

Spanish Primer: Pronunciation guide

If you want to speak Spanish, you have to learn the accent or else you are going to sound like an idiot. If your accent is too thick, you may not even be understood. Think of a heavy Spanish accent and how you have trouble understanding some words, it's like that except your accent is English. For example: A heavy Spanish accent would say the word "speak" like "spick" (as in Spic and Span) In fact, if someone were to speak English but pronounce it with Spanish rules, we wouldn't even recognize the words! Trust me, I was shown this first hand!

This guide is broken down into parts: The alphabet, the vowels, diphthongs, consonants, stress (or word accent) and intonation.

The Alphabet:

A: a	F: efe	L: ele	P: pe	V: ve
B: be	G: ge	LL: elle	Q: cu	W: doble u
C: ce	H: hache	M: eme	R: ere	X: equis
CH: che	I: ee	N: ene	S: ese	Y: i griega
D: de	J: jota	Ñ: eña	T: te	Z: zeta
E: e	K: ka	O: o	U: u	

The vowels:

The Spanish "a" is pronounced like the "a" in the word "father." Think Aaaaahhh... as in say "ahhh" at the dentist

The Spanish "e" is most often pronounced like "eh" ... like a short a, only crisper

The Spanish "i" is pronounced like the "ee" in the word "see," except that the sound is shorter. Think Chi Chi Rodriguez.

The Spanish "o" is pronounced like the "o" in the word "no," except that the sound is shorter.

The Spanish u is pronounced like the "ue" in the word "due," except that the sound is shorter.

Diphthongs (those accent things)

Diphthongs occur when an unstressed "i", "u", or "y-ending" appears next to another vowel in the same syllable. Their vowel sounds do not change, but they blend together to form a single syllable.

Diphthong - ai (ay)

One such vowel combination, "ai" (or "ay" word ending), is pronounced like the English word "eye," except that it is a somewhat shorter sound. Note that when there is a written accent over the letter "i", the diphthong is "broken" and the two vowels are pronounced separately.

Diphthongs - ei (ey)

One such vowel combination, "ei" (or "ey" word ending), is pronounced like the "ay" in the English word "say," except that it is a somewhat shorter sound. Note that when there is a written accent over the letter "i", the diphthong is "broken" and the two vowels are pronounced separately.

Diphthong - oi (oy)

One such vowel combination, "oi" (or "oy" word ending), is pronounced like the "oy" in the English word "boy," except that it is a somewhat shorter sound. Note that when there is a written accent over the letter "i", the diphthong is "broken" and the two vowels are pronounced separately.

Diphthong - ui (uy)

One such vowel combination, "ui" (or "uy" word ending), is pronounced like the English word "we," except that it is a somewhat shorter sound.

Diphthong - au

One such vowel combination, "au", is pronounced like the "ow" in the English word "owl," except that it is a somewhat shorter sound. Note that when there is a written accent over the letter "u", the diphthong is "broken" and the two vowels are pronounced separately.

Diphthong - eu

One such vowel combination, "eu", does not have an English equivalent. It sounds like a combination of the "ay" of the word "say" and the "oo" of the word "boot." Note that when there is a written accent over the letter "u", as in the word "transeúnte," the diphthong is "broken" and the two vowels are pronounced separately.

Diphthong - ia

One such vowel combination, "ia", is pronounced like the "eo" in the English word "neon," except that it is a somewhat shorter sound. Note that when there is a written accent over the letter "i", the diphthong is "broken" and the two vowels are pronounced separately.

Diphthong - ie

One such vowel combination, "ie", is pronounced somewhat like the English word "yea," except that the sounds are shorter. Note that when there is a written accent over the letter "e", the diphthong is "broken" and the two vowels are pronounced separately.

Diphthong - io

One such vowel combination, "io", is pronounced like the "eo" in the English word "video," except that it is a somewhat shorter sound. Note that when there is a written accent over the letter "i", the diphthong is "broken" and the two vowels are pronounced separately.

Diphthong - iu

One such vowel combination, "iu", is similar to the English word "you," except that it is a somewhat shorter sound.

Diphthong - ua

One such vowel combination, "ua", has no real English equivalent, but can be reproduced by combining the "oo" of the word "boot" with the "a" of the word "papa." Be sure to combine these two sounds into a single sound. Note that when there is a written accent over the letter "u", the diphthong is "broken" and the two vowels are pronounced separately.

Diphthong - ue

One such vowel combination, "ue", has no real English equivalent, but can be reproduced by combining the "oo" of the word "boot" with the "a" of the word "paper." Be sure to combine these two sounds into a single sound. Note that when there is a diaeresis (umlaut) over the letter "u", the diphthong is "broken" and the two vowels are pronounced separately.

Diphthong - uo

One such vowel combination, "uo", has no real English equivalent, but can be reproduced by combining the "oo" of the word "boot" with the "o" of the word "note." Be sure to combine these two sounds into a single sound. Note that when there is an accent over the letter "u", as in "dúo," the diphthong is "broken" and the two vowels are pronounced separately.

The consonants:

The Spanish b/v

The Spanish "b" (be larga) and "v" (be corta) are pronounced exactly alike. These letters have two separate sounds, hard and soft. At the beginning of a word and after "m" or "n", the hard Spanish "b/v" closely resembles the "b" in the word "boy," except that the lips are held tense. In other situations, the "b/v" is pronounced like an English "b" in which the lips are not allowed to touch. (This is a sound that does not exist in English.)

