

# Learning Spanish—The Basics

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## Hablas Español: At least Try!

You've heard it before...and if you've traveled much internationally, you know it to be true. If you at least try to speak the local language, you will be treated with much more respect than someone who doesn't make the effort.

## A quick pronunciation primer

If you are a native English speaker, the pronunciation of Spanish vowels should be fairly easy. Close approximations of all their sounds exist in English, and, with the exception of the E and the sometimes silent U, all the vowels have basically one sound. The most important thing to remember is that in Spanish, vowel sounds are generally more distinct than they are in English.

In English, any vowel can be represented by what's known as the *schwa*, an unstressed vowel sound such as the "a" in "across," the "ai" in "mountain," the "e" in "children" and the "u's" in "conundrum." But in Spanish, the indistinct *schwa* sound isn't used. Although, (as in most languages) the sounds of the vowels can vary slightly with the letters before and after them, in general the sound remains the same regardless of the word it's in.

### Generally:

- **A** is pronounced similarly to the "a" in "father" or the soft "o" in "loft." Examples: *madre*, *ambos*, *mapa*.
- **I** is pronounced similarly to the "ee" in "deed" and the "e" in "me," although usually a little briefer. Examples: *finca*, *timbre*, *mi*.
- **O** is pronounced like the "oa" in "coat" or the "o" in "dote," although usually a little briefer. Example: *teléfono*, *amo*, *foco*.
- **E** is generally pronounced like the "ai" in "trail" or the "ay" in "gray." Examples: *café*, *compadre*. Sometimes, when it is at the beginning of a word, it is pronounced similarly to the Canadian "eh." Example: *escuela*.
- **U** is generally pronounced like the "oo" in "boot" or the "u" in "dude." Don't pronounce it like the "u" in "uniform." Examples: *universo*, *reunión*, *unidos*. In the combinations "gui" and "gue," as well as after "q," the "u" is silent. Examples: *guía*, *guerra*, *quizás*. If the "u" should be pronounced between a "g" and "i" or "e," an *umlaut* (sometimes called a *dieresis*) is placed over it. Examples: *vergüenza*, *lingüista*.
- **Y** is generally pronounced the same as it would if it were an "i," as part of a diphthong. Examples: *rey*, *soy*, *yacer*. Some words that are derived from English and have a "y" at the end often retain the English pronunciation. For example, in popular songs you may hear words such as *sexy* and phrases such as *oh baby*.

**What's a diphthong? A triphthong?** As in English, two or three vowels in Spanish can blend together to form a sound. The sound is basically the sound of the two or three vowels rapidly pronounced. For example, the “u” when followed by an “a,” “e,” “i,” or “o” ends up sounding something like the “w” in “water.” Examples: *cuaderno, cuerpo, cuota*. The “ai” combination sounds something like the sound of “eye.” Example: *airear*. The “i” when followed by an “a,” “e,” “i,” or “u” sounds kind of like the “y” in “yellow.” Examples: *hierba, bien, siete*.

## The basics of good manners

Mexicans are very polite. When they pass you on the street, they always greet you...whether or not they know you personally. When you ask directions, they will always give them...whether or not they actually know how to get where you want to go...but that's a different story. The point is, in this very polite society, it is important for you to, at the very least, know how to say hello, goodbye, and most importantly, please and thank you.

**Tip: The accent is usually on the second syllable.** If you don't see an accent mark elsewhere in the written word, it is a good bet that the emphasis should be placed on the second syllable of the word.

### Here goes:

Please	-	Por favor (por-fa-BOR)
Thank you	-	Gracias (GRAH-see-us)
Thanks very much	-	Muchas gracias (Moo-chuss GRA-see-us)
Hello	-	Hola (OH-la)
Good morning	-	Buenos Dias (BWAY-nos DEE-us)
Good afternoon	-	Buenos Tardes (BWAY-nos TAR-dase)
Good night	-	Buenos Noches (BWAY-nos NO-chus)
Good bye	-	Adiós (ah-dee-OHSS)
How are you?	-	Cómo está? (CO-mo ess-TAH)
How's it going?	-	Qué tal? (KAY tall)
Nice to meet you	-	Mucho gusto (Moo-cho GOOSE-toe)
You're very kind	-	Muy amable (Moo-ee ah-MAH-blai)
See you later	-	Hasta luego (OSS-ta Loo-AY-go)

Remember...you can use “buenos noches” as both a greeting and a farewell.

