



SPANISH · BEGINNER LEVEL

Lesson 1

Reading Spanish, introducing yourself, and the first grammar foundations — with corrected exercises

● Pronunciation

● Introducing yourself

● SER & ESTAR

● Verbs & articles

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INTRODUCTION

Before you start

Spanish has a rare quality: it reads exactly as it is written. Once you know the nine pronunciation exceptions — they fit on a single page — you can read any Spanish text aloud without ever hesitating. That is a considerable advantage at the start, and it is where this lesson begins.

You will then learn to introduce yourself, to say where you are from and where you live, to tell apart the two Spanish verbs for “to be”, and to conjugate the three verb groups in the present tense. Every point is illustrated with full sentences, and the lesson ends with five sets of exercises and their answers.

Chapter 1 — Reading Spanish aloud

Chapter 2 — Introducing yourself

Chapter 3 — The two verbs for “to be”

Chapter 4 — Nouns, articles and verbs

Chapter 5 — Exercises

Allow one to two hours for a first pass, and come back to it: the exercises repay being done several times.

CHAPTER 1

Reading Spanish aloud

You open a Spanish text for the first time. Good news: unlike English or French, you will almost never have to guess how a word is pronounced. What is written is read, and what is heard is written.

1 The general rule: everything is pronounced

Each letter has one sound, and only one. There are no silent final letters, and no vowels changing sound depending on their neighbours. The five vowels a, e, i, o, u always sound the same, cleanly and briefly.

Remember : Pronounce every letter you see — apart from the nine exceptions below.

2 The doubles: RR, LL and CH

RR is strongly rolled: *perro* (dog). **LL** sounds like the English y: *ella* (she), *paella* is said “pa-EH-ya”. **CH** sounds like the English ch: *chico* (boy).

Classic trap : Mind the pair *pero* (but) / *perro* (dog): only the roll tells them apart.

3 The jota: J always, G sometimes

The letter **J** — called the *jota* — sounds like a guttural h, close to the ch in Scottish “loch”: *Jorge*. The letter **G** is a hard g as in *gato*, **except before E and I** where it takes the jota sound: *gente*, *gimnasio*.

The reflex : Check the vowel after the G: e or i → jota; a, o, u → hard g.

4 The misleading letters: H, Z, V and Ñ

H is never pronounced: *hola* is said “ola”. **Z** sounds like s in Latin America and southern Spain. **V** falls between b and v, often very close to b. **Ñ** sounds like the ny in “canyon”: *España*.

Remember : The Spanish H is a ghost letter: you write it, you never hear it.

5 The written accent shows where to stress

When a word carries an accent (*está, llamas, México*), that is the syllable you stress. Without a written accent the rule is simple: words ending in a vowel, in -n or in -s are stressed on the second-to-last syllable; all others on the last.

Why it matters : The Spanish accent is not decoration: it tells you where to hit. Moving it changes the word.

The nine exceptions at a glance

RR → rolled r (perro) · **LL** → y (ella) · **CH** → ch (chico) · **Ñ** → ny (España)

J → jota, guttural h (Jorge) · **G** → hard g, but jota before E and I (gente)

H → silent (hola) · **Z** → s (zapato) · **V** → between b and v (vivir)

Nine exceptions, and you can read Spanish aloud. That's all there is to it.

What really matters

→ Spanish reads as it is written: no hesitation once the exceptions are known.

→ G changes sound before E and I — the exception that comes up most often.

→ The written accent marks the stressed syllable, nothing else.

CHAPTER 2

Introducing yourself

First conversation: giving your name, asking for someone else's, answering "how are you". Three sentences are enough — but they rest on two mechanisms Spanish handles differently from English.

1 Personal pronouns carry gender

Singular: *yo* (I), *tú* (you), *él* (he), *ella* (she), *usted* (formal you). In the plural the form depends on the group: **nosotros / nosotras** (we), **vosotros / vosotras** (you), **ellos / ellas** (they).

The rule : The -as form is used only if the group is entirely female; as soon as one man is present, you go back to -os.

2 Usted is not a second person

Usted addresses one person formally, *ustedes* several. Grammatically, though, they take the **third person**: *usted se llama*, *ustedes se llaman*. *Vosotros* is the informal plural you.

Worth knowing : In Latin America *vosotros* has dropped out of everyday use: *ustedes* covers every plural.

3 Reflexive verbs: the particle moves in front

English has no reflexive particle here — we say “my name is”. Spanish uses one, it sits **before** the conjugated verb, and it **changes with every person**: *me*, *te*, *se*, *nos*, *os*, *se*. In the infinitive it attaches to the end: *llamarse*.

The reflex : Learn the string *me · te · se · nos · os · se*: it will serve for every reflexive verb.

4 Llamarse — to be called

yo **me** llamo · tú **te** llamas · él / ella / usted **se** llama · nosotros **nos** llamamos · vosotros **os** llamáis · ellos / ellas / ustedes **se** llaman.

