



The Spanish Verb-Tense Map

Past, present, future—and everything in between

Our “not-so-easy” series has turned into a verb-tense festival. That is not necessarily bad: verbs are the engines of Spanish sentences.

This final article brings the major forms together. The goal is not to memorize every ending at once. It is to understand what each tense or mood helps you communicate.

Tense and mood are not the same

A **tense** locates an action in time:

- Past
- Present
- Future

A **mood** shows how the speaker presents the action:

- The **indicative** presents information as factual or expected.
- The **subjunctive** presents wishes, reactions, recommendations, doubts, and uncertain possibilities.
- The **imperative** gives commands.

The conditional is traditionally called a tense, although it often describes hypothetical actions rather than a specific time.

The present

Use the present tense for:

- Actions happening now
- Habits and routines
- General truths
- Near-future plans

Examples:

- *Estudio español.* — I study Spanish.
- *Ahora escribo un artículo.* — I am writing an article now.
- *Siempre llegamos temprano.* — We always arrive early.
- *Mañana salimos a las ocho.* — Tomorrow we leave at eight.

Spanish often uses the simple present where English uses “am,” “is,” or “are” plus an *-ing* form.

The preterite

Use the preterite for:

- Completed past actions
- Events with a clear beginning or ending
- A sequence of completed events
- An action that interrupts another action

Examples:

- *Ayer terminé el proyecto.* — Yesterday I finished the project.
- *Entró, saludó y se sentó.* — She entered, greeted everyone, and sat down.
- *Estudiaba cuando sonó el teléfono.* — I was studying when the telephone rang.

Think:

What happened?

The imperfect

Use the imperfect for:

- Repeated past actions
- Actions that were in progress
- Descriptions and background information
- Time, age, weather, and emotions in the past

Examples:

- *De niño, jugaba al fútbol.* — As a child, I used to play soccer.
- *Eran las nueve.* — It was nine o'clock.
- *Llovía mucho.* — It was raining heavily.
- *Los estudiantes hablaban cuando llegó la profesora.* — The students were talking when the teacher arrived.

Think:

What was happening, or what was it like?

The future

Use the future tense for:

- Predictions
- Promises
- Future events
- Guesses about the present

Examples:

- *Mañana estudiaremos.* — Tomorrow we will study.
- *Te ayudaré.* — I will help you.
- *Habrà menos contaminación.* — There will be less pollution.
- *¿Dónde estará Mateo?* — Where could Mateo be?

- *Estará en casa.* — He is probably at home.

Think:

What will happen—or what is probably happening now?

The conditional

Use the conditional for:

- What someone would do
- Hypothetical results
- Wishes and preferences
- Polite requests
- Friendly advice

Examples:

- *Yo viajaría más.* — I would travel more.
- *Me gustaría visitar Perú.* — I would like to visit Peru.
- *¿Podrías ayudarme?* — Could you help me?
- *Yo que tú, estudiaría esta noche.* — If I were you, I would study tonight.

Think:

What would happen under certain conditions?

The present subjunctive

Use the present subjunctive after expressions of:

- Wishes
- Emotions
- Recommendations
- Importance or necessity
- Doubt or uncertainty

Examples:

- *Quiero que vengas.* — I want you to come.
- *Me alegra que estés aquí.* — I'm glad you are here.
- *Recomiendo que estudies.* — I recommend that you study.
- *Es importante que participemos.* — It is important that we participate.
- *Dudo que tengan tiempo.* — I doubt that they have time.

Think:

How does the speaker view this possible action?

The imperfect subjunctive

The imperfect subjunctive frequently appears when the main verb is in the past or conditional.

Examples:

- *Quería que vinieras.* — I wanted you to come.
- *La profesora recomendó que estudiáramos.* — The teacher recommended that we study.
- *Me gustaría que participaras.* — I would like you to participate.
- *Si tuviera tiempo, viajaría.* — If I had time, I would travel.

