

The Red Car or the Car Red?

Spanish Adjectives Behave Differently

ENGLISH: ADJECTIVE BEFORE THE NOUN

The adjective usually comes before the noun.

the red car



KEY IDEA

Spanish adjectives follow the noun they describe.

Noun + Adjective
(not Adjective + Noun)

SPANISH: ADJECTIVE AFTER THE NOUN

The adjective usually comes after the noun.

el coche rojo



➤ **EXAMPLES: SAME NOUN, DIFFERENT GENDER AND NUMBER** <➤

MASCULINE SINGULAR	FEMININE SINGULAR	MASCULINE PLURAL	FEMININE PLURAL
el coche rojo	la casa roja	los coches rojos	las casas rojas
 	 	 	 

LOOK FOR THE PATTERN

Learn the noun with its article and adjective: **el libro interesante**, **la chica amable**.

A QUICK REMINDER

Spanish adjectives must agree in gender and number with the noun they describe.

el amigo inteligente	(m.)
la amiga inteligente	(f.)
los amigos inteligentes	(m.pl.)
las amigas inteligentes	(f.pl.)

Try It!

Translate these:

- the blue book
- the tall girl
- the small houses
- the nice boys

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English speakers are accustomed to putting adjectives **before** the nouns they describe:

- the **red** car
- the **pretty** girl
- the **big** house

Spanish frequently turns that order around:

- **el coche rojo** — the red car
- **la chica bonita** — the pretty girl
- **la casa grande** — the big house

To an English-speaking beginner, *the car red* may sound backward. To a Spanish speaker, **el coche rojo** sounds perfectly natural.

But word order is only half the story. Spanish adjectives also like to **agree** with the nouns they describe.

The Adjective Has to Match the Noun

Remember that Spanish nouns have gender. Many adjectives change their endings to match that gender.

Start with:

el chico alto--*the tall boy*

Change the boy to a girl and **alto** changes too:

la chica alta--*the tall girl*

Now make them plural:

- **los chicos altos**--*the tall boys*
- **las chicas altas**--*the tall girls*

The adjective follows the noun wherever it goes:

- **chico** → **alto**
- **chica** → **alta**
- **chicos** → **altos**
- **chicas** → **altas**

Think of it as grammatical teamwork. The noun establishes the gender and number, and the adjective gets into the proper uniform.

O Usually Changes to A

Many descriptive adjectives ending in **-o** have four forms: **rojo, roja, rojos, rojas**

So:

- **el coche rojo** — the red car
- **la camisa roja** — the red shirt
- **los coches rojos** — the red cars
- **las camisas rojas** — the red shirts

This is why learning the gender of nouns matters. Once you know **la camisa** is feminine, you know it needs **roja**, not *rojo*.

The pieces begin fitting together.

But Not Every Adjective Changes for Gender

Many adjectives have the same masculine and feminine form.

Consider **interesante**:

- **el libro interesante** — the interesting book
- **la película interesante** — the interesting movie

Or **azul**:

- **el coche azul** — the blue car
- **la casa azul** — the blue house

The adjective doesn't change for gender.

It still changes for number:

- **los libros interesantes**
- **las películas interesantes**
- **los coches azules**
- **las casas azules**

So don't automatically turn every adjective ending into **-o** or **-a**. Some adjectives simply aren't interested in playing that game.

What If One Adjective Describes Several People?

Suppose we have a boy and a girl, and both are tall:

El chico y la chica son altos.

Why **altos** instead of *altas*?

Traditionally, when a plural group contains both masculine and feminine nouns, Spanish uses the **masculine plural** form.

Two girls:

Las chicas son altas.

Two boys:

Los chicos son altos.

A boy and a girl: **El chico y la chica son altos.**

That's the conventional grammatical pattern you'll encounter throughout standard Spanish.

Spanish Usually Puts the Adjective After the Noun

For ordinary descriptions, the safest place for a beginning student to put the adjective is **after the noun**.

- **una casa blanca** — a white house
- **un libro interesante** — an interesting book
- **una mujer inteligente** — an intelligent woman
- **un perro pequeño** — a small dog

If you're describing what something looks like, what color it is, what nationality it is, or what characteristics it has, noun-first is an excellent default.

NOUN + ADJECTIVE

English says:

the blue car

Spanish normally says:

el coche azul

Once you've heard enough Spanish, it stops sounding backward.

English starts sounding backward instead.

But Sometimes the Adjective Comes First

Naturally, Spanish isn't going to let us escape with one perfect rule.

Some common adjectives frequently appear **before** the noun:

- **un buen amigo** — a good friend
- **una gran ciudad** — a great city
- **el primer día** — the first day
- **la misma cosa** — the same thing

You'll learn these combinations naturally as you encounter them.

For now, don't worry about memorizing a long list. If you're a beginner and aren't sure where an ordinary descriptive adjective belongs, **put it after the noun**. You'll be right much of the time.

Sometimes Position Changes the Meaning

Here's one of the more interesting features of Spanish.

Moving an adjective can occasionally change what it means. Consider **grande**.

una casa grande *a big house*

But:

una gran casa *a great house*

Same adjective. Different position. Different idea.

Or consider **viejo**:

- **un amigo viejo** *an old friend* — a friend who is old
- **un viejo amigo** *an old friend* — someone who has been your friend for a long time

Spanish can use adjective placement not merely to describe something, but to shade the meaning.

That's fascinating.

It's also something you don't need to master today.

The Rule Worth Taking Home

For beginning Spanish, remember two things.

First, **make the adjective agree with the noun** whenever the adjective has forms that change:

- **el perro blanco**
- **la casa blanca**
- **los perros blancos**
- **las casas blancas**

Second, **put an ordinary descriptive adjective after the noun** unless you've learned that a particular expression works differently:

- **el coche rojo**
- **la chica inteligente**
- **los libros interesantes**

Don't translate English word order mechanically. Let Spanish arrange its own furniture.

Once you get accustomed to saying **la casa blanca** instead of thinking *the house white*, adjective placement begins to feel perfectly natural.

And if Spanish occasionally decides to move the adjective somewhere else and change its meaning while it's at it?

Well, by now you've probably learned that Spanish likes to keep us paying attention.

