

# Spanish Needs Two Ways to Say "To Be"



English has one verb that does an enormous amount of work: **to be**.

*I am tired. She is a doctor. We are in Madrid. The car is red. The concert is downtown.*

Spanish looks at that workload and divides it between two verbs: **ser** and **estar**.

Both can mean **to be**, but they don't do the same job. At first this seems unnecessarily complicated. Eventually, however, you discover that Spanish is making a useful distinction.

## Meet the Two Verbs

First, here are their present-tense forms.

### SER

**soy** - I am; **eres** - you are; **es** - he/she/you are

**somos** - we are; **sois** - you are (plural, primarily Spain); **son** - they/you are

### ESTAR

**estoy** - I am; **estás** - you are; **está** - he/she/you are

**estamos** - we are; **estáis** - you are (plural, primarily Spain); **están** - they/you are

Yes, both verbs are irregular. Spanish apparently decided that if it was going to give us two verbs meaning *to be*, it might as well make us work for both of them.

## Think "What Is It?" for Ser

Use **ser** when you're identifying, defining, classifying, or describing the basic nature of someone or something.

**Ella es doctora.** - She is a doctor. *What is she? A doctor.*

**Somos de México.** - We are from Mexico.

**El coche es rojo.** - The car is red.

**Soy americano.** - I am American.

A useful way to think about **ser** is: **What is it? Who is it? What kind of thing is it?**

## Ser Also Handles Time

Spanish uses **ser** to tell time and identify dates and days.

**Hoy es lunes.** - Today is Monday.  
**Es el diez de agosto.** - It's August 10.  
**Son las tres.** - It's three o'clock.

Don't worry about why time belongs to **ser**. It simply does.

## Ser Shows Ownership and Origin

To say something belongs to someone, or where someone or something comes from:

**El libro es de Juan.** - The book belongs to Juan.  
**María es de España.** - María is from Spain.  
**El vino es de Chile.** - The wine is from Chile.

Again, we're identifying or defining something about the subject.

## Now Think "How or Where Is It?" for Estar

**Estar** usually tells us about a condition, state, or location.

**Estoy cansado.** - I am tired. *How am I? Tired.*  
**Ella está feliz.** - She is happy.  
**Estamos en la oficina.** - We are in the office.

If you're answering **How is it? Where is it?**, **estar** is probably waiting nearby.

## Location Usually Belongs to Estar

When you're saying where a person, place, or thing is located, use **estar**.

**Madrid está en España.** - Madrid is in Spain.  
**El libro está en la mesa.** - The book is on the table.  
**Mis amigos están en casa.** - My friends are at home.

This exposes the weakness in the old rule that **estar means temporary**. Madrid's location in Spain is hardly temporary. The better rule is simply: **Location - estar**.

## Except for Events!

Naturally, Spanish throws us a curveball. When you're saying **where an event takes place**, use **ser**:

**La conferencia es en el auditorio.** - The conference is in the auditorium.  
**La fiesta es en mi casa.** - The party is at my house.

The auditorium itself **está** somewhere. But the conference **es** there. Spanish treats the location of an event as part of identifying the event.

## Estar Tells Us How Someone Feels

Physical and emotional conditions commonly use **estar**:

**Estoy cansado.** - I'm tired.  
**Está enfermo.** - He's sick.  
**Estamos contentos.** - We're happy.  
**¿Cómo estás?** - How are you?

That last question is one of the most familiar uses of **estar**. You're not asking **what** someone is. You're asking **how** someone is.

## Estar Also Keeps the Action Going

Spanish uses **estar** with a present participle to describe an action in progress:

**Estoy estudiando.** - I am studying.  
**Estamos comiendo.** - We are eating.  
**Los niños están jugando.** - The children are playing.

Here **estar** helps create what grammarians call the **present progressive**. The important part is simpler: something is happening **right now**.

## Sometimes Changing the Verb Changes the Meaning

Here's where **ser** and **estar** become particularly interesting.

**Él es aburrido.** - He is boring.  
**Él está aburrido.** - He is bored.  
  
**Ella es lista.** - She is clever.  
**Ella está lista.** - She is ready.

Same adjective. Different *to be*. Different meaning. This is why simply memorizing **permanent versus temporary** won't take you very far.

## Forget "Permanent Versus Temporary"

For generations, Spanish students have been taught **ser = permanent** and **estar = temporary**. It's easy to remember, but it isn't very reliable.

Instead, start with these questions:  
**SER** - What is it? Who is it? What defines or identifies it?  
**ESTAR** - How is it? Where is it? What condition is it in?  
**Special cases:** Time and dates - ser; origin and ownership - ser; location - estar; location of an event - ser; action in progress - estar.

You won't choose correctly every time at first. Nobody does. But eventually you'll stop translating the English word **is** and start thinking about what you actually mean.

Is she a happy person? **Es feliz.**  
Is she feeling happy right now? **Está feliz.**

English gives us one little word - **is**. Spanish makes us think about it.

**And perhaps Spanish has a point.**