Frequently, when you say good bye to someone, they may respond “Qué le vaya bien.” Pronounced kay luh VY-uh bee-EN, it means “Go (or travel) well.” You can respond by saying “Muchas gracias” or “Muy amable.” (“Thank you,” or you're “very kind.”)

## Let's talk food: restaurant speak

Eating in a restaurant in a foreign country can often be very intimidating. Even for the adventuresome eater. So, to help prepare you for the adventure of eating in Mexico, here is a start:

Mexican food	-	La comida Mexicana (la co-MEE-dah May-hee-CON-ah)
A bottle of water	-	Una botella de agua (oon-ah boh-TAY-ah day AW-gwa)
Breakfast	-	El desayuno (ell day-say-OO-no)
The main meal, usually lunch	-	La comida (la co-MEE-dah)
Dinner/supper	-	La Cena (la SAY-na)
Menu	-	Una carta (OO-nah CAR-tah)
Purified water	-	Agua purificada (AW-gwa poo-ree-fee-CAH-dah)

Drinks	-	Bebidas (bay-BEE-dahs)
Snacks	-	Botanas (boh-TAH-nahs)
Beef	-	Carne de res (CAR-nay day rays)
Pork	-	Cerda (or puerco) (SAYR-dah or PWAIR-coh)
Fish	-	Pescado (Pays-CAH-doh)
Shrimp	-	Camarones (Cah-mah-ROW-nays)
Chicken	-	Pollo (POH-yoh)
Vegetables	-	Verduras (vair-DOO-rahhs)
Salad	-	Ensalada (ayn-sah-LAH-da)
Beer	-	Cerveza (sair-VAY-sah)
Wine	-	Vino (BEE-noh)
Soft drink	-	Refresco (ray-FRAYS-coh)
Iced tea	-	Te healdo (tay hay-LAH-doh) .

Would you like something to drink?	-	Gustan algo para tomar? (GOOstahn AL-goh pah-ra toh-MAR)
The check, please.	-	La cuenta, por favor (la CWAYN-ta por fah-vor)
Where is the bathroom?	-	Donde está el baño?" (DON-day ays-TAH ell BONN-yoh?)

#### Note

- When eating out, Mexicans eat at different times than we do north of the border. *La comida*, for instance, is usually served after 2 pm. *La cena* rarely starts before 8 pm.
- La carta may be divided into *antojitos* (an-toh-HEE-tohs) or appetizers, *el plato fuerte* (ell plah-toh FWAIR-tay) or main dish, and *postres* (POH-strays) or desserts.

## What day is it?

#### Days of the week:

Sunday	-	Domingo (doh-MEEN-goh)
Monday	-	Lunes (LOO-nais)
Tuesday	-	Martes (MAHR-tais)
Wednesday	-	Miércoles (mee-AIR-coh-lais)
Thursday	-	Jueves (WHAI-vaís)
Friday	-	Viernes (vee-AIR-nais)
Saturday	-	Sábado (SAH-bah-doh)

#### Months:

January	-	Enero (eh-NEHR-oh)
February	-	Febrero (fay-BREHR-oh)
March	-	Marzo (MAHR-soh)
April	-	Abril (ah-BREEL)
May	-	Mayo (MY-oh)
June	-	Junio (HOO-nee-oh)
July	-	Julio (HOO-lee-oh)
August	-	Agosto (ah-GHOST-oh)
September	-	Septiembre (sep-tee-AIM-breh)
October	-	Octubre (oak-TOO-breh)
November	-	Noviembre (noh-vee-AIM-breh)
December	-	December (day-see-AIM-breh)

**What time is it?** The great thing about Mexico is that nobody cares! If you really need to know, you'll need to know how to count in Spanish. Importantly, you'll also need to know this in order to exchange money. It's not hard, but a little cumbersome to go into here...so we won't.

