

The Spanish Alphabet

The Spanish *alphabet*, or **abecedario**, includes 27 letters. Only one, **la ñ**, is not included in the English alphabet.

Aa	Bb	Cc	Dd	Ee	Ff	Gg	Hh	Ii	Jj	Kk	Ll	Mm	Nn
a	be	ce	de	e	efe	ge	hache	i	jota	ka	ele	eme	ene
Ñ	Oo	Pp	Qq	Rr	Ss	Tt	Uu	Vv	Ww	Xx	Yy	Zz	
eñe	o	pe	cu	ere	ese	te	u	ve	uve doble	equis	i griega	zeta	

What's in a (Letter) Name?

The majority of the letters in Spanish have their own special names (some even have more than one!) and people use them all the time when spelling out words.

¡Ojo! Once counted as letters in their own right, **ch**, **ll**, and **rr** are now considered to be combinations of the letters **c** + **h**, **l** + **l**, and **r** + **r**, respectively.

A	a This letter sounds like the <i>ah</i> sound you use to express realization in English: <i>Ah, that's the one!</i>	N	ene This letter sounds just like the English <i>n</i> .
B	be or be larga or be alta This letter often sounds like an English <i>b</i> . Especially when it occurs between two vowels, it is pronounced with the lips not touching, much like the Spanish v . You may also hear it called be grande or be de burro .	Ñ	eñe A completely separate letter from the <i>n</i> , this letter sounds much like the <i>gn</i> in <i>lasagna</i> or the <i>ny</i> in <i>canyon</i> .
C	ce This letter often sounds like the English <i>k</i> . Before e or i , it sounds like an <i>s</i> in Latin America or like the <i>th</i> in <i>thick</i> in many parts of Spain.	O	o This letter sounds close to the <i>o</i> in <i>so</i> , but shorter.
Ch	che This combination of the letters <i>c</i> and <i>h</i> sounds like the <i>ch</i> in <i>cheese</i> .	P	pe This letter sounds much like the <i>p</i> in <i>cup</i> .
D	de This letter sounds much like an English <i>d</i> , except you should place your tongue against your upper teeth instead of the roof of your mouth when pronouncing it. It can also sound like the <i>th</i> in English <i>then</i> , especially when it comes between two vowels.	Q	cu This letter is almost always followed by the letter <i>u</i> and sounds like English <i>k</i> .
E	e This letter sounds like the <i>eh</i> sound you make when asking for clarification or agreement in English: <i>Eh? What did you say?</i>	R	ere This letter often sounds like the <i>tt</i> sound in the American English pronunciation of <i>butter</i> . However, at the beginning of a word, at the beginning of a syllable following a syllable ending in a consonant, and sometimes even at the end of a word, it's pronounced like the Spanish trilled rr .
F	efe This letter sounds like the English <i>f</i> .	Rr	doble ere To make the famous trilled r , the key is practice. Practice tip: Say the word <i>butter</i> (with American pronunciation) and think of the sound you make in the middle (<i>tt</i>). In American English, this sound is a tap. The Spanish rr is essentially many taps in a row.
G	ge Pronounced <i>hey</i> , this letter usually sounds much like the <i>g</i> in <i>good</i> . However, before e or i , it sounds like the <i>h</i> in English <i>here</i> or <i>history</i> .	S	ese This letter sounds just like the English <i>s</i> .
H	hache In general, this letter is silent. However, in words adopted from other languages, the breathy aspiration is maintained. For example, Hawái .	T	te Softer than the English <i>t</i> , to say <i>t</i> in Spanish, the tongue should touch the teeth and there should be no explosion of breath after moving the tongue away.
I	i or i latina This letter sounds a lot like the <i>ee</i> in <i>need</i> .	U	u This letter sounds close to the <i>oo</i> in <i>food</i> .
J	jota This letter sounds a lot like the <i>h</i> in <i>horse</i> in Latin America. In many parts of Spain, it sounds like the <i>ch</i> in <i>loch</i> as pronounced in Scottish English. It never sounds like the <i>j</i> in English <i>judge</i> .	V	uve or ve corta or ve chica or ve baja This letter sounds much like the Spanish <i>b</i> . You may also hear it called ve corta , ve chica , or ve de vaca .
K	ca This letter is uncommon in Spanish, but sounds much like the English <i>k</i> .	W	uve doble or doble uve or doble ve or doble u This letter is not native to Spanish, but sounds similar to English <i>w</i> . You may also hear it called doble uve or doble u .
L	ele This letter sounds close to the English <i>l</i> , but with the tongue raised closer to the roof of the mouth rather than dipped down.	X	equis This letter is pronounced like the <i>ks</i> in English <i>socks</i> . However, in place and person names (especially those from México), it can be pronounced like a raspy English <i>h</i> , an <i>s</i> , or even the <i>sh</i> in English <i>show</i> .
Ll	elle This combination of letters sounds like the <i>y</i> in <i>yellow</i> in most Spanish-speaking places. It can also be pronounced like the <i>j</i> in <i>judge</i> , the <i>s</i> in <i>pleasure</i> , or the <i>sh</i> in <i>show</i> . You may also hear it called doble ele .	Y	i griega or ye Most of the time, this letter sounds like the <i>y</i> in English <i>yes</i> . At the end of a word, it sounds like the letter <i>i</i> (hay). You may also hear it called ye .
M	eme This letter sounds just like the English <i>m</i> .	Z	zeta This letter is mostly pronounced like the English <i>s</i> , but can sound like the <i>th</i> in English <i>thin</i> in many parts of Spain.

