

1. Introduction to Spanish Pronunciation

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Like all Romance languages, Spanish uses the Latin alphabet, so it'll be a lot easier to learn if your native language uses this alphabet. This is especially true if it's another Romance language, such as Portuguese or Italian. As for pronunciation, this too is easier for those who already speak a similar language. But luckily, [Spanish alphabet](#) pronunciation isn't that hard to learn for *anyone*.

Spanish has noticeably fewer sounds than English, both for consonants and vowels. But what's more important is that ninety-nine percent of the time you pronounce just what's written. This is thanks to the simplicity of its *phonology*, which is the distribution of sounds in a language.

Most Spanish sounds are similar to English sounds. It can be confusing, however, that a few of these sounds are found in different letters than they are in English. For example, the *th* sound in "**Th**ursday" can be found in Iberian Spanish; but you'll actually find it in the letter *z* and sometimes *c*. For example, in the words *zapato* ("shoe") and *cera* ("wax"). Again, we realize this might be confusing, but we'll see more on this later.

2. Top Five Mistakes to Avoid

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Spanish alphabet pronunciation does have its difficult spots. Let's take a look at some common Spanish language pronunciation errors to avoid!

1- Do not pronounce the letter *h* when it's by itself.

For example, the word *hola*, [which we're sure you all know](#), is pronounced as if it was spelled *ola* (which is actually another word that means "wave"). This is quite a common mistake, so be careful!

2- Don't mistake *ñ* for *n*.

We know they look similar, but they're definitely not the same. The letter *n* is the normal one we all know. The sound for *ñ* is a sound you might have heard before, but it's not that common. The Spanish *ñ* is equivalent to *gn* in Italian, as in "lasagna," or the *nh* in Portuguese, among others.

Here's an example that we're sure will make you remember that they're different: *año* means "year," but *ano* means "anus." That's definitely a mistake you don't want to make.

The *ñ* sounds like *ni* in "onion." While that isn't completely precise, it's a good start if you're not sure how to pronounce it.

3- The letters *v* and *b* have the same pronunciation, but it changes depending on their position in a word.

When it comes to pronunciation, the letters *v* and *b* are essentially the same letter in Spanish and they always sound more like a *b*. However, their pronunciation does vary between two different sounds. Like we just mentioned, they're pretty much the same letter, so this pronunciation doesn't depend on whether it's a *b* or a *v*; it depends on its position within the word.

Basically, at the beginning of a word, both the *v* and the *b* will sound like a hard *b*, nearly the same as the English sound for *b*. If this sound is in the middle of a word, especially in-between vowels, it's a much softer *b*. To try this sound, you need to do the *b* sound, but without letting your lips touch very much.

4- Never pronounce the letters *j* and *g* as in the *j* in "juice."

The English sound for the letter *j* doesn't exist in Spanish, so anytime you want to use it—don't. The sound we have in Spanish doesn't exist in English either, and it would be something like the English sound for *h*, but harder...sort of as if you wanted to spit, but shorter. Yes, we realize that's probably not the nicest way of describing it, but it's definitely the easiest way to help you understand it.

In a little bit, we'll show you exactly when you should use this sound when you find the letter *g*, and when you shouldn't.

5- Never pronounce the letter *z* like you would in English.

Just like we mentioned before, the sound for *z* isn't the one you would use in English; it's the sound you find in words like "thin."

Remember that we're learning Standard Iberian Spanish! In Latin America and some parts of southern Spain, the letter *z* is actually pronounced like an *s*.

6- Don't pronounce the letter *u* in *que, qui, gue, or gui*.

Before, we said that in Spanish, ninety-nine percent of the time you pronounce what's written. Well, here's the exception. Whenever you see any of these four combinations inside a word (*que, qui, gue, gui*), you never pronounce the *u*.

To better understand how this works, take the word "guitar" in English. It has a *u*, but do you pronounce it? No; you jump straight from the *g* to the *i*. Well, this is what happens in Spanish every time you see one of these combinations. It happens in common words such as *qué*, which means "what" or *queso*, which means "cheese."

