

Chapter 1

Spanish Grammar in a Nutshell

In This Chapter

- ▶ Getting to know your parts of speech
 - ▶ Taking a quick look at conjugating verbs in different tenses
 - ▶ Slapping together a simple sentence
 - ▶ Asking questions, posing conditions, and giving orders
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Spanish grammar is fairly complex, so many people benefit from getting an overall picture of everything that's involved — the framework on which all the details ultimately find their place — before they jump into any one part. This chapter presents this framework, bringing you up to speed in a hurry on Spanish grammar basics and rooting that framework in what you already know — English.



Luckily for everyone, the Spanish language is very phonetic, which makes speaking it fairly simple. Even so, you need to be aware of the importance of pronunciation when you're learning Spanish to make sure that what you're saying not only conveys the meaning you intended but also sounds grammatically correct. Skip to Chapter 2 for everything you need to know about Spanish pronunciation.

Recognizing the Parts of Speech

Learning a second language is a whole lot easier if you know a little something about your own language, especially when the languages are as similar as Spanish and English. To grasp the fundamentals of either of these languages, you need to know your *parts of speech* — the various categories that describe what purpose different types of words serve and how those different types of words relate to one another.

Don't worry if you can't recall your parts of speech. The following sections provide a quick review.

Nouns and pronouns



A **nombre** or **sustantivo** (*noun*) is a person, place, or thing that can serve as a subject, direct object, or indirect object:

- ✔ **Subject:** Whoever or whatever performs the action
- ✔ **Direct object:** What or whom the action is performed on
- ✔ **Indirect object:** To or for whom or what the action is performed

For example, in **Paco le dijo a María una mentira** (*Paco told María a lie*), **Paco** is the subject because he's performing the action (telling), **una mentira** (*a lie*) is the direct object (what **Paco** is telling), and **María** is the indirect object (the one to whom the lie is told). Chapter 3 introduces Spanish nouns in more detail.



To mix things up, you can use different types of **pronombres** (*pronouns*) in place of nouns so you don't have to keep repeating the same noun:

- ✔ **Subject (personal) pronouns:** **Yo** (*I*), **tú** (*you* singular, informal), **él** (*he*), **ella** (*she*), **usted** (*you* singular, formal), **nosotros/nosotras** (*we*), **vosotros/vosotras** (*you* plural, informal), **ellos/ellas** (*they*), and **ustedes** (*you* plural, formal) are the subject pronouns. They take the place of the doer of the action.
- ✔ **Direct object pronouns:** **Me** (*me*), **te** (*you* singular, informal), **lo** (*him* or *you* masculine, singular, formal), **la** (*her* or *you* feminine, singular, formal), **nos** (*us*), **os** (*you* plural, informal), and **los/las** (*them* or *you* plural, formal) are the direct object pronouns. They take the place of the person, place, or thing the action is performed on.
- ✔ **Indirect object pronouns:** **Me** (*to/for me*), **te** (*to/for you* singular, informal), **le** (*to/for him, her, it, or you* singular, formal), **nos** (*to/for us*), **os** (*to/for you* plural, informal), and **les** (*to/for them* or *you* plural, formal) are the indirect object pronouns that take the place of the recipient of the action.
- ✔ **Reflexive pronouns:** **Me** (*myself*), **te** (*yourself*), **se** (*himself, herself, or yourself*), **nos** (*ourselves*), **os** (*yourselves*), and **se** (*themselves* or *yourselves*) are reflexive pronouns that take the place of the recipient of a reflexive action (an action that the subject of the sentence performs on itself).
- ✔ **Interrogative pronouns:** **¿Quién(es)?** (*Who?*), **¿Cuál(es)?** (*What? or Which one[s]?*), **¿Qué?** (*What?*), **¿Cuánto(a)?** (*How much?*), and **¿Cuántos(as)?** (*How many?*) are the interrogative pronouns. They take the place of the nouns given in the answers to these questions.

Flip to Chapter 9 for the full scoop on Spanish pronouns.

Articles

Artículos (*articles*) are the tiny words commonly used to introduce nouns. They come in two flavors:

- ✔ **Definite articles:** **El, la, los, and las** (*the*)
- ✔ **Indefinite articles:** **Un and una** (*a, an*) and **unos and unas** (*some*)



An article must agree with the noun it modifies in gender (masculine or feminine) and number (singular or plural). That's why you have four articles in each category: **el** and **un** are masculine, singular, **la** and **una** are feminine, singular, **los** and **unos** are masculine, plural, and **las** and **unas** are feminine, plural. Chapter 3 covers this agreement issue in greater detail.

