

Por or Para? Spanish Gives "For" Two Different Jobs



Sooner or later, every Spanish student encounters this little annoyance: English says **for**. Spanish sometimes says **por** and sometimes says **para**. Why?

Although both words can sometimes be translated as *for*, Spanish uses them to express different relationships.

POR often looks backward or around - WHY, HOW, HOW LONG, or THROUGH WHERE something happens.

PARA usually looks forward - toward a PURPOSE, DESTINATION, RECIPIENT, or DEADLINE.

That won't solve every possible *por/para* question, but it will solve an impressive number of them.

POR: Why Did It Happen?

Use **por** when you're explaining a reason, cause, or motive.

Lo hizo por amor. - He did it for, or because of, love.

Gracias por tu ayuda. - Thank you for your help.

Lo castigaron por llegar tarde. - They punished him for arriving late.

In each case, **por** points back toward the reason something happened. Think: **WHY? - POR**

PARA: What Is the Purpose?

When we're looking forward toward a goal, use **para**.

Estudia para ser médico. - He studies to become a doctor.

Trabajo para ganar dinero. - I work to earn money.

Necesito un cuchillo para cortar el pan. - I need a knife to cut the bread.

The action is directed toward a purpose. Think: **WHAT FOR? - PARA**

Lo hago por ti. - I do it because of you / on your behalf.

Lo hago para ti. - I do it for you - intended for you.

Changing one little word can change the idea.

POR Takes You Through Something

When you're moving **through, around, along, or by way of** a place, **por** is usually the word you want.

Caminamos por el parque. - We walked through the park.

Paseamos por la ciudad. - We walked around the city.

Entró por la puerta. - He entered through the door.

You're moving within or through a space rather than aiming at a destination.

PARA Points Toward the Destination

When the emphasis is on where someone or something is headed, use **para**.

Salimos para Madrid. - We're leaving for Madrid.

El barco sale para España mañana. - The ship leaves for Spain tomorrow.

POR = through. PARA = toward.

POR Tells How Something Is Done

Por is frequently used for means, communication, or method.

Hablamos por teléfono. - We talked by phone.

Te lo envío por correo. - I'll send it to you by mail.

Compré los boletos por internet. - I bought the tickets online.

Think of **por** as answering: **HOW? BY WHAT MEANS?** But don't automatically use it every time English says *by*. Spanish has its own preferences: **Viajamos en tren.** - We travel by train.

POR Measures How Long

Use **por** to express a duration of time:

Trabajé por dos horas. - I worked for two hours.

Vivimos allí por tres años. - We lived there for three years.

How long? **POR.** In everyday Spanish, *por* can sometimes be omitted with durations, but recognizing this use will help you understand what you hear and read.

PARA Points Toward a Deadline

A deadline looks forward toward a particular point in time, so use **para**.

La tarea es para mañana. - The homework is for tomorrow.

Necesito el informe para el viernes. - I need the report by Friday.

POR = duration. PARA = deadline.

PARA Identifies the Recipient

If something is intended **for someone**, use **para**.

Este regalo es para ti. - This gift is for you.

La carta es para María. - The letter is for María.

Compré flores para mi esposa. - I bought flowers for my wife.

The gift, letter, or flowers are headed toward a recipient. That's another form of destination.

POR Handles Exchanges

When one thing is exchanged for another, use **por**.

Te doy diez euros por el libro. - I'll give you ten euros for the book.

Pagué veinte dólares por la camisa. - I paid twenty dollars for the shirt.

One thing goes **in exchange for** another. Think: **EXCHANGE - POR**

You've Already Been Using Por

Even beginning Spanish students know several expressions containing **por**:

por favor - please; **por supuesto** - of course; **por ejemplo** - for example

por qué - why; **por eso** - therefore / that's why

para siempre - forever; **para mí** - for me / in my opinion; **para variar** - for a change

Don't try to dissect every expression. Learn common expressions as complete phrases. Sometimes the easiest grammar rule is simply: **That's how Spanish says it.**

The Shortcut Worth Remembering

When you're stuck between **por** and **para**, picture two arrows:

POR looks backward or travels through:

WHY? - reason or cause; HOW? - means or method; HOW LONG? - duration

THROUGH WHERE? - movement through; IN EXCHANGE FOR WHAT? - exchange

PARA points forward:

FOR WHAT PURPOSE? - goal; TOWARD WHERE? - destination

FOR WHOM? - recipient; BY WHEN? - deadline

Lo hice por ti. - I did it because of you.

Lo hice para ti. - I did it for you.

Same English word. Two different Spanish ideas.

Once you start thinking about the idea instead of translating the word *for*, those pesky little words **por and **para** become considerably less pesky.**