

Speak Spanish Pronto

Beginner Lessons

The Sounds of Spanish

Now that you're familiar with the [Spanish alphabet](#), it's as good of time as any to go through the **sounds** behind the letters.

The previous audios have provided you with some sample words that represent each letter. However, most languages have more sounds than letters.

If you're learning a language and you're only focusing on the sounds from the written alphabet, you're going to miss a lot.

This is true for two reasons:

1. One letter can make multiple sounds, depending on its **position** within a word
2. A **combination** of letters produces unique sounds that individual letters don't

A good example of reasons #1 and #2:

*“**Generalmente**, los **gatos** no les **gusta** el **agua**.”*

- The *g* in *generalmente* is a ‘soft’ *g* and sounds more like the *h* in English, although not 100%

- The *g* in *gatos* and *gusta* use a ‘hard’ *g* and are equivalent to the *g* from the English word *get*
- The *g* in *agua* is a ‘soft-ish’ *g* and doesn’t have an English equivalent—the closest *g* would once again be the word *get*



You got that right—**three** different sounds for the letter *g* are possible in Spanish.

And that’s the focus of this lesson—how letters can produce multiple sounds depending on **position** and **letter combination** within a word.

We’re going to make use of the [International Phonetic Alphabet](#) for this lesson.

The IPA establishes a standard representation for the sounds of all spoken languages, taking the guessing out of pronunciation.

IPA for Spanish Vowels

IPA symbol	English approximate	Occurrence in bold
/ä/	father	cama
/e/	set	peso
/i/	see	pico
/o/	more	algo
/u/	food	duro

IPA for Spanish Consonants

IPA symbol	Best English approximate	Occurrence in bold
/b/	about	boca, beso, vaca,
/β/	very	vivir, curva, lava

/β/ not found in modern English; /β/ is close to /b/, except the /β/ sound is made without closing your lips completely

/d̪/	today	donde, cuando
/ð/	this	nada, dedo
/f/	face	fácil, café
/g/	again	gato, lengua
/ɣ/	again	amigo, luego, sigue

/ɣ/ not found in American English;
like /g/, but without tongue hitting roof of mouth

/t̪d̪/	jeep, judge	caballo, llave, pollo
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/t̪d̪/ not found in American English

/d̪/	yes	pie, tierra, radio
/k/	kiss	casa, banco, quise
/l/	let	lejos, local, la
/ʎ/	million	caballo, llave, pollo

/ʎ/ not found in American English;
good approximation is the combination of /lj/

/m/	him	campo, mamá , mismo
/m̃/	symphony	influir

/m̃/ not found in American English;
good approximation is combination of /ɪm/

/n/	need	nada, nadie, nunca
/n̄/	month	antes, cantar, fondo
/ɲ/	canyon	año, enseñar, mañana

/ɲ/ not found in American English;
good approximation is combination of /nj/

/ŋ/	sing	cinco, domingo, venga,
/p/	pack	paso, peso, sopa,
/r/	better	puro, caro, partir

/r/ usually not found in American English;
/ɹ/ is more often used

/r/		arriba, correr, rumbo
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/r/ not found in American English

/s/	sand	salida, las, encima
/θ/	thing	paz, zorro

/θ/ is the “lispy”, regional sound that’s mainly used in Spain.
Latin American Spanish does **not** use /θ/

/t̄/	tie	tomó, tengo, listo
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/t̪/ not found in American English;
best approximation is /t/

/tʃ/	church	mucho, noche, chocolate
/v/	valve	Afganistán
/w/	wine	agua, cuando, fuimos
/x/	no equivalent	g eneral, mujer, j amón
/x/ not found in American English; best approximation is /h/		
/z/	zoo	mismo, rasgo, isla

Moving on to something just a bit more complex...

When two vowels appear next to each other, we call this occurrence a *diphthong*.

Another important task for learning the sounds of Spanish is being able to hear and then reproduce the 14 diphthongs.

Since these sounds are produced by two vowels which are already defined, usually diphthongs are classified as one new sound.

IPA for Spanish Diphthongs

IPA symbol	Occurrence in Bold
/äi/	baile, hay , traigo
/äu/	pausa, aunque , bautismo
/ei/	seis, ley , reina
/eu/	Europa , deuda, neutral
/oi/	estoy, hoy, oigo
/ou/	
It's rare to use /ou/ <i>within</i> a word; more often, it's a connection from the <i>ending</i> of one word to the <i>beginning</i> of another word	<p><i>“Tengo una casa.”</i></p> <p><i>“Tengou/na casa.”</i></p>
/jä/	media, estudiar, infancia
/je/	tiempo, siempre, viejo
/jo/	delicioso, precio, novio
/ju/	ciudad, triunfo, viudo
/wä/	cuatro, guante, igual
/we/	bueno, fuerte, juego
/wi/	pingüino, cuidado, construir
/wo/	antiguo, ambiguo, monstruo

Now that you've completed the first introductory lessons, you have all the knowledge you need to get started on the [Beginner Series](#).

By studying the sounds *before* beginning the series, you're in a great position to understand more than someone who did not practice sounds right out of the gate.

You'll be **more** likely to speak and practice with Spanish pronunciation and **less** likely to let your English knowledge take over.

¡A trabajar!