Verbs

Verbos (*verbs*) breathe life into expressions, so you really can't do anything without them. For example, in the simple sentence, **Selena canta** (*Selena sings*), **Selena** is the subject and **canta** is the verb.



In most languages, verbs are the most challenging part of speech because every verb has so many variations, depending on who's performing the action and when they're performing it — in the present, past, future, and so on. I touch on this issue later in this chapter in the section “Conjugating Verbs in the Present Tense.”

Adjectives and adverbs

Adjetivos (*adjectives*) and **adverbios** (*adverbs*) are descriptive words that colorize otherwise drab expressions:

- ✓ *Adjectives* describe nouns.
- ✓ *Adverbs* describe verbs, adjectives, and other adverbs.

Here's an example of what you can do to a sentence simply by adding adjectives and adverbs:

Before: El edificio se derrumbó. (*The building collapsed.*)

After: El edificio alto poco a poco se derrumbó. (*The tall building slowly collapsed.*)

The second sentence is much more interesting, don't you think? That's the magic of adjectives and adverbs. Chapter 4 tells you all about Spanish adjectives; I cover Spanish adverbs in detail in Chapter 12.



You often use adjectives and adverbs to make comparisons, such as **Susanna es más alta que Ricardo** (*Susanna is taller than Ricardo*). If you're wondering how to compare two or more people or things (or actions), head to Chapter 16 for more about making comparisons.

Prepositions

A **preposición** (*preposition*) is a word that typically accompanies a noun or pronoun and describes its relationship usually in terms of time, space, or direction. Simple prepositions include **a** (*to or at*), **ante** (*before or in the presence of*), **contra** (*against*), **durante** (*during*), **hasta** (*until*), and **tras** (*after*). Here's an example of a simple preposition in action:

Ella va a la tienda. (*She is going to the store.*)

In this example, the simple preposition **a** (*to*) joins with **la tienda** (*the store*) to form a prepositional phrase that describes where she's going. For more about prepositions and the rules for using them, check out Chapter 13.

Conjunctions

Conjunciones (*conjunctions*) connect words and phrases in a sentence. Common conjunctions include **y** and **e** (*and*), **ni** (*neither/nor*), **o** and **u** (*or/either*), **pero** (*but*), **porque** (*because*), and **que** (*that*). In Chapter 6, you find out how to use conjunctions to form compound sentences by joining two simple sentences.

Conjugating Verbs in the Present Tense

When you want to describe an action, you have a lot to consider besides which verb to use. You have to choose the right form of the verb that does all of the following:

- ✓ Matches the subject in person (first, second, or third) and number (singular or plural)
- ✓ Describes when the action is taking place (verb tense), which can be present, past, future, and so on
- ✓ Reflects the correct *mood* (the attitude of the speaker), which can be *indicative* (certain), *subjunctive* (uncertain or hopeful), *conditional* (what if), or *imperative* (commanding)
- ✓ Reflects the right voice (active or passive)

To conjugate a verb, you start with the infinitive form and add endings that represent the person, number, tense, mood, and voice. The following sections break down the process of conjugating verbs in the present tense.

Identifying infinitives

The *infinitive* form of a verb is pure action or being — when nobody’s doing it or being it and time doesn’t matter. In other words, the infinitive is the verb without a subject or tense. In English, you form the infinitive by adding *to* before the verb, as in *to run*, *to skip*, and *to jump*. In Spanish, the infinitive forms end in **-ar**, **-er**, or **-ir**. Here’s an example of each type of verb: **hablar** (*to talk, to speak*), **correr** (*to run*), and **vivir** (*to live*).

When you conjugate a verb, you start with the infinitive form, drop the ending, and add the appropriate conjugated ending according to the subject of the sentence and the tense that you’re using.

Establishing subject-verb agreement



To know which conjugated verb form to use, you need to know the subject of the verb — whatever or whoever is performing the action — because the verb must agree with the subject in both person (for example, *I*, *you*, or *he*) and number (for example, *I* is singular and *we* is plural). When conjugating verbs, use the subject pronouns that I list in the earlier section “Nouns and pronouns” to substitute for actual nouns.

Several different types of Spanish verbs exist; I outline their present tense conjugations in the following sections. You can turn to Chapter 6 for additional information on using the present tense.