Common mistake : Note *os llamáis*, not “vos llamáis”: the particle for *vosotros* is **os**.

5 Asking and answering

¿Cómo te llamas? — What's your name? · ¿Qué tal? — How's it going?
· ¿Qué tal estás? (you) · ¿Qué tal está? (he, she, formal you) · ¿Qué tal estáis? (you, informal plural).

The vocabulary : Common answers: *Muy bien* (very well) · *Bien* (fine) · *Fenomenal* (great) · *Fatal* (awful).

Your first conversation

— ¡Hola! ¿Cómo te llamas? — Me llamo Georgi. ¿Y tú?

— Me llamo Yasmin. ¿Qué tal estás? — Muy bien, gracias. ¿Y tú?

— Fenomenal.

Note the inverted **¿** and **¡**: they open every question and every exclamation. This is a feature of written Spanish, and it is compulsory.

Three exchanges, and you can hold an introduction conversation.

What really matters

- Plural pronouns agree with the gender of the group: -os if mixed or male, -as only if entirely female.
- Usted and ustedes take the third person, never the second.
- The reflexive particle precedes the conjugated verb and changes with every person.

CHAPTER 3

The two verbs for “to be”

This is the first real difficulty in Spanish, and it has no English equivalent: where we have a single verb “to be”, Spanish has two — and confusing them changes what the sentence means.

1 SER: what defines you

SER states what you are in a lasting way: identity, origin, occupation, character, nationality. *Soy Yasmin, soy búlgara y soy de Sofía, también soy profesora de español.*

Memorize : Conjugation: *soy · eres · es · somos · sois · son*. An irregular verb — learn it by heart.

2 ESTAR: what passes

ESTAR states the condition of the moment: mood, health, temporary situation, position in space. *Estoy cansada* (I'm tired, today) · *Estoy en Sofía* (I'm in Sofia, right now).

Memorize : Conjugation: *estoy · estás · está · estamos · estáis · están*. Irregular too.

3 The test for choosing

Ask yourself a simple question: **could this change tomorrow?** If yes, it's *estar*. If not, it's *ser*. *Soy búlgara* (that will stay true) against *estoy cansada* (not by tomorrow morning).

The trap to know : A telling case: *es aburrido* = he is boring (character); *está aburrido* = he is bored (right now).

4 Saying where you're from: DE + ser

¿De dónde eres? — Where are you from? · Soy de Bulgaria. · ¿De dónde es Claudia? — Claudia es de Colombia. Origin is permanent: always ser.

Remember : The preposition **de** marks provenance, like the English “from”.

5 Saying where you live: EN + vivir

¿Dónde vives? — Where do you live? · Vivo en Sofía. The verb *vivir* (to live) belongs to the third group: vivo · vives · vive · vivimos · vivís · viven.

Remember : The preposition **en** marks where you are or where you live — English “in” or “at”.

SER or ESTAR — the decision table

SER — identity, origin, occupation, nationality, character, the time and the date

ESTAR — mood, health, position, temporary situation, result of a change

Soy profesora (occupation) · *Estoy en clase* (right now) · *Soy de Bulgaria* (origin) · *Estoy cansada* (today)

One verb in English, two in Spanish: this is the distinction that needs the most practice.

What really matters

- SER for what lasts, ESTAR for the state of the moment.
- The test: could it change tomorrow? Yes → estar. No → ser.
- Origin uses ser + de; where you live uses vivir + en.

CHAPTER 4

Nouns, articles and verbs

With a few rules about noun gender and verb endings, you'll be able to build full sentences of your own rather than repeating learned formulas.

1 Gender is often visible in the ending

Nouns ending in **-o** are generally masculine (*el libro*, the book), those in **-a** generally feminine (*la casa*, the house). Adjectives agree the same way: *cansado / cansada, búlgaro / búlgara*.

The key difference : English has no grammatical gender, so this is a genuinely new habit: every noun you learn comes with its gender.

2 Definite articles: **el, la, los, las**

Where English has one word — *the* — Spanish has four: *el* (masc. sing.), *la* (fem. sing.), *los* (masc. pl.), *las* (fem. pl.). *La ciudad* — the city · *los libros* — the books.

The rule : The plural adds **-s** after a vowel, **-es** after a consonant: *ciudad* → *ciudades*.

3 Indefinite articles: **un, una, unos, unas**

un libro (a book) · *una casa* (a house) · *unos libros* (some books) · *unas casas* (some houses). The indefinite plural translates as “some” or “a few”.

The reflex : Spanish agrees article, noun and adjective systematically: *unas casas bonitas*.

4 Three verb groups, readable in the infinitive

First group in **-AR** (*llamar, hablar*) · second in **-ER** (*comer, beber*) · third in **-IR** (*vivir, escribir*). The group determines the endings.

Worth knowing : The good news: the second and third groups have nearly identical endings.