However, there's also an exception to the exception. Not as commonly, sometimes you'll see *qüe, qüi, güe, or güi*. The two little dots above the *u* aren't as important in Spanish as they are in German, and can only be found on top of a *u*. Well, whenever you find this, you *do* have to pronounce the *u*. An example is the word *pingüino*, which is very similar to its translation in English and means "penguin."

3. Vowel Sounds in Spanish

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When it comes to vowels, Spanish is much simpler than English. While English has what feels like a million different vowel sounds, some long and some short, in Spanish we only have five different vowels, which are the written ones that you all know (*a, e, i, o, u*), and they're always short.

The pronunciation of the vowels is a bit different though.

- The "a" sounds like animal,
- "e" like elefante,
- the "i" like Ibiza,
- the "o" is a shorter and crisper version of the English "o",
- and "u" sounds more like "oo".

When you see a written vowel in English, it will often be pronounced in two sounds. For example, the letter *u* in the word "unit" requires a diphthong, or two different sounds, before the *n*. This will never happen in Spanish.

We think Spanish vowels are much easier to understand if you can hear them, and that's why we have this amazing Spanish Vowels & Diphthongs video above with each of these sounds for you to listen to and practice with us.

4. Consonant Sounds in Spanish

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The language has a large number of consonants as well, and for the most part the consonants are going to sound just like their English counterparts sound.

Some of the consonants in Spanish pronunciation are quite different though, and it is important to recognize them.

- The letter “h” alone has no sound. It is a silent letter.
- Pairing a “c” in front of the “h” gives a ch sound as in chorizo or Chihuahua. Not that the other “h”s in Chihuahua are silent.
- The “j” can change based on the speaker. Those who are speaking traditional Spanish will have the “j” make an “h” sound.
- The letter ñ actually has a “ny” sound to it. Thus, the word Español is going to have the ny sound in the third syllable.
- The letter “v” is English, and it sounds just like “b”.

These are just some of the many differences that you are going to encounter with the consonants. Learning proper Spanish pronunciation might seem like it will take a long time because of all of the differences, but you will find that it really isn’t too hard once you break things down. Understanding the differences in the Spanish language , and how it can even differ from speakers in Mexico to speakers in Spain is important in grasping the language and being able to speak it fluently.

1- Familiar Sounds

For this list of Spanish pronunciation rules for consonants, let’s start with the sounds you already know in English. Some of these are found in the same letters you have in English, but some aren’t. To help you better understand these sounds, we’ve included some Spanish pronunciation to English examples.

- **b**

Like we mentioned before, the letters *b* and *v* have the same sound in Spanish, even though it can change according to its position within a word.

Examples: *llave* (“key”); *abuela* (“grandmother”).

- **ch**

We mentioned that we don’t pronounce the *h* when it’s by itself. In this case, you’ll find the *ch* sound in the exact same environment as in English, and it’s pronounced the same way. Example: *coche* (“car”).

- **d**

The Spanish sound for *d* is quite similar to the English one, but it's not exactly the same. What happens with the *d* sound in Spanish is the same thing that happens to *b*. When this sound is in the middle of a word, it's pronounced much lighter than it would be at the beginning of the word. Here, it's not about the lips; it's about not letting your teeth touch your tongue very much so that it sounds lighter. Example: **dedo** ("finger").

- **f**

The *f* sound is the same in English and in Spanish. Example: **café** ("coffee").

- **g**

We already mentioned that the *j/g* sound that we find in words like "cage" doesn't exist in Spanish, so here we're talking about the other *g* sound, such as in "gray." The letter *g* is pronounced this way when it's in front of another consonant or the vowels *a*, *o*, or *u*. Examples: **grande** ("big"); **agujero** ("hole").

- **k**

The letter *k* is rather uncommon in Spanish, and the few times we find it, it's in foreign words such as *karate*, *kiwi*, *karaoke*, etc. However, we find this sound in more letters, such as *q*, which is much more common in Spanish than in English. Sometimes it's also found in the letter *c*.