Regular verbs

To conjugate most regular verbs in the present tense, you drop the infinitive's **-ar**, **-er**, or **-ir** ending to create the verb *stem* and then add the verb's present tense endings. The endings you add vary according to whether you're conjugating an **-ar**, **-er**, or **-ir** verb:

Verbs That End In

-ar

-er

-ir

Use These Endings

-o, -as, -a, -amos, -áis, -an

-o, -es, -e, -emos, -éis, -en

-o, -es, -e, -imos, -ís, -en

As you may have guessed, this gives you six forms of the verb. Here's an example, showing the verb **practicar** (*to practice*) conjugated in the present tense. Be sure to drop the **-ar** ending to form the stem (**practic-**) before adding the endings.

practicar (<i>to practice</i>)	
yo practico	nosotros/nosotras practicamos
tú practicas	vosotros/vosotras practicáis
él/ella/usted practica	ellos/ellas/ustedes practican



Unlike in English, you can usually tell who the subject of a Spanish sentence is just by looking at the verb ending. Thus, Spanish allows you to drop the subject out of your sentence when it's unnecessary. If I'm practicing something, for example, I don't have to say **yo practico**. I can simply say **practico**. Only two forms may be ambiguous — the third person singular and the third person plural. These two forms represent more than one possible subject; therefore, you have to establish who the subject is before you can drop it from the sentence.

Stem-changing, spelling-changing, and irregular verbs

Knowing how to conjugate regular verbs in the present tense is a great start, but unfortunately, Spanish has some stem-changing, spelling-changing, and irregular verbs that don't play by the rules:

- ✓ **Regular stem-changing verbs:** With regular stem-changing verbs, you don't just drop the verb ending to form the stem. In all conjugated forms except the **nosotros/nosotras** and the **vosotros/vosotras** forms, the stem changes from **e** to **i**, **o** to **ue**, or **e** to **ie**, as in the case of **empezar** (*to begin, to start*), whose stem changes from **empez-** to **empiez-**.
- ✓ **Regular spelling-changing verbs:** Certain verbs change spelling to help with pronunciation when the verb is conjugated into its different forms. For example, when conjugating **incluir** (*to include*), you drop the **-ir** ending and add **-y** in all forms except the **nosotros/nosotras** and the **vosotros/vosotras**.

- ✓ **Irregular verbs:** These verbs are just plain weird. Some change irregularly in the stem, while others change irregularly in the endings or only in certain forms, such as the **yo** form. For example, the **yo** form of **caber** (*to fit*) is **yo quepo**. The verb **estar** (*to be*) is irregular in all of its forms except the **nosotros/nosotras** and **vosotros/vosotras** forms. (*Note:* The verbs **estar** and **ser**, which both mean *to be*, are especially unusual; I discuss them in detail in Chapter 7.)

Composing a Simple Sentence

When you have some vocabulary under your belt and you know how to conjugate verbs, forming a simple sentence in Spanish is easy. All you do is start with a subject and then tack on a verb that agrees with the subject in person and number and reflects the desired tense, mood, and voice. One of the simplest sentences you can come up with is **Yo soy** (*I am*). In Spanish, you can simplify it even further — **Soy** (*I am*) — because the verb ending indicates the subject of the sentence.

After you have a simple sentence in place, you can start to embellish it with the other parts of speech that I describe earlier in this chapter — articles, adjectives, adverbs, pronouns, and prepositions — and use conjunctions to combine words, phrases, and even entire sentences! Head to Chapter 6 for an introduction to simple sentences in the present tense. In Chapter 8, you find out how to compose sentences in another simple tense — the present progressive.



Another very basic form of communication in any language is to express what you like and dislike. In Spanish, you do this with the verb **gustar** (*to be pleasing*). Turn to Chapter 10 for more details.



In Spanish (as in English), you sometimes need to express things in the negative, such as **Yo nunca quiero ver a ellos jamás** (*I never want to see them again*). Both languages use the word **no** for **no**, but they also have many other words that express the negative. For more on negative words and expressions, see Chapter 17.

Asking Questions

A good portion of daily communication revolves around asking and answering questions. One of the easiest ways to ask a **sí/no** (*yes/no*) question is to take a statement, like **Usted tiene un dolor de cabeza** (*You have a headache*) and bracket it with an upside-down and right-side-up question mark: **¿Usted tiene un dolor de cabeza?** (*Do you have a headache?*) (Literally: *You have a headache?*). Another option is to invert the subject and the verb, as in this example: **¿Tiene usted un dolor de cabeza?** Answering such questions, assuming you understand them, is easy. You just say **sí** or **no** or shake your head in agreement (or disagreement).