It also appears in hypothetical *si* sentences:

Si estudiara más, aprendería más. ^[SEP] If I studied more, I would learn more.

The imperfect subjunctive describes the condition. The conditional describes the result.

Commands

Commands belong to the imperative mood. Use them to tell someone what to do—or what not to do.

Examples:

- *Habla más despacio.* — Speak more slowly.
- *Escuchen con atención.* — Listen carefully.
- *No salgas.* — Don't leave.

- *No se preocupen.* — Don't worry.

Negative commands use subjunctive forms. Many formal and plural commands do too, which is another reason the subjunctive appears so often.

Simple and compound tenses

A simple tense uses one conjugated verb:

- *estudio*
- *estudié*
- *estudiaba*
- *estudiaré*
- *estudiaría*
- *estudie*

A compound tense uses a form of *haber* plus a past participle:

- *he estudiado*
- *había estudiado*
- *habré estudiado*
- *habría estudiado*
- *haya estudiado*
- *hubiera estudiado*

The form of *haber* tells us the tense and mood. The participle identifies the action.

Present perfect

he, has, ha, hemos, habéis, han + participle

Use it for a completed action or experience connected to the present.

- *He visitado México.* — I have visited Mexico.
- *Todavía no hemos terminado.* — We have not finished yet.
- *¿Has visto la película?* — Have you seen the movie?

Past perfect

había, habías, había, habíamos, habíais, habían + participle

Use it for an action completed before another past action.

- *Cuando llegamos, la película ya había empezado.* When we arrived, the movie had already started.
- *El conserje había movido el robot.* The custodian had moved the robot.

Think:

What had already happened?

Future perfect

habré, habrás, habrá, habremos, habréis, habrán + participle

Use it for something that will be complete by a future moment.

- *Para el viernes, habremos terminado el proyecto.* By Friday, we will have finished the project.
- *En junio, Elena habrá completado el curso.* In June, Elena will have completed the course.

It can also express probability about a past action:

- *¿Por qué no está Mateo? Habrá perdido el autobús.* Why isn't Mateo here? He probably missed the bus.

Think:

What will have happened by then?

Conditional perfect

habría, habrías, habría, habríamos, habríais, habrían + participle

Use it for something that would have happened under different circumstances.

- *Habría viajado, pero no tenía dinero.* I would have traveled, but I didn't have money.
- *Ellos habrían ganado si hubieran practicado.* They would have won if they had practiced.

This form often describes an unreal or missed past possibility.

Think:

What would have happened?

Present perfect subjunctive

haya, hayas, haya, hayamos, hayáis, hayan + participle

Use it when a subjunctive trigger refers to an action that has already occurred but remains connected to the present.

- *Me alegra que hayas venido.* ^[SEP]I'm glad that you have come.
- *Dudo que hayan terminado.* ^[SEP]I doubt that they have finished.
- *Es posible que ella haya salido.* ^[SEP]It is possible that she has left.

The action is completed, but the speaker reacts to it, doubts it, or considers it possible.

Think:

How does the speaker view something that has happened?

Past perfect subjunctive

hubiera or hubiese + participle

Use it for:

- Past actions that did not occur
- Regrets
- Hypothetical past conditions
- Actions viewed through a past subjunctive trigger

Examples:

- *Ojalá hubiera estudiado más.* ^[SEP]I wish I had studied more.
- *Si hubiéramos salido antes, habríamos llegado a tiempo.* ^[SEP]If we had left earlier, we would have arrived on time.
- *La profesora dudaba que ellos hubieran terminado.* ^[SEP]The teacher doubted that they had finished.

The forms with *hubiese* have the same basic meaning:

- *hubiera hablado*
- *hubiese hablado*

The *hubiera* forms are more common in everyday usage in many regions.

Think:

What might have happened differently in the past?

