

Chapter 1

SPELLING AND PRONUNCIATION

Chapter Check-In

- Spelling words
- Pronouncing words
- Understanding cognates
- Stressing the correct syllable
- Knowing when a written accent is necessary

Spanish is very consistent in its spelling and pronunciation rules. Since these rules are simple and easy to learn, anyone can master correctly spelling and pronouncing Spanish words.

The rules presented in this chapter will prepare you to properly pronounce a written word and spell a spoken word. The first step is to forget the limited and chaotic rules of English spelling and, throughout this chapter, focus your attention on the simplicity of Spanish and the consistency of its rules.

A lot of Spanish words look similar to English words, and some are even spelled exactly the same. These words, called **cognates**, are usually easier to spell in Spanish than in English once you learn the pronunciation rules for both consonants and vowels.

Consonants

Consonants in Spanish are generally pronounced like English consonants. Here are some useful rules to follow to eliminate any spelling difficulties.

Double consonants

In English, instances of a double *bb*, *nn*, *ss*, *ff*, and so forth, are common. Spanish, on the other hand, does not have many words with double consonants of the same consonant letter. You can find exceptions to this rule, however, with words containing *ll*, *rr*, *cc*, and *nn*; for example, *diccionario*, *carro*, *connotación*, and *llave*. Only the single letter *f* is used to make the *f* sound in Spanish. The Spanish never use *ph* to produce the *f* sound, and the letter *p* is always pronounced like the *p* in “papa.” If the English word has *ph* or a double *f*, the Spanish cognate will always use one *f*; for example, *fotografía*, *físico*, and *terrible*.

There are some important exceptions to the “no double letter” rule. The *ll* that occurs in Spanish is technically not a double *l* but rather a single letter that is pronounced like the consonant *y* in “yellow.” In some South American Spanish-speaking countries, the sound of *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 words.

Note: On April 27, 1994, the Spanish Language Academies voted and eliminated *ch* and *ll* as separate letters of the Spanish alphabet. Many pre-1994 dictionaries, however, are still in use, and apparently the real Spanish-speaking world continues the thousand-or-so-year habits of the language because *ch* and *ll* are still frequently listed as separate letters and, for example, still occupy one box in a crossword puzzle.

Another letter in Spanish that looks like a double letter is the *rr*. This letter is intended to elicit the rolling sound that is difficult for many who are learning Spanish as a second language. You should roll your tongue when you see the letter *rr* within a word, or when a single *r* is the first letter of a word.

A spelling change is sometimes necessary when two words become one. For example, the *r* in *Costa Rica* is rolled because it is the first letter of a word. The adjective for a native of Costa Rica, however, is only one word, so the *rr* is used in *costarricense* to produce the rolling *r* and maintain the pronunciation.

The only true double consonant in Spanish occurs when two *c*'s are used to produce the *x* sound. In words like *diccionario* and *acceso* the first *c* is hard because it is followed by a consonant and the second *c* is soft because it is followed by *i* or *e*.

Dictionary placement

When looking for a word that starts with *ll* in the dictionary, don't forget that the Spanish side of some dictionaries will list words beginning with *ll* after the words beginning with a single *l*. This will also occur with the letter *ch*, which is also considered a single letter in Spanish and, in most dictionaries, may be found in its own section after the *c* section. *Ch* is easily pronounced (like the sound in "charm" or "Charles"), but, unlike English, *ch* is always pronounced the same way in Spanish.

Dictionary listings may also confuse you when a word includes the Spanish letter *ñ*. The little squiggle over the *n* is called a *tilde*, and its use creates an entirely new letter that follows the *n* section in the dictionary. The *ñ* is pronounced like the *ny* combination in "canyon," or the *ni* combination in "union."

The letter *c*

The letters *k* and *w* do not occur in Spanish words unless the word has been borrowed from another language such as English or even Japanese. For example, *el karate* is considered a "Spanish" noun, even though the *k* is not a Spanish letter.

In Spanish, there are two ways to produce the sound of the English letter *k*. When the letter *c* is followed by an *o*, *a*, or *u*, it is pronounced like a *k*. 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."

This rule results from the fact that the letter *c* has "issues." When followed by *o*, *a*, *u*, or any consonant, it is pronounced like the *c* in "cat," "coat," or "cut." When *c* is followed by *e* or *i*, it is pronounced like the *c* in "certain" or "cinder."