Asking an interrogative question to actually elicit some information is a little more difficult. First, you need to form your question by inverting the subject and verb. Then you have to add an interrogative word, such as **¿Quién(es) . . . ?** (*Who . . . ?*) or **¿Cuándo . . . ?** (*When . . . ?*), to the beginning of the sentence. Here's an example:

¿Cuándo quieren ellos ir al cine? (*When do they want to go to the movies?*)

Obviously, answering an interrogative question and understanding the answer to an interrogative question you asked are more challenging than dealing with a **sí/no** question, because you have to deal with additional information. If you've ever asked someone for directions in a Spanish-speaking country, you know what I mean.

To answer an interrogative question, you drop the interrogative word, invert the question to place the subject at the beginning, and then add the information being requested. Here's an example:

¿Cuándo quieren ellos ir al cine? (*When do they want to go to the movies?*)

Ellos quieren ir al cine a las 7:00 de la noche. (*They want to go to the movies at 7:00 p.m.*)

Do you have additional questions about Spanish questions? Chapter 11 gives you the info you're looking for.

Moving On to Other Verb Tenses

Spanish has fourteen verb “tenses” — seven simple and seven compound tenses. (I put “tenses” in quotes because some tenses are really a combination of tense and mood.) In this book, I focus on the four simple tenses you use most often: present, preterit (past), imperfect (ongoing past action), and future. I also explain how to combine a verb with a helping verb to transform simple tenses into compound tenses, which include the pluperfect (more past than the past tense) and future perfect (an action completed before another future action).

The following sections introduce you to the three main simple tenses (besides the present tense, which I cover earlier in this chapter) and the compound tenses.



Like English, in addition to different tenses, Spanish has different voices — active and passive. With the active voice, the subject performs the action, as in **El mecánico arregló el coche** (*The mechanic repaired the car*). With the passive voice, the subject of the sentence receives the action, as in **El coche fue arreglado por el mecánico** (*The car was repaired by the mechanic*). For more about the passive voice, see Chapter 15.

Preterit and imperfect

The *preterit* or *past tense*, which I explain in Chapter 18, describes action that's been completed or is clearly in the past. Use the preterit like the past tense in English. Here's an example:

Ustedes salieron a las nueve. (*You [plural] left at nine.*)

The *imperfect tense* is vague and imprecise, the equivalent to *used to* or *always* in English, as in **Yo solía ir a las corridas de toros** (*I used to go to the bullfight*). The action occurred in the past, but you don't know exactly when it occurred. You may also use the imperfect to describe two or more ongoing past actions that occurred simultaneously, as in **Mientras mi mamá cocinaba mi padre leía el periódico** (*While my mom was cooking, my father was reading the newspaper*). Chapter 19 provides additional examples, along with more uses for the imperfect.



When choosing whether to use the preterit or the imperfect to describe a past action, keep in mind that the preterit describes an action or a series of actions completed in the past — they're done, over, stick a fork in it. The preterit also expresses an action, event, or state of mind that happened in the past and was completed at a specific moment or period. The imperfect describes an ongoing or continuous past action, without focusing on the beginning or end.

Future

The future tense describes what *will* or *might* happen. Use the future tense to

- ✓ Describe an action or a state of being that will occur in the future, as in the following example:

Yo limpiaré la casa este fin de semana. (*I will clean the house this weekend.*)

- ✓ Express probability or conjecture in the present. In English, you'd do this with such terms as *I wonder*, *could it be*, *must be*, and *probably*, as in the following example:

¿Serán ya las diez? (*Could it already be ten?*)

You *will* find out more about the future tense in Chapter 20.



Whether you're describing present, past, or future events, you often need to add some specific words about when the action occurred, such as **el sábado a las diez** (*on Saturday at ten o'clock*). To find out about numbers, dates, and time, check out Chapter 5.