When I say sometimes, it's because of a rule that's actually very similar in English. This rule also applies to a sound earlier in this list. The letter *c* is only pronounced like a *k* when it's in front of the vowels *a*, *o*, or *u*, or in front of another consonant. This rule is the same in English, so it should be easy to follow.

Examples: **casa** ("house"); **querer** ("to want").

- **l**

The sound for *l* is the same in both English and in Spanish. Example: **alma** ("soul").

- **m**

The sound for *m* in Spanish is the same as in English. Example: **mano** ("hand").

- **n**

Another easy one. The sound for *n* has the exact same pronunciation as it does in English. Example: *nariz* ("nose").

- **p**

Again, the *p* sound is the same in English and in Spanish. Example: *desaparecer* ("to disappear").

- **s**

The *s* sound is exactly the same in Spanish and in English. The only thing you need to keep in mind is that in standard Iberian Spanish, you'll only use this sound when the word is spelled with the letter *s*, never with a *c*. Example: *serpiente* ("snake").

- **t**

The *t* sound is the final easy sound for us to explain. In Spanish, we always pronounce a hard *t*, as it is in English at the beginning of a word, like in the word "table." Example: *antes* ("before").

- **th**

The last of our familiar sounds is one that we mentioned previously in this article. Like we said, we share this exact sound, but it's found in a much different context. In Spanish, we find this sound any time there's the letter *z*, as well as any time *c* isn't pronounced like a *k*. This means that you have to use the *th* sound every time the letter *c* is followed by the vowels *e* or *i*. Examples: *cena* ("dinner"); *zorro* ("fox").

- **y**

The pronunciation of the *//* or double *l* (in Spanish, *elle*) might differ slightly in some Spanish regions, but you should never pronounce it like a regular *l*. Even though it's not exactly the same sound in all areas, you can't go wrong if you pronounce both *y* and *//* like a *y*, as in the word "young." This ensures that everyone understands you. Examples: *llorar* ("to cry"); *ayer* ("yesterday").

2- New Sounds:

- **j**

We've already mentioned this sound. It's the one that kind of sounds like you want to spit. It's used any time you find the letter *j*, as well as whenever you see the letter *g* in a different environment than the one used for the other *g* sound (every time it's in front of the vowels *e* or *i*). Examples: ***justicia*** ("justice"); ***girasol*** ("sunflower").

- **ñ**

We've also explained this sound before, so it doesn't require another explanation. Just keep in mind that it's not a regular *n*! Even though it can be at the beginning of a word, the most common place you'll find it is in the middle of a word, always in-between two vowels. Examples: ***español*** ("Spanish"); ***muñeca*** ("doll").

- **r**

Here comes the tough one. There are two different kinds of *r* in Spanish: the hard one (the trilled *r*) and the soft one.

Let's start with the soft *r*. This sound actually exists in American English, but it's not considered an *r*, so it might be confusing. You can find it in words like "water," "bottle," "doodle," and "little." In British English, this is pronounced like a hard *t* or a regular *d* in the case of "doodle," but in American English we get the *r* sound we're looking for. We can find this sound in the middle of a word when there's a single *r* in-between two vowels, between a vowel and a consonant, or at the end of a word.

Examples: ***araña*** ("spider"); ***actriz*** ("actress"); ***sombrero*** ("hat"); ***andar*** ("to walk").

We know that to many Spanish learners, the trilled *r* can be a nightmare, both pronouncing it and knowing whether it should be a hard or soft *r*. An *r* is trilled when you find it at the beginning of a word, and whenever the word is spelled with a double *r* (which you can only find in-between vowels).

Examples: ***ratón*** ("mouse"); ***aburrido*** ("bored"); ***arreglar*** ("to fix"); ***romper*** ("to break"). Notice that in the last two examples, there's an *r* at the end. But as we mentioned before, whenever you find an *r* at the end of a word, it's pronounced as a soft *r*.

Though if you want to learn Spanish pronunciation from a native speaker, you can upgrade your account to take advantage of our [MyTeacher program!](#)

Further, it may help to look for Spanish pronunciation exercises online to help you trill your *r*'s more like a native.

