

Reflexive Verbs: Spanish Verbs That Wash Themselves



Spanish has some interesting verbs that seem to carry their own little boomerang.

The action goes out - and comes right back to the person doing it.

Lavo el carro.

I wash the car.

I'm doing the washing, but the car receives the action.

Me lavo.

I wash myself.

This time I'm both doing the washing **and getting washed**.

That's the basic idea behind a **reflexive verb**.

English Does It Too

English uses reflexive words such as **myself, yourself, himself, herself, ourselves, and themselves**. We might say: *I hurt myself. She introduced herself. They prepared themselves.*

Spanish expresses the same general idea, but it uses a special group of little pronouns:

me - myself

te - yourself

se - himself, herself, yourself

nos - ourselves

os - yourselves (primarily Spain)

se - themselves, yourselves

Think of these as **boomerang pronouns**. They send the verb's action right back to the subject.

Why Do Reflexive Verbs End in -se?

In a dictionary or vocabulary list, you'll often see a reflexive verb written like this:

lavarse - to wash oneself
vestirse - to get dressed
afeitarse - to shave oneself
despertarse - to wake up
acostarse - to go to bed

That **-se** tells you you're looking at the reflexive form of the verb. But when you actually conjugate the verb, the **se** changes to match the person.

Take **lavarse**:

Me lavo. - I wash myself.
Te lavas. - You wash yourself.
Se lava. - He/she washes himself/herself.
Nos lavamos. - We wash ourselves.
Se lavan. - They wash themselves.

The verb changes - and so does the reflexive pronoun.

Reflexive Verbs Love the Bathroom

You'll encounter reflexive verbs constantly when talking about your daily routine. That's because many of the things we do every morning are things we do **to ourselves**.

Me despierto. - I wake up.
Me levanto. - I get up.
Me ducho. - I take a shower.
Me lavo. - I wash myself.
Me visto. - I get dressed.
Me acuesto. - I go to bed.

From getting out of bed in the morning to climbing back into it at night, Spanish reflexive verbs can follow you through the entire day.

The Pronoun Usually Goes Before the Conjugated Verb

In an ordinary statement, put the reflexive pronoun **before** the conjugated verb:

Me lavo las manos.
I wash my hands.

Se cepilla los dientes.
She brushes her teeth.

Nos preparamos para salir.
We get ourselves ready to leave.

Notice something interesting in those first two examples. Spanish normally says **Me lavo las manos** rather than literally saying *I wash my hands*.

The reflexive **me** already tells us whose hands we're talking about, so Spanish commonly uses **las manos** rather than a possessive such as *mis manos*. The same thing happens with **Me cepillo los dientes**. Spanish assumes you're probably brushing your own.

Sometimes the Pronoun Attaches to the Verb

When the verb remains in its infinitive form, the reflexive pronoun can attach to the end:

Voy a lavarme.

I'm going to wash myself.

Necesito acostarme.

I need to go to bed.

So don't be surprised when you see **me**, **te**, **se**, **nos**, or **os** moving around. Their position depends on the verb construction.

Adding -se Can Change the Meaning

Sometimes the reflexive form gives a familiar verb a different meaning.

ir - to go; **irse** - to leave or go away

Voy a casa. - I'm going home. **Me voy.** - I'm leaving.

aburrir - to bore; **aburrirse** - to become or be bored

La película me aburre. - The movie bores me. **Me aburro.** - I'm bored.

You don't have to learn all these differences at once. Just recognize that **-se can sometimes do more than simply mean oneself**.

Sometimes the Boomerang Goes Both Ways

Reflexive pronouns can also express something people do **to each other**.

Se miran. - They look at each other.

Nos ayudamos. - We help each other.

Se abrazan. - They hug each other.

Grammarians call this a **reciprocal** use. For now, *each other* is all you need to remember.

The Easy Way to Think About Reflexives

When you encounter a reflexive verb, imagine a boomerang:

I - action - myself: Me lavo.

She - action - herself: Se prepara.

We - action - ourselves: Nos vestimos.

The terminology may sound intimidating, but the basic idea isn't. When the person doing the action is also receiving the action, Spanish sends out one of its little boomerang pronouns: **me**, **te**, **se**, **nos**, **os**, **se**.

And sooner or later, almost all of them seem to end up in the bathroom.