

A Quick Guide to Spanish Syntax

Syntax is the order of words and phrases that create a sentence. This quick guide will discuss the word pattern for basic Spanish sentences. This order, however, is flexible, which will be demonstrated later in this handout. Because sentences have many elements, such as pronouns, subjects, and verbs, please refer to the following key as you progress through this guide:

S = subject	O = object	IN = interrogative
V = verb	I = infinitive form of the verb	d = direct object pronoun
n = negation	p = preposition	i = indirect object pronoun
A = auxiliary	PP = present progressive	

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Syntax and One-Verb Sentence Constructions

Spanish word order follows a Subject-Verb-Object (**SVO**) pattern. Spanish word order is very similar to English word order, as English also follows SVO pattern. The sentence's subject is the "doer" of the action; the verb is the action, and the object is the person or thing affected by the action. In addition, when a negation (**n**) is necessary, the negative is placed before the verb. While English typically adds an auxiliary verb (**A**), such as a conjugation of *to be* or *to do*, to a negation, Spanish does not.

SVO Pattern Examples:

Positive:

English	Spanish
<u>Maria</u> <u>reads</u> <u>the books</u> .	<u>Maria</u> <u>lee</u> <u>los libros</u> .
S V O	S V O

Negative:

English	Spanish
<u>Eduardo</u> <u>does not</u> <u>eat meat</u> .	<u>Eduardo</u> <u>no</u> <u>come</u> <u>el carne</u> .
S A n V O	S n V O

Often, the subject in Spanish is implied by the verb conjugation.

Positive:

English	Spanish
<u>I</u> <u>have</u> <u>the money</u> .	<u>Tengo</u> <u>el dinero</u> .
S V O	S/V O

Negative:

English	Spanish
<u>We</u> <u>did not</u> <u>speak</u> <u>last night</u> .	<u>No</u> <u>hablamos</u> <u>anoche</u> .
S A n V O	n S/V O

Two-Verb Constructions

Sometimes, two verbs are needed to express an action. In English, for instance, the first verb is conjugated to agree with the subject, and the second verb is left in its infinitive form (I); that is, the verb will remain in its “to” + verb form. For example, “to eat” is the infinitive verb that is conjugated to agree with the person who eats, i.e. I eat, you eat, she eats, etc. The same rule of syntax applies to Spanish. When using two verbs, the first verb will be conjugated to match the subject, and the second verb will remain in the infinitive. In addition, the negation will continue to be placed before the first verb.

Two-Verb Construction Examples:

Positive:

English	Spanish
<u>I need to shop</u> for <u>jeans</u> .	<u>Necesito comprar</u> para <u>los jeans</u> .
S V I O	S/V I O

Negative:

English	Spanish
<u>They are not able to see the stars</u> .	<u>Ellos no pueden ver las estrellas</u> .
S A n V I O	S n V I O

There are two common exceptions to this syntax rule. First, if the purpose of the sentence is to imply that a person or thing must perform an action, as in “I have to go to the store,” then the verb construction must include the word *que* placed between the conjugated form of *tener* (to have) and the infinitive.

Example:

English	Spanish
<u>I have to go to the store</u> .	<u>Tengo que ir a la tienda</u> .
S V I O	S/V I O

Second, to express a future action or condition, use a conjugated form of the verb *ir* (to go) plus the preposition (**p**) *a*, followed by the infinitive. In English, this is often expressed with the present progressive tense (**PP**) conjugation of the verb *to go*, followed by the infinitive form of the verb.

Example:

English	Spanish
<u>Tia is going to dance</u> .	<u>Tia va a bailar</u> .
S PP I	S V p I

Lastly, there are verb tenses that do not require an infinitive verb in a two-verb construction. Instead, both verbs will be conjugated. Tenses that follow this rule include the progressive tenses and the perfect tenses. For example, the present progressive tense, which in English is

conjugated with the verb ending *ing*, requires that the first verb is conjugated to match the subject, and the second verb is conjugated for the present progressive tense.

Example:

English	Spanish
<u>Mateo is not opening the door.</u>	<u>Mateo no está abriendo la puerta.</u>
S V n PP O	S n V PP O

For more information about Spanish verb tenses and conjugations, please refer to our [Guide to Spanish Verb Tenses](https://www.germannna.edu/academic-center-for-excellence/helpful-handouts/) booklet located on the Academic Center for Excellence website at: <https://www.germannna.edu/academic-center-for-excellence/helpful-handouts/>

Interrogatives

Interrogatives are questions. In general, when asking questions in Spanish, the order of the subject and the verb are reversed. This is similar to English. Also, like English, a question in Spanish may include an interrogative word (**IN**), such as *qué*, *por qué*, *cuándo*, *cuánto*, *cuál*, *cómo*, and *dónde*.

Example:

English	Spanish
<u>When is Carlos coming to the party?</u>	<u>¿Cuándo viene Carlos a la fiesta?</u>
IN V S PP p O	IN V S p O

Questions in Spanish may also be posed without an interrogative word. Sometimes, the subject is implied with the verb conjugation. However, at other times, the subject needs to be expressed for clarity.