5. How to Improve Spanish Pronunciation

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Wondering how to practice Spanish pronunciation and how to improve Spanish pronunciation overall?

In order to improve your pronunciation in any language, there's no doubt that the best thing you can do when learning is to listen to native speakers and practice as much as

you can. You can learn the theory, but only when you pay attention to the way people speak can you understand each of these sounds completely.

An important part of good Spanish pronunciation isn't related to sounds, but rather to when syllables should (or shouldn't) be stressed. If you know the accentuation rules in Spanish, it will be easy to know exactly how to stress it when you see it written. If you don't know them, they might seem complicated at first. But they're actually quite simple once you know them.

In Spanish, we divide words according to their stressed syllable. If a word has an accent, we know we have to stress the syllable where the accent is. If it doesn't have one, we can learn to find out where the stress is anyway. Let's take a quick look at these rules and Spanish pronunciation words.

1- ***Palabras agudas***

In *palabras agudas*, the stressed syllable is the last one. These words require an accent when the word ends in *n*, in *s*, or in a vowel.

Examples:

- *Camión* → ca - **mión** ("truck")
- *Cantar* → can - **tar** ("to sing")
- *País* → pa - **ís** ("country")
- *Bebé* → be - **bé** ("baby")

2- ***Palabras llanas***

In *palabras llanas*, the stressed syllable is the second to last. These words have the opposite rule as *palabras agudas*. This means that they're accentuated when they end in any consonant that isn't *n* or *s*.

Examples:

- *Dólar* → **dó** - lar ("dollar")
- *Fútbol* → **fút** - bol ("football")
- *Nube* → **nu** - be ("cloud")
- *Resumen* → re - **su** - men ("summary")

3- *Palabras esdrújulas*

In *palabras esdrújulas*, the stressed syllable is the third to last. All *esdrújulas* words need to be accentuated. There's only one exception to this rule, and that is when the word is an adverb that's formed by an adjective and followed by *-mente*. In this case, the word keeps the accent that it would (or wouldn't) have in the original word, the adjective.

Examples:

- *Química* → **quí** - mi - ca ("chemistry")
- *Sábado* → **sá** - ba - do ("Saturday")
- *Romántico* → ro - **mán** - ti - co ("romantic")
- *Matemáticas* → ma - te - **má** - ti - cas ("Math")
- *Felizmente* → fe - **liz** - men - te ("happily")

4- *Palabras sobreesdrújulas*

Palabras sobreesdrújulas are the least common, and in these words, the stressed syllable is even before the third to last syllable. Many of these words are, in fact, part of the previously mentioned category of adverbs that end in *-mente*. Just like before, these words only have an accent if the word without *-mente* would have it as well.

Other *sobreesdrújulas* include verbs that have pronouns attached to them. In this case, they always require an accent.

Examples:

- *Rápidamente* → **rá** - pi - da - men - te ("quickly")
- *Véndemelo* → **vén** - de - me - lo ("sell it to me")
- *Firmándose* → fir - **mán** - do - se - la ("signing it to him/her")

In our [Ultimate Spanish Pronunciation Guide of Stress & Accentuation](#) lesson, you can learn much more about these rules, as well as their exceptions.

There are also some tips for improving your pronunciation that are always helpful. Take a look at our [Best Ways to Improve Pronunciation](#) page.

6. Hard Words to Pronounce and How to Overcome

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There are many words that might seem hard at first, but because Spanish phonology is relatively simple, as soon as you read them out loud a few times, you should be fine. Only words with sounds you've never used before can be a proper challenge.

For most, the hardest sound to pronounce is the trilled *r*, so obviously words that include this sound will be quite difficult. For example, the word *perrera*, which means "dog pound," includes both Spanish *r*'s.

Even though the *th* sound in *z* and *c* is quite common in English, it might become hard to say when you find it twice in a word, such as in *zurcir*, which means "to mend" or "to sew."

Other hard sounds in Spanish include the *j* that we've mentioned a couple of times in this article. So the first time you try to pronounce it, it might be hard to say words like *jamón* ("ham"), but you can do this!