5 The present-tense endings

First group: -o, -as, -a, -amos, -áis, -an → *llamo, llamas, llama, llamamos, llamáis, llaman*. Second and third: -o, -es, -e, -emos/-imos, -éis/-ís, -en → *vivo, vives, vive, vivimos, vivís, viven*.

The detail that counts : Only the first and second person plural distinguish -ER from -IR: *comemos / vivimos*.

The vocabulary of this lesson

Greeting: buenos días (until noon) · buenas tardes (after noon) · buenas noches (evening and bedtime) · buen día (have a good day)

Saying: hola · gracias · muy bien · bien · fenomenal · fatal · hoy (today)

Naming: España · español / española · Bulgaria · búlgaro / búlgara · la ciudad · el libro · la casa · cansado / cansada

Around thirty words are enough to hold that first conversation.

What really matters

→ Gender is often visible in the ending: -o masculine, -a feminine, with a few exceptions to memorize.

→ Article, noun and adjective always agree together.

→ Three verb groups, but only two sets of endings.

CHAPTER 5

Exercises

Do them once without looking at the answers, then come back to them a few days later: spaced repetition is what makes verb forms stick.

1 Pronunciation — read aloud

1. gente 2. hola 3. paella 4. Jorge 5. perro 6. España 7. gato
8. chico

Answers : 1. “hen-teh” (jota before E) · 2. “ola” (silent H) · 3. “pa-EH-ya” (LL = y) · 4. “HOR-heh” (jota) · 5. rolled r · 6. “es-PA-nya” (Ñ) · 7. hard g before A · 8. “CHEE-ko”

2 Fill in the reflexive particle

1. Yo ____ llamo Ana. 2. ¿Cómo ____ llamas? 3. Nosotros ____ llamamos Pedro y Luis. 4. Vosotras ____ llamáis. 5. Ellos ____ llaman.

Answers : 1. me · 2. te · 3. nos · 4. os · 5. se

3 SER or ESTAR?

1. Yo ____ de Bulgaria. 2. Hoy ____ (yo) muy cansada. 3. Ella ____ profesora. 4. Nosotros ____ en Sofía. 5. ¿Cómo ____ (tú)?

Answers : 1. soy (origin) · 2. estoy (state today) · 3. es (occupation) · 4. estamos (place, right now) · 5. estás (how you are)

4 Conjugate in the present

1. hablar (yo) 2. vivir (tú) 3. comer (nosotros) 4. llamar (vosotros) 5. escribir (ellos)

Answers : 1. hablo · 2. vives · 3. comemos · 4. llamáis · 5. escriben

5 Translate into Spanish

1. My name is Mary. 2. Where are you from? 3. I live in Sofia. 4. She is Bulgarian. 5. Today I'm tired.

Answers : 1. Me llamo Mary. · 2. ¿De dónde eres? · 3. Vivo en Sofía. · 4. Ella es búlgara. · 5. Hoy estoy cansado.

How to work through this lesson

Day 1: read the whole lesson, do the exercises without looking at the answers.

Day 3: redo exercises 2, 3 and 4 — verb forms settle in through repetition.

Day 7: translate exercise 5 again, then introduce yourself aloud without reading.

Twenty minutes three times beats one hour once.

What really matters

→ Exercises are meant to be repeated: the first attempt shows what you think you know, the third what you actually know.

→ Reading aloud is essential in Spanish — the pronunciation is regular, so it becomes automatic fast.

→ Introducing yourself without reading is the real test of Lesson 1.

CONCLUSION

What you can do now

What you can do now

- ☐ Read any Spanish text aloud without hesitating over pronunciation
- ☐ Introduce yourself, ask someone's name and answer “how are you”
- ☐ Say where you are from and where you live
- ☐ Choose between SER and ESTAR depending on what you mean
- ☐ Conjugate a regular verb of all three groups in the present tense

To practise this week

- ☐ Read the lesson aloud — pronunciation settles in through speaking, not through looking
- ☐ Redo exercises 2 to 4 without looking at the answers
- ☐ Introduce yourself in Spanish in front of a mirror, without reading: name, origin, where you live, how you feel today

What comes next

- ☐ Lesson 2: numbers, telling the time, family, and the most common irregular verbs
- ☐ The cheat sheets for this lesson can be downloaded separately from domaformalis.com

The five things not to forget

1. Nine pronunciation exceptions, and Spanish reads without hesitation.
2. The reflexive particle precedes the verb and changes with each person: me, te, se, nos, os, se.
3. Usted and ustedes take the third person.
4. SER for what lasts, ESTAR for what passes.
5. Three verb groups, two sets of endings.

These five points are enough to hold a first conversation in Spanish.

This lesson follows and expands the course of Yasmine, a Spanish teacher based in Sofia. The explanations have been enriched (word stress, noun gender, articles) and completed with corrected exercises so the lesson can be worked through independently.

To go further, find the **cheat sheets** for this lesson on Domaformalis, and get in touch if you'd like live lessons with a teacher.

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