The letter *g*

The letter *g* in Spanish behaves very much like the letter *c* in that the letter that follows the *g* determines how it is pronounced. The reason the *g* in "go" is pronounced differently than the *g* in "germ" is because there is a "hard *g*" and a "soft *g*" sound. In English and in Spanish, a *g* that is followed by *e* or *i* is generally soft, and any *g* that is followed by *o*, *a*, or *u* is hard.

The pronunciation of the hard *g* is the same in both languages. The *g* in *gato*, *gorila*, or *gusto* sounds exactly like the *g* in “goal,” “gallant” or “gum.” As in English, if a Spanish *g* is followed by an *e* or *i*, it is pronounced soft. However, the soft *g* in Spanish sounds like the English letter *h*. The *g* in *gemelo* or *gitano* sounds like the English *h* in “home” or “head.”

The letter *u* is placed between the *g* and *e* or between the *g* and *i* to produce a hard *g* sound in front of an *e* or *i*. *Guerra* is pronounced “**gay**-ra,” and *guido* is pronounced like “**gree**-do” without the *r*. The *u* itself is not pronounced because the intent of the *u* is to produce the hard *g* sound. This is an exception to the rule that all vowels are always pronounced. You are probably already familiar with the words *guerrilla* and *guitarra*; these words can serve as examples in your head to help you avoid the urge to say *gway* or *gwee* when you see the *gue* and *gui* combinations.

If the *gway* or *gwee* sound is desired, the German symbol called an umlaut (a double dot over the *u*: *ü*) is used to indicate that the *u* should be pronounced like a *w* even if it is in between a *g* and an *i* or a *g* and an *e*. Pronounce the word “bilingual” and then say *bilingüe* with the same *gw* sound.

The letter *j*

The letter *j* is always pronounced like the *h* in “hi” or “hollow.” It is difficult to predict whether to use a *g* or *j* when you need to produce a word with the sound of the English *h* followed by an *e* or *i*. For example, *jirafa* and *jefe* are spelled with a *j* and *giro* and *general* are spelled with a *g*. Focus on whether to use a *j* or a *g* when you first learn to spell the word. Words with the *h* sound in front of *o*, *a*, or *u* (*jota*, *Japón*, and *julio*) are always spelled with a *j* because a *g* would not produce the *h* sound at all when followed by these letters.

The letter *h*

The Spanish letter *h* is always silent and is generally at the beginning of the word if used at all. 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 an *h*.

The letter *d*

The letter *d* basically sounds like an English *d* but is a bit softer in Spanish. At the end of a word, it is not stressed as it is in English. Say the word “paid” out loud and hear the strength of the *d* at the end. It almost creates its own syllable. In Spanish, any *d* at the end of the word is barely pronounced. Say *ciudad* without the *d* at the end and you’ll sound like a native.

Remember, the lack of double consonants makes spelling easy. The *d* sound is always a single *d* in any Spanish word.

The letter *t*

Another letter that is softer in Spanish than English is the *t*. It is especially soft when followed by an *r*: The sound of the *tr* in *triple* would sound more like *tl*. Try to say *tratar* without moving your tongue away from the back of your teeth. If you say the *t* as you would in English, you will have a slight accent but will be easily understood. Don't forget that the *t* will never be doubled when spelling Spanish words.

The letters *b* and *v*

Many uneducated Spanish speakers have difficulty determining whether to use a *b* or *v* when spelling a word. Both sound like a combination of *bv*. To make the sound, start out making the *b* sound and slur it into the *v* sound. English speakers usually forget to pronounce the two letters the same, so their instinct is to spell *vivir* or *beber* correctly because, in their minds, the first word still sounds like it begins with a *v* and the second word still sounds like it begins with a *b*. This pronunciation error is helpful with spelling, but until your *b*'s and *v*'s sound like some mixture of both, you'll have an English accent. One helpful point about the similarity of *b* and *v* in Spanish: Sometimes, it can be easy to recognize a word that is similar to English if you imagine the word with a *v* instead of a *b*, or vice versa. For example, the verb *gobuernar* means to govern.

Vowels and Diphthongs

Each vowel has only one pronunciation and it will be pronounced that way in every Spanish word. Except for the *gu* and *qu* combination, there are no silent vowels in Spanish. Some vowels will slur together to create a single sound. These vowel combinations are called **diphthongs** and will be explained later in this chapter.

Correct pronunciation of vowels is especially important when you pronounce a word that looks like an English word. Remember, a lot of Spanish words look similar to English words, and some are even spelled exactly the same. However, these cognates are never pronounced exactly like their English equivalents. Also, a Spanish word that is pronounced like an English word will probably be spelled differently in Spanish. When you recognize a cognate, take your time and pronounce the vowels carefully.

