

Chapter 1

SPELLING AND PRONUNCIATION

Chapter Check-In

- Pronouncing different consonants and vowels
- Identifying spelling rules
- Stressing the correct syllable
- Writing accent marks when necessary

Some people say, “I can’t even spell in English, how can I hope to learn how to spell in Spanish?” Those who detest the lack of correlation between pronunciation and spelling in English will be thrilled to learn that Spanish is very consistent in its spelling and pronunciation rules. Since these rules are very simple and easy to learn, even a terrible speller of the English language can master the spelling of Spanish words.

This chapter provides you with the foundation to begin speaking and writing Spanish by presenting the ways to properly pronounce a word that you see written as well as to spell a word that you hear spoken. Your only difficulty may be overcoming the influence of years of speaking English. Spanish is a phonetic language, therefore spelling is quite predictable and easier than in English.

Consonants

Consonants in Spanish are generally pronounced like English consonants, but a few exceptions are important. Also, there are some rules about consonants that eliminate spelling difficulties.

The letters *k* and *w* do not occur in Spanish words unless the word has been borrowed from another language like English or even Japanese. For example, *Karate* is considered a Spanish word even though it comes from Japanese.

Double consonants

In Spanish, consonants are almost never doubled. For example, only the letter *f* is used to get the *f* sound in Spanish. Therefore, there is no difficulty in spelling *professor*. Can you remember whether it's a double *f* or *s* in English? And did you even consider that the spelling in English could have been a *ph* instead of *f* or *ff*?

However, there are four exceptions to the double-consonant rule: *ll*, *rr*, *cc*, and in rare cases, *nn*. *Ll* is an actual letter, the fourteenth letter of the Spanish alphabet since 1803. *Ll* is pronounced like the consonant *y* in Yerba. In some countries, the *ll* sounds like a combination of the sound of *sh* and the letter *j* in English. A single *l* sounds like the letter *l* you hear in English and Spanish words. *Rr* is not a letter but rather a double *r* intended to elicit the rolling sound that is difficult for many who are learning Spanish as a second language. You are supposed to roll your tongue for one *r* if it is the first letter of the word, and you should also roll your tongue whenever you see the letter *rr* within a word. This accounts for a spelling change sometimes when two words become one. For example, in the name of the island *Puerto Rico*, the *r* is rolled because it is the first letter of a word. The adjective for a native, *Puertorriqueño*, is only one word, so the *rr* is used to produce the rolling *r* and maintain the pronunciation.

The third occasion where you will see a double consonant in a Spanish word is when a double *c* is used to produce the *k* or *x* sound as in *diccionario* (dictionary).

Consonant sounds and spellings

The pronunciation of Spanish consonants is easy to learn. There are many consonants that are pronounced exactly like their English equivalent, and these will not pose any problems for you. Only the consonants that can have more than one pronunciation or that are used in combinations to create a different sound are explained in the following sections. Any consonant that is not covered should be pronounced exactly like it is in English.

Cognates

There are a lot of Spanish words that look similar to English words, and some are even spelled exactly the same. However these words, called **cognates**, are usually easier to spell in Spanish than they are in English once you learn the rules.

In Spanish, the letter *p* is always pronounced like the *p* in *prince*, and the Spanish never use the letter combination *ph* to produce the *f* sound. If the English word has a *ph*, the Spanish cognate will always use one *f*. For example, look at the Spanish words *teléfono* (telephone), *elefante* (elephant), and *filosofía* (philosophy). The letter *f* is the only way to produce the *f* sound in Spanish.

The letter *c*

In Spanish, there are three ways to produce the sound of the English letter *k*. The letter *k* is used for words that are originally from other languages, and it is pronounced as it is in English. The letter *c* is pronounced like a *k* when it is followed by an *o*, *a*, or *u*. However, the letter *c* is pronounced like an *s* when it is followed by an *e* or *i*. The *qu* combination must be used to produce the *k* sound in front of an *e* or *i*. A word that the English borrowed from the Spanish, *mosquito*, has already prepared you to pronounce *qu* in Spanish without any *w* sound. Not like *quill*, but rather like *tequila*.

The following words have a sound like *k*. Notice the *qu* = *k* in front of *e* or *i*, and *c* = *k* in front of *o*, *a*, or *u*.

