



# Spanish: When to Use Written Accent Marks

- In Spanish, please remember that rules governing spoken language precede those controlling writing. It is important to distinguish between VERBAL stress and written accents.
- Meanings of words can change drastically, according to which syllable is stressed.  
*Por ejemplo: hablo (I speak), vs. habló, él/ ella/ usted speak;*  
*hablara, that he/she/you were to speak (past subjunctive), vs.*  
*hablará, he/she/you will speak (future)*
- In Spanish, when figuring out where to verbally stress a syllable, you count syllables backwards from the last syllable. Usually you don't need to count more than 3 syllables back.
- The verbal stress point of most Spanish words is decided according to what letter of the alphabet is at the END of the word: does the last syllable end in a vowel, n or s, or does it end in a consonant that is not n or s?
- When the pronunciation of a word goes against the rules, an accent mark is written on the syllable which is verbally stressed to show a rule has been broken.
- Only stressed syllables can have accent marks.
- When accents are written in, they are ALWAYS placed on the VOWEL of the stressed syllable.
- Diacritical accents serve to distinguish one meaning from another for the exact same spelling.  
*POR EJEMPLO: dé, (Command – give), vs. de, of or from (preposition).*

## RULES

1. **When a word ends in a vowel, n, or s (n's and s's make nouns and verbs plural or change person), the customary syllable which receives the verbal stress is the second-to-last syllable and IS NOT accented.**

*EJEMPLOS: como; comes, comemos; comen; margarita; margaritas.*

**BUT, when a word that ends in a vowel or n or s is NOT verbally stressed on the second-to-last syllable, an accent mark is written on the syllable that IS stressed.**

*EJEMPLOS: comió, Tomás, ratón, estás, después.*

2. **When a word ends in any other consonant (except n or s), the verbal stress has been established to be on the LAST syllable, and IS NOT accented.**

*EJEMPLOS: hablar (and ALL infinitives) , tamal, universidad, libertad.*

**BUT, when a word ends in any other consonant (except n or s) and is NOT stressed on the last syllable, a written accent is placed on the vowel of the stressed syllable.**

*EJEMPLOS: ángel, dólar, álbum, lápiz, árbol, Sánchez, Rodríguez.*

3. **Diphthongs (syllables with 2 or more vowels) are considered to be ONE syllable and ARE NOT accented, UNLESS the vowels of the diphthong are broken in pronunciation; THEN an accent is placed over the stressed vowel.**

*EJEMPLOS: peine, se afeita, buitre, colegio*

*PERO María, tío, país, raíces, maíz, comía, dormía (and ALL er/ir regular imperfect tense verb conjugations).*

4. **Palabras esdrújulas are any Spanish words which are verbally stressed on the THIRD-TO-LAST syllable and ALWAYS take a written accent on that syllable.**

*EJEMPLOS:*

*esdrújulas, linguística, película, hispanico, México;*

*dénmelos (and any positive commands that take both direct and indirect object pronouns after them);*

*Hablábamos (and all nosotros regular –ar imperfect indicative conjugations).*

5. **Diacritical accents are written accents placed on a word to distinguish it from another word that is spelled identically but means something else.**

*EJEMPLOS:*

- ALL interrogative words in direct AND indirect questions:  
*¿Qué; Por qué; cómo? PERO que – that/which; como – as/since*  
*Me pregunto por qué no estuviste en clase ayer;*  
*vs. (que= that) Creo que no estuviste porque teníamos un examen.*
- Demonstrative pronouns take accents BUT demonstrative adjectives do not.  
*Éste vs. este hombre*  
*Ése vs. ese hombre*  
*Aquél vs. aquel hombre*

**BUT neuter** demonstrative pronouns NEVER take accents: esto, eso, aquello

- Some one-syllable words take an accent to differentiate meaning:  
*Tú (you) vs. Tu (your)                      él (he) vs. el (masc. gender article – the)*  
*Sí (yes) vs. si (if)                              té (tea) vs. te ( dir/indir obj.pronoun)*  
*Mí (my) vs. mi(my)                            más (more) vs. mas (but)*  
*Sólo (only) vs. solo (alone)                Aún (still) vs. aun (even)*