Compound

The *compound tenses* (also referred to as *complex tenses*) add the verb **haber** (*to have*) to the main verb so that a verb in the past tense can be more past, a conditional statement can be completed, and a future action can be finished. Spanish has seven compound tenses. The two most commonly used compound tenses are

- ✓ **Present perfect:** Describes actions that *have happened* — recently completed actions, as in **Yo he comido un sandwich** (*I have eaten a sandwich*), and past actions that continue to remain true, as in **Yo he comido aquí todos los sábados por cinco años** (*I have eaten here every Saturday for five years*).
- ✓ **Pluperfect:** The *pluperfect* describes actions that happened in the past before another past action. It's the same as saying that something *had happened* in English. For example, in the sentence **Ellos habían comido antes de llegar** (*They had eaten before arriving*), the eating happened before they arrived.

Compound tenses are made up of two elements:

- ✓ **Helping verb:** All compound tenses require the *helping verb* (or *auxiliary verb*) **haber** (*to have*).

✓ **Past participle of the action verb:** All compound tenses require the past participle, or the ed/en form, of the verb whose action has or had been done. In Spanish, you form the past participle of most verbs by adding **-ado** or **-ido** to the end of the verb's stem:

- For an **-ar** verb, drop the **-ar** and add **-ado**.
- For an **-er** verb, drop the **-er** and add **-ido**.
- For an **-ir** verb, drop the **-ir** and add **-ido**.

The great thing about the compound tenses is that you don't have to learn how to conjugate a bunch of different verbs. All you need to know is how to conjugate **haber** and how to form the past participle of the action verb. Find out all the details about compound tenses in Chapter 21.

Wondering “What If” with the Conditional Mood

The *conditional mood* describes what will or would happen if something else occurs. You can use the conditional to describe something you (or someone else) would like or would do, to conjecture about something that occurred in the past (what might have happened), or to express probability about a past action (what must have happened).

Forming the conditional with regular **-ar**, **-er**, and **-ir** verbs is pretty easy. You take the entire verb infinitive (don't drop anything) and then add the imperfect verb endings you use for **-er** and **-ir** verbs (see Chapter 19). Following are the three different types of verbs conjugated in the conditional.

preparar (to prepare)	
yo prepararía	nosotros/nosotras prepararíamos
tú prepararías	vosotros/vosotras prepararíais
él/ella/usted prepararía	ellos/ellas/ustedes prepararían

vender (to sell)	
yo vendería	nosotros/nosotras venderíamos
tú venderías	vosotros/vosotras venderíais
él/ella/usted vendería	ellos/ellas/ustedes venderían

escribir (to write)	
yo escribiría	nosotros/nosotras escribiríamos
tú escribirías	vosotros/vosotras escribiríais
él/ella/usted escribiría	ellos/ellas/ustedes escribirían

Here's an example of a very basic use of the conditional:

Me gustaría tomar un refresco. (*I would like to have a soft drink.*)

You can find out more about the conditional mood in Chapter 22.

Forming Simple Commands

Use the *imperative mood* to give commands — to tell someone what to do or what not to do. In most cases, you bark out commands in one of the *you* forms, **tú** (*you* singular, informal), **usted** (*you* singular, formal), **vosotros/vosotras** (*you* plural, informal), or **ustedes** (*you* plural, formal). But you can also use the **nosotros** (*we*) form of the imperative so that your command comes across as more of a “Let’s . . .” suggestion than a direct command.



The imperative is called a *mood* rather than a tense because it deals with wants and desires and because the time is always *now*.

To form singular informal commands, drop the **-s** from the present tense **tú** form of the regular **-ar**, **-er**, and **-ir** verbs:

Hablas. (*You speak.*) becomes **¡Habla!** (*Speak!*)

Comes. (*You eat.*) becomes **¡Come!** (*Eat!*)

Escribes. (*You write.*) becomes **¡Escribe!** (*Write!*)

To form negative singular informal commands, add **No** (*No*) to the beginning of the sentence, remove the **-o** from the present tense **yo** form of the verb, and add **-es** for regular **-ar** verbs and **-as** for regular **-er** and **-ir** verbs, as in the following examples:

Hablo. (*I speak.*) becomes **¡No hables!** (*Don't speak!*)

Como. (*I eat.*) becomes **¡No comas!** (*Don't eat!*)

Escribo. (*I write.*) becomes **¡No escribas!** (*Don't write!*)



In Spanish, you can use an upside-down exclamation point at the beginning of your command and a right-side-up exclamation point at the end to show emphasis.

Singular informal commands should enable you to tell all the people within shouting distance what to do. However, you still need to know how to form commands in the informal plural and the formal singular and plural. For all that, skip to Chapter 23.