<i>que</i>	what
<i>aquí</i>	here
<i>comer</i>	to eat
<i>culebra</i>	snake
<i>cantar</i>	to sing

The letter *c* is pronounced like *s* when it is in front of *e* or *i*, as in the following words:

<i>cinta</i>	tape
<i>cenar</i>	to dine

To pronounce words with a double *c*, such as *diccionario* and *accidente*, the first *c* is hard because it's followed by a consonant, and the second *c* is soft because it's followed by an *i* or *e*.

The letter *g*

The letter *g* in Spanish has issues very much like the letter *c*: The pronunciation of the letter *g* is influenced by the letter that follows it. Whether or not you realize it, you have been following a similar rule in English.

The reason the *g* in “goat” is pronounced differently than the *g* in “gem” is because in both Spanish and English, there is a hard *g* sound and a soft *g* sound. Generally, in English, a *g* that is followed by *e* or *i* is a soft *g*, and a *g* that is followed by *o*, *a*, or *u* is a hard *g*. This rule is the same in Spanish and is even more consistent.

The pronunciation of the hard *g* is the same in both languages. The *g* in *goma* (eraser), *ganar* (to win, earn), or *guante* (glove) is exactly like “good,” “gallant,” or “gum.” Like in English, a Spanish *g* is soft if it is followed by an *e* or *i*. However, the soft *g* in Spanish sounds like the English letter *h*. The *g* in *gente* (people) or *gitana* (gypsy) sounds like the English *h* in “hat” or “heat.”

To keep their language’s pronunciation rules consistent, the Spanish had to face the dilemma of spelling a word with a hard *g* sound in front of an *e* or *i*. To resolve this dilemma, the letter *u* is placed between the *g* and *e* or between the *g* and *i*. Since the intent of the *u* is to produce the hard *g* sound, the *u* itself is not pronounced. This is a rare exception to the rule that all vowels are always pronounced. You may be already familiar with the words *guerrilla* and *guitarra*. These words can serve as examples to help you avoid the urge to say the *gway* or *gwee* sound when you see *g* and *u* together.

On extremely rare occasions when the *gway* or *gwee* sound is desired, the German symbol called an **umlaut** (“), translated as *diéresis* or *crema* in Spanish, is used to indicate that the *u* should be pronounced like a *w* when it is in between a *g-i* or *g-e*. And, the umlaut is used only on the vowel *u*. Pronounce the word “bilingual,” and then say *bilin*gü*e* with the same *gw* sound, and you’ll see how the umlaut works.

The letter *j*

The letter *j* is always pronounced like the *h* in “hello” or “happy.” When you need to spell a word with the sound of the English *h*, followed by an *e* or *i*, it is difficult to predict whether to use a *j* or *g*. For example, *jira* and *jefe* are spelled with a *j*, and *gimnasio* and *gema* are spelled with a *g*. Your awareness of this difficulty should cause you to focus on whether to use a *j* or a *g* when you first learn to spell the word. It is at least certain that words with the *h* sound in front of *o*, *a*, or *u* (*jo*, *ja*, and *ju*) are always spelled with a *j*, because a *g* would be a hard *g* if it’s followed by *o*, *a* or *u* and wouldn’t produce the *h* sound at all.

The letter *h*

You may be wondering how to pronounce the Spanish letter *h* when you see it in a Spanish word. The answer is that you don’t pronounce it at all.

The letter *h* is always silent. It exists because of the way the language has evolved, but now-a-days it is not pronounced, and it seems to confuse spelling issues. There really is no way to predict when a word will begin with a silent *h*, so be sure to focus on the spelling of words that you learn beginning with a silent *h*.

The letter *d*

The letter *d* is a bit softer in Spanish. It basically sounds like an English *d*, but will not be stressed at the end of the word like we do in English. Say the word “made” out loud and you’ll hear how the strength of the *d* at the end almost creates its own syllable. In Spanish, any *d* at the end of the word will barely be pronounced. Say *Madrid* without the *d* at the end and you’ll sound like a native. Once again, the lack of double consonants makes spelling the *d* sound easy: It’s always a single *d* in any Spanish word.