The Company You Keep Matters

While the majority of the letters in Spanish are always pronounced the same way, there are a few whose pronunciation changes depending on the letters with which they combine. Let's take a look at some of the trickier combinations.

Ge Before a Vowel When ge comes before i or e , it's pronounced like a raspy English <i>sh</i> . gente <i>people</i> Gibraltar <i>Gibraltar</i> Before other vowels (a , o , u), it's pronounced like the <i>g</i> in English <i>good</i> . gol <i>goal</i> guapo <i>handsome</i> gato <i>cat</i>
Ce Before hache When ce comes before hache , it's pronounced like the <i>ch</i> in English <i>cheese</i> . chícharo <i>pea</i> chicharra <i>cicada</i>

Double ele When two eles appear together, they can be pronounced like the <i>y</i> in English <i>yellow</i> , the <i>j</i> in English <i>judge</i> , the <i>s</i> in English <i>pleasure</i> , or the <i>sh</i> in English <i>show</i> , depending on what country you're in. llamar <i>to call</i> valle <i>valley</i> Double erre When two erres appear together, they are trilled (the sound you make when you roll your tongue). A single erre at the beginning of a word is also trilled. carro <i>car</i> burro <i>donkey</i> rojo <i>red</i>
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Equis Marks the Spot The equis is usually pronounced like the <i>ks</i> in English <i>socks</i> . However, in place and person names (especially those from Mexico), it can be pronounced like a raspy English <i>h</i> , an <i>s</i> , or even the <i>sh</i> in English <i>show</i> . Check out these examples: Like the <i>ks</i> in English <i>socks</i> : examen <i>exam</i> Like a raspy English <i>h</i> : México <i>Mexico</i> Like an <i>s</i> : Xochimilco <i>Xochimilco</i> , a neighborhood in Mexico City Like <i>sh</i> in English <i>show</i> Xicalango <i>Xicalango</i> , a town in Mexico

Spanish Vowels

Spanish has five vowels: **a**, **e**, **i**, **o**, and **u**.

Spanish Vowel Pronunciation

Spanish has the same five vowels as English, but Spanish vowels are generally shorter in duration than their English counterparts.

Take the letter **o**. When you say the letter **o** in English, you tend to stretch it out and add a bit of an *uh* sound at the end. In Spanish, **o** is much shorter and is pronounced with rounded lips from start to finish (sort of like the vowels you would use in English choral music).