The Spanish c

The Spanish "c" has two separate sounds, hard and soft. When appearing in the combinations "ca", "co" and "cu", the hard Spanish "c" closely resembles the English "k" sound. The difference is that when pronouncing the hard Spanish "c" there is no puff of air, as there is with the English "k". When appearing in the combinations "ce" and "ci", the "c" is softer. Spaniards pronounce this like the "z", while Latin Americans pronounce it like the "s".

The Spanish ch

The Spanish "ch" is pronounced like the "ch" in the word "chief."

The Spanish f

The Spanish "f" is pronounced like the "f" in the word "fire."

The Spanish "d" has two separate sounds, hard and soft. At the beginning of a word and after "n" or "l", the hard Spanish "d" closely resembles the "d" in the word "dog." The difference is that when pronouncing the hard Spanish "d", the tongue touches the back of the front teeth (rather than the gum ridge, as in English). In other situations (particularly between vowels) the "d" is softer, closely resembling the "th" sound in the word "this."

The Spanish "r" has two separate sounds, depending on whether or not it is the first letter of a word. Neither one of these sounds even remotely resembles the English "r" sound. When the "r" is the first letter of the word, it is trilled like the "rr", which is covered in the next lesson. Otherwise, the "r" sounds much like the "dd" of the word "ladder." (It's not exactly the same, but it's much closer to this "dd" sound than to the English "r" sound.)

The Spanish "rr" is a vibrating, or trilling sound. The single "r" is also pronounced this way when it is the first letter of a word.

The Spanish "g" has three separate sounds: hard, soft and an "h" sound. After a pause and when followed by "a", "o", "u", and when following the letter "n", the hard Spanish "g" closely resembles the "g" in the word "got." The soft "g" sound is not like any English sound, and will require considerable practice. This sound normally occurs between vowels. Finally, when "g" comes before "e" or "i", it sounds like the "h" in the word "hot" except that it is "raspier."

Like the "h" in the English word "hour," the Spanish "h" is always silent.

The Spanish "j" is pronounced like the "h" in the word "hot," except that it is "raspier."

In Spanish, the letters "k" and "w" are found only in foreign words. The "k" is pronounced like an English "k" without the puff of air. The "w" is pronounced like the "b/v" when it occurs between vowels.

The Spanish "l" is similar to, but not exactly like the "l" in the word "call."

The pronunciation of the Spanish "ll" can vary widely from region to region. Most commonly, it is pronounced like the "y" in the word "yes," or like the "lli" in the word "million." In Colombia it is pronounced like an English "j" sound.

The Spanish "m" is pronounced like the "m" in the word "mob."

The Spanish "n" is usually pronounced like the "n" in the word "not."

The Spanish "ñ" is pronounced like the "ny" in the word "canyon."

The Spanish "p" is pronounced like the "p" in the English word "spot," except that there is no puff of air.

The Spanish "q" -- which always appears in combination with the letter "u" -- is pronounced like the "k" in the word "kid," but without the puff of air.

The Spanish "s" is pronounced like the "s" in the word "salt," except that it is a bit shorter.

When making the "t" sound in English, the tongue touches the gum ridge behind the upper front teeth. The Spanish "t" is produced quite differently, with the tongue actually touching the back of the front teeth, and without the puff of air that characterizes the English "t".

The Spanish "x" has three separate sounds. The first is like the "ks" in the word "talks" (examen). The second is pronounced like the English letter "h" and is reserved for certain proper nouns and words that are derived from them (México, mexicano). The third is pronounced like the English "ch" and it, too is reserved for certain proper nouns (Xitle, Xela).

Spanish "y" has two common sounds. Depending upon the region, the "y" might sound like the English "y" in the word "yes" or the "j" in the English word "joy."

The Spanish "z" is pronounced differently in Spain than in Latin America. In Spain, it is pronounced like the "th" in the English word "think." In Latin America, it is pronounced like the letter "s".

Stress

"Stress" refers to the loudness of a syllable. In Spanish, one syllable of a word usually is louder than the others. Stress is important because it can completely change the meaning of a word. The following words are identical, except for the location of the stressed syllable:

papá - father

papa - potato

compró - he bought

compro - I buy

Intonation: Statements

"Intonation" refers to pitch, or the rising and falling of one's voice. Intonation is important because it can change the meaning of an utterance. In Spanish, normal statements end in a falling pitch.

Information Questions

In Spanish, questions which elicit information end in a falling pitch. This is the same pattern as normal statements, but information questions are never confused with statements because they always begin with question words.

Yes/No Questions

In Spanish, simple yes/no questions end in a rising pitch, conveying a meaning of uncertainty.

Choice Questions

When a question elicits an answer that is a choice between two or more alternatives, the pitch rises with each choice, and then falls with the final option.

Pronunciation: Linking

In spoken Spanish, when the last letter of one word is the same as the first letter of the next word, they are pronounced as a single sound

In spoken Spanish, when a word that ends in a vowel is followed by a word that begins with a vowel, those vowels are "linked" into one syllable, even if they are different

In spoken Spanish, when a word that ends in a consonant is followed by a word that begins with a vowel, the final consonant is "linked" with the initial vowel sound

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