The main difference is that `tener` means **"to have"**
(possession), while `tener que` means **"to have to"**
(obligation) to do something. ✐
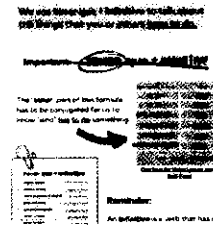
Tener (To Have)

`Tener` is used to express possession of objects, physical traits, age, and various
idiomatic expressions related to physical states. ✐

- **Possession:**

  - *Tengo un coche.* (I have a car.)

  - *Ella tiene tres libros.* (She has three books.)

- **Age:**

  - *¿Cuántos años tienes?* (How old are you? - literally: How many years do you
    have?)

  - *Tengo diecisiete años.* (I am seventeen years old.)

- **Idiomatic Expressions (physical states):**

  - *Tengo hambre.* (I am hungry - literally: I have hunger.)

  - *Tengo frío.* (I am cold - literally: I have cold.)

  - *Tengo sueño.* (I am sleepy/tired.) ✐

Tener que (To Have To / Must) ✐

`Tener que` is a phrase used to express a specific, personal obligation or necessity to
perform an action. It is always followed by a verb in its **infinitive form** (the dictionary
form ending in -ar, -er, or -ir), which does not change. ✐

The structure is: **Conjugated** `tener` **+** `que` **+ Infinitive verb.** ✐

- **Obligation/Necessity:**

  - *Tengo que estudiar.* (I have to study.)

- *Tienes que llamar a mamá.* (You have to call mum.)

- *Él tiene que trabajar mañana.* (He has to work tomorrow.) 🔗

Key Takeaway

Phrase 🔗	Meaning	Usage	Example
Tener	To have	Possession, age, certain states	*Tengo dinero.* (I have money.)
Tener que	To have to	Personal obligation/necessity	*Tengo que irme.* (I have to go.)

You must conjugate the verb tener to match the subject of the sentence in both cases. For example, in the present tense, the forms are: 🔗

- (Yo) **tengo**

- (Tú) **tienes**

- (Él/Ella/Usted) **tiene**

- (Nosotros) **tenemos**

- (Vosotros) **tenéis**

- (Ellos/Ellas/Ustedes) **tienen**

3 ways to express obligation in Spanish: 'deber', 'tener que' and 'hay que'

The Coffee Break Spanish Show - Season 2, Episode 3

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Knowing how to appropriately express obligation in Spanish is a useful aspect to get to grips with if you're a learner of the language. In Spanish, there are three main phrases used to convey that someone must or has to do something: **deber**, **tener que** and **hay que**.

Understanding these expressions is useful for many everyday situations, but it's also a topic that our Coffee Break community asks us about a lot, as it can be difficult to know when and how to use each expression.

The Coffee Break Spanish Show is a series of podcast episodes, in which we tackle tricky topics for Spanish learners. In this episode, join Anabel and Concha to learn how to express obligation in Spanish using these 3 main expressions.

So, let's get started with looking at **deber**, **tener que** and **hay que** in Spanish, and we'd suggest you listen along to the podcast episode as you read.

1. 'deber' + infinitive

The verb **deber** in Spanish is used to express a strong sense of obligation and it is the equivalent of the English word "must".

Let's start by reviewing the conjugation of **deber.** The good news is that it is a regular verb in the present tense.

> **deber** conjugation – present tense
>
> **(yo) debo**
>
> **(tú) debes**
>
> **(él/ella/usted) debe**
>
> **(nosotros/nosotras) debemos**
>
> **(vosotros/vosotras) debéis**
>
> **(ellos/ellas/ustedes) deben**

To say that someone must do something, we conjugate **deber** according to the person, then add the second verb in its infinitive form. Let's see some examples:

> **Debemos hacer los deberes.**
>
> *We must do our homework.*

> **Debes aprender idiomas.**
>
> *You must learn languages (addressing one person, a specific "you").*

Pay attention to the next example, which is slightly different.

> **Se debe reciclar.**
>
> *You / one / everyone must recycle (addressing a general "you").*

While **deber** + infinitive can be used to say what an individual person or group of people must do, the construction **se debe** + infinitive expresses a more general obligation in Spanish – something that everyone, or people in general must do.

2. 'tener que' + infinitive

The phrase **tener que** in Spanish conveys a slightly less strong sense of obligation compared to **deber**. It translates as "to have to" in English and is commonly used in everyday situations.

The verb **tener** was the focus of the previous episode of *The Coffee Break Spanish Show*, in which we learned 10 other everyday phrases that use **tener**. So, in this episode we're adding an 11th common, everyday **tener** expression: **tener que**.

Tener is an irregular verb in the present tense, so let's start by reviewing its conjugation:

> **tener** conjugation – present tense
> **(yo) tengo**
> **(tú) tienes**
> **(él/ella/usted) tiene**
> **(nosotros/nosotras) tenemos**
> **(vosotros/vosotras) tenéis**
> **(ellos/ellas/ustedes) tienen**

To say that someone has to do something, we conjugate **tener** according to the person, then add **que**, followed by the second verb in its infinitive form. Let's see some examples:

> **Tengo que repasar los verbos irregulares.**
> *I have to review / go over the irregular verbs.*

> **Tenéis que llamar a mamá.**
> *You (plural) have to call mum.*

As we just saw with **deber**, **tener que** also has an alternative construction using **se**. Like **se debe** + infinitive, **se tiene que** + infinitive is used to express a wider obligation in Spanish – addressing people in general, rather than one specific person or group of people. For example:

Se tiene que cuidar el planeta.

You / one / everyone has to take care of the planet (addressing a general "you").

In many contexts, **tener que** and **deber** are roughly interchangeable, so don't worry too much about using one over the other to express obligation in Spanish. Just remember that **tener que** uses **que** after the conjugated verb, while **deber** does not.

3. 'hay que'

The third expression we're going to look at for expressing obligation in Spanish is **hay que**. **Hay que** + infinitive is only used to indicate a general obligation, just like **se debe** or **se tiene que**, and it conveys a similar idea to "one must" or "it is necessary to" in English.

And the good news with **hay que** is that we don't have to think about conjugating the verb – it is a set expression that is simply followed by the infinitive. Let's see some examples:

Hay que limpiar la casa.
One has to clean the house. / You (general) have to clean the house. / The house has to be cleaned.

Hay que ser puntual.
One has to be punctual. / You (general) have to be punctual.

Using **hay que** in Spanish is particularly useful when you want to express an obligation without targeting anyone specifically, by turning a direct suggestion into a more general statement.

In the podcast episode, Anabel gives us a great example: imagine you've been the one cleaning the house every time for the last while, and you think it's time others helped out. In this situation, you might say **hay que limpiar la casa** to make the statement more general and less direct than if you were to say **debes limpiar la casa** or **tienes que limpiar la casa.**

A visual summary of expressions of obligation in Spanish

How to express **obligation**

deber + infinitive
must do something

se debe + infinitive
one must do something

tener que + infinitive
to have to do something

se tiene que + infinitive
one has to do something

hay que + infinitive
one has to do something