Here are the five Spanish vowels and their pronunciations.

Spanish Vowel	Pronunciation	Example Words
a	ah	papa, agua
e	eh	esperanza, bebé
i	ee	sí, chica
o	oh	loco, bonito
u	oo	grupo, futuro



Spanish Diphthongs

A diphthong is a sound formed by two vowels in a single syllable. In Spanish, diphthongs can be formed by combining a strong vowel (**a**, **e**, or **o**) and a weak vowel (**i** or **u**), or by combining two weak vowels.

When a diphthong is made up of a strong vowel and a weak vowel, the strong vowel is stressed a bit more than the weak vowel.

Below are examples of Spanish diphthongs and their pronunciation.

Diphthong	Pronunciation	Examples
au	ow	aula, aunque
ai, ay	ay	aire, hay
eu	ehoo	Europa, neutro
ei, ey	ey	reina, rey
ia	yah	piano, hacia
ie	yeh	tierra, serpiente
io	yoh	radio
iu	yoo	viuda, ciudad
oi, oy	oy	boina, hoy
ua	wah	agua, cuadro
ue	weh	fuego, trueno
ui	wee	fuimos, fuiste
uo	woh	cuota, individuo



Spanish Vowel Hiatus

When a strong vowel and a weak vowel appear together and the weak vowel is accented, the vowels belong to two separate syllables. This is called a hiatus. Two strong vowels together also form a hiatus.

Hiatus	Pronunciation	Example
aí	ah - EE	país
aú	ah - OO	Raúl
oí	oh - EE	oír
eí	eh - EE	reír
eú	eh - OO	transeúnte
ía	EE - ah	día
íe	EE - eh	ríe
ío	EE - oh	río
úa	OO - ah	cacatúa
úe	OO - eh	acentúe
úo	OO - oh	continúo
ae	ah-eh	caer
ao	ah-oh	aorta
aa	ah-ah	azahar
ea	eh-ah	leal
eo	eh-oh	leo
ee	eh-eh	poseer
oa	oh-ah	coágulo
oe	oh-eh	poetisa
oo	oh-oh	alcohol



Remember that the **h** is silent in Spanish, so it does not make any sound in the words **azahar** and **alcohol** in the table above.

Spanish Word Stress

If a Spanish word has a *written accent*, or **tilde**, the word stress falls on whatever syllable has the **tilde**.

For example: **compré** kohm-PREH, **árbol** AHR-bohl

Knowing where to put the stress on a word in Spanish is the difference between pronouncing a word like **computadora** with great Spanish pronunciation (**kohm-poo-tah-DOH-rah**), instead of Englishy pronunciation (**kohm-POO-tah-doh-rah**).

There are four main categories of words you'll come across when talking about Spanish word stress: **palabras agudas**, **palabras llanas** (also called **palabras graves**), **palabras esdrújulas**, and **palabras sobresdrújulas**. Let's take a closer look at each one.

Agudas Words

Las **palabras agudas** are words that are stressed on the **last syllable**.

Pronunciation Tip

If a word ends in a consonant other than **s** or **n** and the word does **not** have a **tilde** anywhere, the word is a **palabra aguda**. Las **palabras agudas** have a **tilde** on the final syllable to mark word stress if the last letter in the word is a vowel or the consonants **s** or **n**.

Spanish	Pronunciation
azul	ah-SOOL
avestruz	ah-be-STROOS
matador	mah-tah-DOHR
hablar	ah-BLAHR
estoy	eh-STOI
inglés	een-GLEHS
colibrí	koh-lee-BREE
balcón	bahl-KOHN



Llanas Words

Las **palabras llanas**, also called **palabras graves**, are words that are stressed on the **penultimate (second-to-last) syllable**.

Pronunciation Tip

If a word ends in a vowel, **s**, or **n** and does **not** have a **tilde** anywhere, the word is a **palabra llana**. Las **palabras llanas** have a written accent on the second-to-last syllable to mark word stress in words that end in any consonant other than **s** or **n** and in groups of consonants like **ps** and **cs**.