## Important words to know when driving

If you get lost and need to ask directions, say "Donde está la via à (city name)?" This may not be the best way, but people seem to understand that and you'll get the answer we need...usually. But the problem then becomes understanding the directions they give in return. Knowing basic numbers and directions helps. So do these words, which you also see on traffic signs:

block(s)	-	cuadra(s) (CWAH-druhs)
left	-	izquierdo (eez-kee-AIR-doh)
right	-	derecho (day-RAY-cho)
straight	-	directo (dee-RAYC-toh)
speedbump	-	tope (TOH-pay)
danger	-	peligro (pay-LEE-groh)
caution	-	precaución (pray-cow-see-OHN)
be careful	-	cuidado (coo-ee-DAH-doh)
detour	-	desvío (days-VEE-oh) or desviación
stop	-	alto (AHL-toh)
fast	-	rápido (RAH-pee-doh)
slow	-	lento (LAIN-toh)
checkpoint	-	revisión (ray-vee-see-OHN)
dip	-	vado (VAH-doh)
traffic circle	-	glorieta (glo-ree-AY-tah)
those in circle have right of way	-	preferencia en glorieta (pray-fay-REHN-see-ah)
highway	-	carretera (carr-ay-tay-rah)
toll (also refers to toll roads)	-	cuota (cwo-tah)
free (also refers to non-toll roads)	-	libre (lee-bray)
bridge	-	puente (pwen-tay)
return	-	retorno (ray-tor-noh)
water	-	agua (ah-qwaw)
scenic outlook	-	mirador (mee-rah-dor)
do not pass	-	no rebase (no ray-bah-say)
rest area	-	area de descanso (ah-ray-ah day days-CAHN-soh)
seat belt	-	cinturón de seguridad (seen-too-ROHN day say-GOO-ree-dahd)
drive with care	-	maneje con precaución (mah-nay-hay cohn pray-cow-see-OHN)

## For property buyers and owners: architectural, hardware store, and "Help Me!" words

If you buy property in Mexico, there are some basic architectural terms you will want to know. And when you start that remodeling project, there will definitely be words and phrases you will need (besides the cuss word, which we urge you to keep to yourself). By now, we're expecting you have the pronunciation down, so here goes....

### **Architectural term translation**

In-ground water storage tank	-	Aljibe
Storage unit	-	Bodega
Type of arched brick ceiling	-	Boveda
Unpolished quarry tile	-	Cantera
Highway	-	Carretera
Small guesthouse	-	Casita
Bypass road	-	Libramiento
Rooftop patio	-	Mirador
A building covered by roof made of woven palm leaves	-	Palapa
Rustic	-	Rustico
Tiles	-	Telas
Patio or terrace, covered or not	-	Terraza
Water storage tank, usually on the roof	-	Tinaco

### **Hardware term translation**

Tools	-	Las Herramientas
Hammer	-	El Martillo
Nails	-	Los Clavos
Screwdriver	-	El Destornillador
Screws	-	Los Tornillos
Pliers	-	Los Alicates
Saw	-	La Sierra
Wrench	-	El Llave (this also means “key”)
Nuts	-	Los Tuercas
Bolts	-	Los Pernos
Drill	-	El Taladro
Tape	-	Cinta
Wire	-	El Alambre
Ladder	-	La Escala
Hose	-	La Manguera
Shovel	-	La Pala
Plunger	-	El émbolo
Valve	-	La Válvula
The electricity is off	-	La electricidad está apagada
The water smells bad	-	El agua huele malo
The toilet won’t flush	-	La cisterna no funcionar
The kitchen sink won’t drain	-	El fregadero de la cocina no escurra
Where is the plunger?	-	Donde está el émbolo
There is no water pressure	-	No hay la presión del agua
Can it be repaired?	-	Puede ser reparado
Remove it	-	Quítalo

## **Additional resources**

Want to go to the next level? Unless you opt to live in a strictly gringo community, you’ll need to learn a bit of Spanish if you move to Mexico. Before you move, check your local community college and see if they offer a basic conversational Spanish class. Once you get here, enroll in classes, where you’ll find some great resources.

And remember to practice, practice, practice!