The letter *t*

Another letter that is similar to English, but softer, is the *t*. It is especially soft when it is followed by an *r*. The sound of the *tr* in “triple” would be more like a *tl* sound in Spanish. Try to say *tratar* (to try, to treat) without moving your tongue away from the back of your teeth. Or if you don’t mind having a slight accent, say the *t* like in English and keep it simple. When spelling, don’t forget that the *t* will never be doubled in Spanish words.

The letters *b* and *v*

The letters *b* and *v* sound the same in Spanish. The sound is a combination of *bv*. To make the sound, start out making the *b* sound, and slur into the *v* sound at the last second. When it comes to spelling words that contain a *b* or a *v*, many Spanish speakers have difficulty determining which letter to use, but since English speakers often have difficulty pronouncing the *bv* letter combination, it’s easier to remember how to spell words correctly since *vivir* (to live) would be pronounced with a stronger *v* sound and *beber* (to drink) would be pronounced with a harder *b* sound. This pronunciation error is helpful with spelling, but until your *b*’s and *v*’s sound like some mixture of both sounds, you’ll have an English accent. One helpful point about the similarity of *b* and *v* in Spanish is that sometimes it will be easy to recognize a word that is similar to English if you imagine the word with a *b* instead of a *v*, or vice versa. For example, the verb *gobernar* means “to govern.”

Dictionary entries

When looking up Spanish words in a Spanish dictionary, keep a few points in mind:

- Remember that *ll* and *rr* are considered separate letters, so the Spanish side of some dictionaries will list words beginning with *ll* after the words beginning with a single *l* and words beginning with *rr* after words beginning with a single *r*.
- The letter *ch* will be found in the *ch* section of most dictionaries at the end of the *c* section.
- Another place where the dictionary listings may confuse you is when a word has the Spanish letter *ñ*. The little squiggle on the *n* is called a **tilde**, and it creates an entirely new letter that will follow the *n*'s in the dictionary. For example, you will find that the word *mañana* is listed after *manzana*. The *ñ* is pronounced like the *ny* combo in “canyon” or the *ni* combo in “onion.”

Vowels

Pronouncing Spanish vowels is simple. Each vowel has only one way to be pronounced, and it will be pronounced that way in every word. Unlike English, there are no silent vowels in Spanish, although some vowels will slur together to create a single sound. These vowel combinations are called diphthongs and will be explained later in this chapter.

You should be careful not to let your vowels become diphthongs when speaking Spanish. Spanish vowels are shorter, sharper, and more crisp than English vowels; therefore, Spanish vowels produce only one, constant sound. Also, the English *schwa* sound doesn't exist in Spanish although it is quite common in spoken English. For example, Spanish never has sounds like “pencil” [pɛnsəl]. The last syllable of “pencil” contains the relaxed *schwa* sound. To further illustrate this notion, the word *banana* is the same in Spanish and English. However, in English the last syllable is the *schwa* [ə] sound, and in Spanish all of the *a*'s are open vowels that are pronounced exactly the same in all three syllables.

Vowel sounds and spellings

The few Spanish words that are common in English can serve as models for your pronunciation. Pronounce the word “taco.” The letter *a* is always pronounced like it is in *taco*. If you have ever heard a person speaking with a heavy Spanish accent, you may have noticed that they usually say

a word like “hat” or “can” sounding more like the English words “hot” or “con.” That is because they are saying the letter *a* the only way it can be said in their language.

The letter *o* is also consistently pronounced like it is in *taco*. You may notice that the *o* is shorter in Spanish and doesn't end in a *wa* at the end.

Another word we have learned from the popularity of Mexican food is *burrito*. The Spanish vowels *u* and *i* are always pronounced like they are in the word *burrito*.

The only vowel left to master is the *e*. It is always pronounced like the *e* in *café* (even when there's no accent on the *e*). To see how well you're learning, go back and make sure you pronounce the *a* in *café* correctly. It should sound like the *a* in *taco*.

Notice that the *e* at the end of *café* is not silent as it is in the English word “cake.” Remember that there are no silent vowels in Spanish (except for the *u* in *qu* and *gu* followed by *e* or *i*), so be careful of cognates that end in *e*, and remember to pronounce it at the end.

The letter *y* is a vowel only when it stands alone or when it is at the end of the word. It is pronounced like the *i* in “burrito” when it is a vowel, as in *ley*, for example. As a consonant, the Spanish *y* sounds just like “yellow” in English, as in *yo*.