Spanish	Pronunciation
mono	MOH-noh
ave	AH-beh
cantan	KAHN-tahn
computadora	kohm-poo-tah-DOH-rah
árbol	AHR-bohl
álbum	AHL-boom
bíceps	BEE-sehps



Esdrújulas Words

Las **palabras esdrújulas** are words that are stressed on the **antepenultimate (third-to-last) syllable**.

Pronunciation Tip

These words **always** have a written accent on the stressed syllable.

Spanish	Pronunciation
rápido	RAH-pee-doh
pájaro	PAH-hah-roh
América	ah-MEH-ree-kah
clásico	CLAH-see-koh
teléfono	teh-LEH-foh-noh



Sobresdrújulas Words

Las **palabras sobresdrújulas** are words that are stressed on the **fourth-to-last, fifth-to-last, or sixth-to-last syllable**.

Pronunciation Tip

These words **always** have a written accent on the stressed syllable. For the most part, only words that are made up of a verb form and two or more pronoun forms are **palabras sobresdrújulas**.

Spanish	Pronunciation
cómpromelo	COHM-prah-meh-loh
préstaselo	PREHS-tah-seh-loh
enséñenoslo	ehn-SEH-nyeh-nohs-loh
devuélvemelo	deh-BWEHL-beh-meh-loh

Spanish Syllables and Syllabification Rules

Knowing how to separate a word into syllables can help you pronounce and spell Spanish words correctly, as well as help you decide if a word needs a written accent or not. The fancy word for dividing a word into syllables is **syllabification**. Here are some general rules for Spanish syllabification.

Consonant Plus Vowel

Whenever possible, you should break up words so that each syllable contains a consonant followed by a vowel. A consonant between two vowels belongs to the syllable with the second vowel. The goal is to end a syllable with a vowel whenever possible.

Check out the syllabification of these common Spanish words.

Word	Syllabification
sábana	sá-ba-na
gato	ga-to
casa	ca-sa
mano	ma-no
oro	o-ro
mesa	me-sa



Two Consecutive Consonants

Two consecutive consonants will generally belong to separate syllables. However, if the second consonant in a consonant pair is **r** or **l**, the consonant pair is not separated into different syllables.

Words that begin with prefixes often violate the above rules. For example the syllabification of **enloquecer** is **en-lo-que-cer**.

Check out the syllabification of these common Spanish words containing consecutive consonants.

Word	Syllabification
cuando	cuan-do
alcanzar	al-can-zar
costa	cos-ta
sombrilla	som-bri-lla
clave	cla-ve
trabajo	tra-ba-jo
aplicar	a-pli-car
frecuente	fre-cuen-te
hecho	he-cho
amarillo	a-ma-ri-llo
carro	ca-rro
merengue	me-ren-gue



- In Puerto Rico and most of Spain, the consonant cluster **tl** is divided into separate syllables. For example, the syllabification of **atlántico** is **at-lán-ti-co**.
- In other regions, such as Mexico and the Canary Islands of Spain, the consonant cluster **tl** is not divided into separate syllables. For example, the syllabification of **atlántico** is **a-tlán-ti-co** and the syllabification of **tlacuache** (*possum*) is **tla-cua-che**.

Three Consecutive Consonants

When three consonants appear together, the first one will generally belong to a separate syllable. Check out the syllabification of these words with three consecutive consonants.

Word	Syllabification
inglés	in-glés
compresa	com-pre-sa
panfleto	pan-fle-to
ombligo	om-bli-go
constante	cons-tan-te

Strong and Weak Vowels

Spanish has both strong vowels (**a**, **e**, **o**) and weak vowels (**i**, **u**). Here are some rules on how the combinations of these vowels are divided into syllables.