**8 CliffsQuickReview Spanish II****Models for vowel pronunciation**

A few common Spanish words can serve as models for your pronunciation. Everyone knows how to pronounce the word *taco*. The letters *a* and *o* are always pronounced as they are in *taco*. A heavy Spanish accent will result in English words like “hat” or “can” sounding more like the English words “hot” or “con.” That is because the native Spanish speaker is saying the letter *a* the only way it can be said in Spanish. As for the letter *o* in *taco*, it is shorter in Spanish and doesn’t end in a *wa* sound.

Another word you have probably learned courtesy of the popularity of Mexican food is *burrito*. The Spanish vowels *u* and *i* are always pronounced as they are in this word.

The final Spanish vowel left to master is the *e*. It is always pronounced like the *e* in *café*. (To see how well you’re learning, make sure you are pronouncing the *a* in *café* correctly. It should sound like the *a* in *taco*.) Also, an *e* at the end of a word is not silent as it is in the English word “rake.” Remember that there are no silent vowels in Spanish (except for the *qu* and *gu* issue), so you must say *ay* at the end of cognates that end in *e*.

Vowel combinations

The strong vowels are *a*, *o*, and *e*. When two strong vowels appear next to each other 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 (*i* or *u*), 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.

If the weak vowels *i* and *u* are combined, the result is one syllable, with the first weak vowel slurred over and the second one fully pronounced. (Remember that, in the battle of the weak vowels, the last one gets stressed.) When a weak vowel precedes a strong vowel, the weak vowel acts as a consonant. The *u* creates the sound of an English *w*; the *i* sounds like the consonant *y*.

Consonants as vowels

The letter *y* acts as a vowel only when it stands alone or when it is at the end of the word. In such instances, it is pronounced like the *i* in *burrito*. As a consonant, the Spanish *y* sounds just like it does in the English word “you.”

Stress and Accentuation

There are easy-to-understand rules explaining why accent marks are used. To start: There is only one kind of accent, only one accent (if any) per word, and it can only be placed on a vowel, never a consonant.

Because the main reason for using an accent mark is to stress a syllable that would not naturally be stressed, you must be prepared to determine which syllable would be stressed naturally. The natural stress of a word follows two simple rules:

- 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.

If the word is supposed to be pronounced with the stress somewhere other than the rules require, a written accent mark indicates which syllable to stress.

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. This leads to some predictable rules within the rules. For example, there are hundreds of words that are cognates of English words that end in *-tion* like “nation,” “liberation,” or “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 the last syllable, but these words are supposed to be stressed on the last syllable as opposed to the stress on the first syllable in English, so an accent mark is written on the last vowel, which is the *o*.

If a syllable is added to the end of a word, the natural stress of the word is changed. This happens when you make a word plural by adding *-es*. The accent mark on a word like *nación* served the purpose of placing the stress on the *o*, but the plural word ends in *s*, so the natural stress would already be on the next-to-last syllable, which is now the *o*. Thus, you must remove the accent mark on the plural form of a word ending in *-ción* because the stress is naturally on the *o* in *-ciones*.

The previous lesson on diphthongs and the strong and weak vowels becomes important when you are trying to decide whether a word needs a written

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accent mark. Remember that one strong and one weak vowel together create one syllable. For example, the word *iglesia* ends in the vowel *a* so the stress naturally falls on the next to the last syllable, the *e*, according to the general rule. Thus, it does not carry a written accent. It is common, however, to see an accent on the *-ía* ending. That is because an accent mark can be used to indicate that the softer vowel is to be pronounced as well as the stronger. This creates two separate syllables and the stress will be on the accented syllable.

Understanding these rules helps you not only to know whether to write an accent when spelling a word that you hear, but also to pronounce a word that you are reading with the stress on the correct syllable.

Another reason for writing an accent mark has nothing to do with pronunciation. It is used to differentiate between two words that are otherwise spelled the same but have different meanings. For example, the word *sí* means “yes” and the word *si* means “if.” Although the accent makes the spelling different, only the context of a spoken sentence will provide a clue as to which of the two words is appropriate.

Chapter Checkout

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

1. *diaria*
2. *examen*
3. *iniciar*

The words below have Spanish cognates that are very similar. Can you predict how they would be spelled?

4. professor
5. organization
6. photo

Answers: 1. *diaria* 2. *examen* 3. *iniciar* 4. *profesor* 5. *organización* 6. *foto*