One verb across the tense map

Watch how the verb *estudiar* changes:

- *Estudio.* — I study.
- *Estudié.* — I studied.
- *Estudiaba.* — I used to study or was studying.
- *Estudiaré.* — I will study.
- *Estudiaría.* — I would study.
- *Quiero que estudies.* — I want you to study.
- *He estudiado.* — I have studied.
- *Había estudiado.* — I had studied.
- *Habré estudiado.* — I will have studied.
- *Habría estudiado.* — I would have studied.
- *Me alegra que hayas estudiado.* — I'm glad you have studied.
- *Ojalá hubiera estudiado.* — I wish I had studied.

The vocabulary stays the same. The tense and mood change the speaker's relationship to time and reality.

A tense tour in one story

Cuando Elena era niña, le encantaban los robots. Construyó su primer robot cuando tenía doce años. Desde entonces, ha participado en varias competencias.

When Elena was a child, she loved robots. She built her first robot when she was twelve. Since then, she has participated in several competitions.

El año pasado, su equipo llegó tarde porque el autobús ya había salido. Elena prometió que el problema no ocurriría otra vez.

Last year, her team arrived late because the bus had already left. Elena promised that the problem would not happen again.

Ahora el equipo se prepara para otra competencia. La profesora quiere que todos lleguen temprano y recomienda que revisen el robot antes de salir.

Now the team is preparing for another competition. The teacher wants everyone to arrive early and recommends that they check the robot before leaving.

Para el viernes, los estudiantes habrán terminado todas las pruebas. Elena cree que ganarán, pero admite que estaría contenta aunque no recibieran un premio.

By Friday, the students will have finished all the tests. Elena believes they will win, but she admits that she would be happy even if they did not receive a prize.

Si hubieran abandonado el proyecto después del problema del año pasado, nunca habrían aprendido cuánto podían lograr juntos.

If they had abandoned the project after last year's problem, they would never have learned how much they could accomplish together.

Choose the best tense

Complete each sentence with the appropriate form.

1. Todos los días yo _____ español. (*estudiar*)
2. Ayer nosotros _____ el proyecto. (*terminar*)
3. De niño, Mateo _____ en el parque. (*jugar*)
4. Mañana Elena _____ la presentación. (*hacer*)
5. Yo _____ contigo, pero tengo que trabajar. (*ir*)
6. La profesora quiere que nosotros _____. (*participar*)
7. Este año ellos _____ tres libros. (*leer*)
8. Cuando llegamos, la clase ya _____. (*empezar*)
9. Para mañana, tú _____ el informe. (*escribir*)
10. Yo _____, pero perdí el autobús. (*venir*)
11. Me alegra que ustedes _____. (*ganar*)
12. Si hubiéramos practicado, _____ mejor. (*jugar*)

Name the purpose

Identify the purpose of each verb form.

1. *Llovía cuando salimos.*
2. *He visitado ese museo.*

3. *Dudo que sea verdad.*
4. *Habríamos ganado.*
5. *Para junio, habrán terminado.*
6. *Ayer perdí las llaves.*
7. *Me gustaría viajar.*
8. *Ojalá hubiera ido.*

Possible purposes include:

- Background action
- Completed past event
- Experience connected to the present
- Doubt
- Hypothetical action
- Completed future action
- Unreal past result
- Past regret

Answer key

Choose the best tense

1. *estudio*
2. *terminamos*
3. *jugaba*
4. *hará*
5. *iría*
6. *participemos*
7. *han leído*
8. *había empezado*
9. *habrás escrito*
10. *habría venido*
11. *hayan ganado*
12. *habríamos jugado*

Name the purpose

1. Background action
2. Experience connected to the present
3. Doubt

4. Unreal past result
5. Completed future action
6. Completed past event
7. Hypothetical action or wish
8. Past regret

Choose meaning before endings

When selecting a Spanish tense, ask:

- 1 Is the action past, present, or future?
- 2 Is it completed, repeated, or in progress?
- 3 Did it occur before another action?
- 4 Is it factual, desired, doubted, or hypothetical?
- 5 Has it happened—or would it have happened?

You do not need to master the entire map in one day. Start with the meaning you want to express. Then choose the tense that communicates it most clearly.