- Two weak vowels together form a diphthong and are not separated into different syllables. Example: **fui**
- A weak vowel and a strong vowel together form a diphthong and are not separated into different syllables. Example: **Juan**
- A strong vowel and an accented weak vowel together form a hiatus and are separated into two different syllables. Example: **mío**
- Two strong vowels together form a hiatus and are separated into different syllables. Example: **Leo**

Check out the syllabification of these words containing groups of vowels.

Word	Syllabification
toalla	to-a-lla
feo	fe-o
iguana	i-gua-na
reina	rei-na
tío	tí-o
ciudad	ciu-dad
creer	cre-er



Spanish Syllables and Syllabification Rules

Tildes, or *written accents*, are used for many different purposes in Spanish. Among other things, they are used to mark word stress, differentiate the present tense from the past tense, and show whether something is a question, exclamation, or statement.

Tildes and Word Stress

The syllables of a word that are pronounced with the most emphasis, or *stress*, are called the stressed syllables. Some words may have more than one stressed syllable, though many have just one. If a Spanish word has a **tilde**, the word stress falls on whatever syllable has the **tilde**.

If you see a **tilde** on a Spanish word, it's important to stress the syllable with the **tilde**. This is often the difference between pronouncing a word like **teléfono** with great Spanish pronunciation (**teh-LEH-foh-noh**), instead of English-like pronunciation (**TEH-leh-foh-noh**).

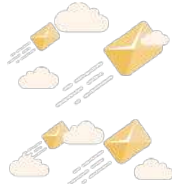


Tildes and Tenses

Accents are also quite useful for telling what tense a Spanish verb is in. For example, the third person singular (**él**, **ella**), and second person formal singular (**usted**) preterite forms of regular Spanish **-ar** verbs end in an **o** with a **tilde**. The first person singular (**yo**) present forms of regular Spanish **-ar** verbs end in an **o** without a **tilde**.

That one little **tilde** can change both the tense and subject of a sentence. For example:

With Tilde	Without Tilde
Mandó una carta. <i>He/She sent a letter.</i>	Mando una carta. <i>I send a letter.</i>



Tildes and Sentence Types

A **tilde** on words like **qué** and **cómo** can be used to show that someone is asking a question or making an exclamation. The lack of a **tilde** on such words is often used to show that something is a statement or command. Check out examples of these differences with the words **qué** and **que** in the table below.

Type of Sentence	Spanish	English
Question	¿Qué es eso?	<i>What is that?</i>
Exclamation	¡Qué bien!	<i>That's great!</i>
Command	Que pase.	<i>Come in.</i>
Statement	Esa no es la camisa que me gusta.	<i>That's not the shirt I like.</i>



Tildes and Word Pairs

There are many pairs of words in Spanish whose only spelling difference is the presence or absence of a **tilde**. Many of these words are possessive adjectives and personal pronouns. This **tilde** is referred to as **tilde diacrítica**. Here are just a few.

Word with Tilde	Word without Tilde	Example
él (<i>he</i>)	el (<i>the</i>)	A él le gusta el queso. <i>He likes the cheese.</i>
té (<i>tea</i>)	te (<i>you</i>)	Te recomiendo que pruebes el té. <i>I recommend that you try the tea.</i>
sí (<i>yes</i>)	si (<i>if</i>)	¡Sí, quiero ir al café, pero solo si tienen pan. <i>Yes, I want to go to the café, but only if they have bread.</i>
más (<i>more</i>)	mas (<i>but</i>)	Quiero más chocolate, mas es mala idea. <i>I want more chocolate, but it's a bad idea.</i>
cómo (<i>how/what</i>)	como (<i>like, as</i>)	¿Cómo se llama él? ¿Es algo como Pablo? <i>What is his name? Is he tall like Pablo?</i>
mí (<i>me</i>)	mi (<i>my</i>)	Mi amor me dio la rosa a mí. <i>My love gave me the rose.</i>
tú (<i>you</i>)	tu (<i>your</i>)	Tú tienes un gato. Es tu gato. <i>You have a cat. It is your cat.</i>

