

English needs the pronoun. Spanish often doesn't. ¡Así es!

THOSE PESKY PRONOUNS!

In Spanish, the verb ending often tells you who's doing the action.

Use the pronoun only when you need it.

Pronoun used (less common)

Yo hablo español.
I speak Spanish.

Pronoun omitted (common)

Hablo español.
I speak Spanish.

1 USE THE PRONOUN FOR CLARITY
When the meaning isn't clear, use the pronoun.
Yo estaba en España.
I was in Spain.
Ellos estaban en España.
They (m.) were in Spain.
Ella estaba en España.
She was in Spain.

2 USE THE PRONOUN TO MAKE A CONTRAST
Use it to show who does what.
Yo cocino y tú lavas los platos.
I cook and you wash the dishes.

3 USE THE PRONOUN FOR EMPHASIS
Add emphasis or stress.
¡Yo lo hago!
I'll do it!
(Without yo, the emphasis is lost.)

4 POLITENESS: USTED AND USTEDES
Use to address someone politely or formally.
¿Usted habla inglés?
Do you speak English?
¿Dónde vive, usted?
Where do you live?

5 DROP IT WHEN IT'S OBVIOUS
If the subject is clear, omit the pronoun.
Hablo español.
I speak Spanish.
Vamos mañana.
We're going tomorrow.
Comieron temprano.
They ate early.

Don't say this (not needed):
-Yo hablo español-
-Nosotros vamos mañana-
-Ellos comieron temprano-

Spanish Subject Pronouns

yo	I
tú	you (fam.)
él	he
ella	she
usted	you (form.)
nosotros / nosotras	we
vosotros / vosotras	you (pl., Spain)
ellos	they (m.)
ellas	they (f.)
ustedes	you (pl.)

Practice listening and speaking with confidence, and Spanish will start to sound natural!

★ One easy rule: Does the listener need it? If not, leave it out.

Those Pesky Pronouns: When Spanish Doesn't Need Them

English insists on putting a subject in front of almost every verb:

- I speak
- You eat.
- We live.

Spanish frequently says, in effect, *Why bother? I already told you who's doing it.*

That's because the ending of a Spanish verb often identifies the subject all by itself.

- **Hablo español.** — I speak Spanish.
- **Comemos temprano.** — We eat early.
- **Viven en Madrid.** — They live in Madrid.

You *could* say **Yo hablo español**, but most of the time **yo** isn't necessary. The **-o** ending of *hablo* has already done the job.

First, Meet the Subject Pronouns

These are the principal Spanish subject pronouns:

- **yo** — I
- **tú** — you (familiar, singular)
- **él** — he

- **ella** — she
- **usted** — you (formal, singular)
- **nosotros / nosotras** — we
- **vosotros / vosotras** — you (familiar plural, primarily Spain)
- **ellos / ellas** — they
- **ustedes** — you (plural)

They're important words. The trick is learning **when not to use them**.

If Everyone Knows Who You Mean, Drop the Pronoun

Suppose someone asks:

¿Hablas español?--*Do you speak Spanish?*

You can answer:

Sí, hablo español *Yes, I speak Spanish.*

You don't need **yo**. The verb *hablo* already identifies the speaker as “I.”

Similarly:

Vamos al restaurante.--*We're going to the restaurant.*

There's normally no need for **nosotros** because *vamos* tells us who's going.

This is one of the habits that makes Spanish sound more natural.

Use the Pronoun When the Meaning Isn't Clear

Sometimes the verb alone doesn't tell us enough.

Consider:

Estaba en España durante el verano.

The form **estaba** could mean **I was**, **he was**, **she was**, or even formal **you were**. Context will often settle the question, but sometimes it won't.

That's when the pronoun becomes useful:

- **Yo estaba en España durante el Verano**--*I was in Spain during the summer.*
- **Ella estaba en España durante el Verano**--*She was in Spain during the summer.*

The pronoun isn't there because Spanish grammar requires it. It's there because **the listener needs it**.

Use Pronouns to Make a Contrast

Pronouns are also useful when distinguishing one person or group from another.

Ellas bailan mejor que los chicos.^[SEP]*They [the girls] dance better than the boys.*

Here **ellas** tells us specifically which “they” we’re talking about.

Or:

Yo cocino y tú lavas los platos.*I’ll cook and you wash the dishes.*

Now the pronouns matter because we’re contrasting **what I’ll do with what you’ll do**.

Use a Pronoun for Emphasis

Sometimes you want to emphasize who’s doing something.

Imagine everyone else has refused to go to the store. Finally you announce:

¡Yo voy!*--I’ll go!*

That **yo** suddenly earns its keep.

The same thing happens in English. Compare:

I’ll do it.

with:

I’ll do it!

Spanish can use the otherwise unnecessary pronoun to provide the same kind of emphasis.

What About Usted?

Usted and **ustedes** are the polite or formal forms of “you,” although *ustedes* is also the normal plural “you” throughout Latin America. They can certainly be stated when you want to establish whom you’re addressing:

¿Usted habla inglés?*--Do you speak English?*

But once the subject is obvious, Spanish speakers don’t have to keep repeating **usted** merely to remain polite.

¿Dónde vive?*--Where do you live?*

That can be perfectly courteous Spanish. The situation, tone, and verb form establish the respectful address.

The Easy Rule

When you're deciding whether to use a Spanish subject pronoun, ask yourself one question:

Does the listener need it? If the verb and context already make the subject obvious, leave it out.

✓Hablo español. ✓Vamos mañana. ✓Comieron temprano. ✓

If you need the pronoun for **clarity, contrast, or emphasis**, put it back.

- **Ella estaba allí**
- **Yo cocino; tú limpias**
- **Yo lo hago!**

English needs its subject pronouns almost all the time. Spanish gives them the day off whenever they're not needed.

And once you get accustomed to that idea, your Spanish begins sounding considerably more like Spanish.