh** path	caminó **kah-mee-NOH** she walked

Different only in some places

casa **KAH-sah** house	caza **KAH-sah** hunting
different in most of Spain, the same elsewhere	
pollo **POH-yoh** chicken	poyo **POH-yoh** stone bench
the same for most speakers; different only where ll is kept apart	

Tongue twisters

Erre con erre cigarro, erre con erre barril, rápido ruedan los carros cargados de azúcar del ferrocarril.	the tap and the roll
Tres tristes tigres tragaban trigo en un trigal.	tr, and pure vowels
Pablito clavó un clavito. ¿Qué clavito clavó Pablito?	soft b and cl
Como poco coco como, poco coco compro.	a pure o, never ow

Ten sentences: cover the right side

1	¿Dónde está la estación?	**DOHN-deh ehs-TAH lah ehs-tah-SYOHN?** Where's the station?
2	Mi hermana vive en México.	**mee ehr-MAH-nah BEE-beh ehn MEH-hee-koh.** My sister lives in Mexico.
3	Quiero un café con leche, por favor.	**KYEH-roh oon kah-FEH kohn LEH-cheh, pohr fah-BOHR.** I'd like a white coffee, please.
4	Mi madre trabaja en un hospital.	**mee MAH-dreh trah-BAH-hah ehn oon ohs-pee-TAHL.** My mum works in a hospital.
5	El perro corre por el jardín.	**ehl PEH-rroh KOH-rreh pohr ehl hahr-DEEN.** The dog's running round the garden.
6	¿Cuántos años tiene tu hijo?	**KWAHN-tohs AH-nyohs TYEH-neh too EE-hoh?** How old is your son?
7	Mañana vamos a la playa.	**mah-NYAH-nah BAH-mohs ah lah PLAH-yah.** We're going to the beach tomorrow.
8	No entiendo, ¿puedes repetir?	**noh ehn-TYEHN-doh, PWEH-dehs rreh-peh-TEER?** I don't understand, can you say it again?
9	La música está muy alta.	**lah MOO-see-kah ehs-TAH mwee AHL-tah.** The music's really loud.
10	Hace mucho calor hoy.	**AH-seh MOO-choh kah-LOHR oy.** It's really hot today.

Meet a word you don't know? In Kitsumi, hover any word in subtitles to see what it means.