Examples:

English	Spanish
<u>Do you teach on Saturdays?</u>	<u>¿Eseñas los sábados?</u>
A S V p O	S/V O

English	Spanish
<u>Do all of you want a drink?</u> A S V O	<u>¿Desean ustedes una bebida?</u> V S O

Direct and Indirect Object Pronouns

Direct object nouns and pronouns are the person or thing directly affected by the verb in the sentence. For example, in the sentence “Josh washed the car,” to find the direct object (**d**) of the sentence, ask a question that includes both the subject and the verb: “What did Josh wash?” The answer is “the car”; therefore, “the car” is the direct object. In Spanish, the direct object functions the same way; however, when a direct object refers to a person, a group of people, or a pet, the personal “a” must be included.

Example:

English	Spanish
<u>Ayla bathed the dog.</u> S V d	<u>Ayla bañó al perro.</u> S V d

English	Spanish
<u>I bought the gift.</u> S V d	<u>Compré el regalo.</u> S/V d

Indirect object nouns and pronouns tell *to whom* or *for whom* an action is performed. In Spanish, an indirect object (**i**) is often signaled by the prepositions *a* or *para* before the indirect object.

Example:

English	Spanish
<u>I bought the gift for Isa.</u> S V d p i	<u>Compré el regalo para Isa.</u> S/V d p i

Direct and indirect object pronouns can be used to replace the corresponding nouns in the sentence to avoid repeating them when speaking or writing. In Spanish, when using both a direct and an indirect object pronoun in a sentence, the indirect object pronoun will always

precede the direct object pronoun. In addition, when both the indirect object pronoun and the direct object pronoun are in the third person, whether singular or plural, the indirect object pronoun must be changed from *le* or *les* to *se*.

One-Verb Constructions:

Object pronouns precede the verb in a sentence that consists of only one verb.

Example:

English (without pronouns)	Spanish (without pronouns)
I bought the gift for <u>Isa</u> . S V d p i	Compré el regalo para <u>Isa</u> . S/V d p i
English (with pronouns)	Spanish (with pronouns)
I bought <u>it</u> for <u>her</u> . S V d p i	<u>Se lo</u> compré. i d S/V

Two-Verb Constructions

When a sentence necessitates two verbs to indicate the action, the object pronouns can either precede the first verb, or they can be attached to the second verb. However, when attaching the object pronouns to the second verb, an accent mark may be needed to indicate a change in syllabic emphasis.

Examples:

English (without pronouns)	Spanish (without pronouns)
Tom is going to buy a car for his mother. S PP I d p i	Tom va a comprar un coche para su madre. S V p I d p i
Spanish (with pronouns preceding verb)	Spanish (with pronouns attached to verb)
Tom <u>se lo</u> va a comprar. S i d V p I	Tom va a <u>comprárselo</u> . S V p I i/d

English (without pronouns)	Spanish (without pronouns)
They are preparing dinner for us. S V PP d p i	Ellos <u>están preparando la cena para nosotros</u> . S V PP d p i
Spanish (with pronouns preceding verb)	Spanish (with pronouns attached to verb)
Ellos <u>nos la</u> están preparando. S i d V PP	Ellos <u>están preparándonosla</u> . S V PP i/d

For more information about direct and indirect object pronouns, please refer to the [Spanish: Direct, Indirect, and Reflexive Pronouns](https://www.germannna.edu/academic-center-for-excellence/helpful-handouts/) helpful handout located on the Academic Center for Excellence website at <https://www.germannna.edu/academic-center-for-excellence/helpful-handouts/>

Commands

Commands are sentences that tell others to do something. In Spanish, there are formal and informal commands, as well as affirmative and negative commands. Regardless of whether a command is formal or informal, when using object pronouns with an affirmative command, always attach the pronouns to the end of the verb. An accent mark may need to be added to show the syllabic change to the verb. If both an indirect and direct object pronoun are needed, the indirect object pronoun will be placed before the direct object pronoun.

Affirmative Command Example:

English	Spanish
<u>Talk to them.</u> V p i	<u>Hábleles.</u> V i

If the command is a negative command, then the object pronouns must be placed between the negation and the verb.

Negative Command Example:

English	Spanish
<u>Do not talk to them.</u> A n V p i	<u>No les hable.</u> n i V

For more information about Spanish commands, please refer to the Academic Center for Excellence [Spanish: Commands](https://www.germannna.edu/academic-center-for-excellence/helpful-handouts/) helpful handout located on our website at <https://www.germannna.edu/academic-center-for-excellence/helpful-handouts/>

Verbs like Gustar

There are , do not follow the traditional SVO pattern; *gustar* is one of these verbs. *Gustar* is a verb that is used to express likes and dislikes in Spanish. However, it is not used in the same way as the English verb *to like*. Instead, *gustar* translates more accurately as *to be pleasing (to someone)*, which means that the subject of the sentence is the person or thing that is liked. Because of this, the verb *gustar* is conjugated to correspond with the number of people or things being liked. In addition, the indirect object pronoun shows to whom the person or thing is pleasing. Lastly, if a negation is needed, place the object pronouns between the negation and conjugated form of the verb.

Examples:

English	Spanish
<u>I like the flower.</u> S V d	<u>Me gusta la flor.</u> i V S

English	Spanish
<u>I do not like the flowers.</u> S A n V d	<u>No me gustan las flores.</u> n i V S

Other verbs that function like *gustar* include but are not limited to:

encantar	to delight or like very much
importar	to be important or to matter
quedar	to remain or have left
faltar	to lack or be lacking
interesar	to interest or to be interesting
parecer	to appear or to seem
molestar	to annoy, to irritate, or to bother
resultar	to result or to turn out