The easiest vocabulary words to learn are also the trickiest to pronounce. A lot of Spanish words look similar to English words, and some are even spelled the same. But, as discussed earlier under “Cognates,” these words are never pronounced exactly like their English equivalent. Also, a Spanish word that does sound like an English word will probably be spelled differently in Spanish to maintain the rules of their language. When you recognize a cognate and immediately determine its meaning, it is natural to just say the English word.

Here's one good way to eliminate the urge to simply pronounce a cognate in Spanish the same as you would in English. Practice by pronouncing all English words as if they were Spanish. At the end of the unit, this example will make more sense, but imagine when you see the English word “imagine” that you pronounce it “ee-mah-hee-nay” because that's how the letters would be pronounced in Spanish. Later, when you learn the word *imagina* you will be prepared to say “ee-mah-hee-nah” almost perfectly.

Diphthongs

The strong vowels are *a*, *e*, and *o*. When two strong vowels are used together in a word, the result is two separate syllables with both vowels

strongly pronounced. If one of the strong vowels is used beside a weak vowel, the resulting single syllable, called a **diphthong**, is a slur of the two vowels, with the stronger vowel the only one that is clearly heard.

The weak vowels are *i* and *u*. Remember that in the battle of the weak vowels, the last one gets stressed. The *u* creates the sound of an English *w*. When the *i* is used with a stronger vowel, the *i* sounds like the consonant *y* in both languages.

Stress and Accentuation

The stress of a word follows two simple rules. Understanding them is imperative for pronouncing words and understanding why written accent marks are sometimes necessary:

- If a word ends in any consonant other than *n* or *s*, the natural stress will be on the last syllable.
- If a word ends in a vowel or the letter *n* or *s*, the natural stress is on the next-to-last syllable.

Accent marks may seem to be randomly placed in a word, but there are actually very easy rules to explain why they are used. The three basic rules to remember are:

- There is only one kind of accent.
- There is only one accent in any word.
- An accent can be placed only on a vowel, never a consonant.

The main purpose of writing an accent mark is to indicate that this particular word is supposed to be stressed somewhere other than the syllable where it would be stressed naturally if it followed the rules (see “Stress and Accentuation” earlier in the chapter). This leads to some rules within the rules. For example, there are hundreds of words that are cognates of English words that end in *-tion*, like “nation,” “liberation,” and “condition.” These words end in *-ción* in Spanish: *nación*, *liberación*, and *condición*. The rule states that a word that ends in an *n* has the natural stress on the next-to-last syllable, and these words are supposed to be stressed on the next-to-the-last syllable like in English. But, because they do not follow the general rule, an accent mark is written on the last vowel, the *o*, to show where the stress should be pronounced.

The previous lesson on diphthongs (see “Diphthongs” earlier in this chapter) and the strong and weak vowels becomes important when you are trying to decide whether or not a word needs a written accent mark. Remember that a diphthong is the single syllable created when one strong and one weak vowel or two weak vowels are pronounced together. That is why there is no accent on the word *iglesia*: The *i* is acting like the consonant *y*, so the diphthong *ia* creates a single syllable *ya* sound at the end of the word, and the natural stress is on the next-to-last syllable since the word ends in a vowel.

The second reason for writing an accent mark is to indicate that the weaker vowel is to be pronounced as well as the stronger vowel. This obviously creates two separate syllables, and the stress will be on the accented syllable.

Understanding these rules not only helps you know whether or not to write an accent when spelling a word that you hear, it will also help you pronounce a word that you are reading with the stress on the correct syllable. This will not only remind you to stress the word on that syllable, but will also help you remember that the word has an accent mark.

The third reason for writing an accent mark has nothing to do with pronunciation. It is used to differentiate between two words that would otherwise be spelled the same. For example, the word *si* means *if*, but the word *sí* means *yes*. Of course, when spoken, only the context of the sentence will provide a clue as to which of the two words is appropriate.

Chapter Check-Out

Q&A

For the following words, use the rules you have learned and underline where the stress would naturally fall.

1. *diccionario*
2. *anaranjado*
3. *devolver*
4. *dificultad*
5. *predominar*

Answers: 1. *diccionario* 2. *anaranjado* 3. *devolver* 4. *dificulta*
5. *predomina*