

Noun Gender in Spanish

El género de los sustantivos

Reference guide · Summary · Extra tips beyond the slides

What is grammatical gender?

In Spanish, every noun — every person, place, or thing — is either **masculine** or **feminine**. This is called grammatical gender, and it has nothing to do with the object being male or female in real life. A table (la mesa) is feminine. A book (el libro) is masculine. The gender is simply a property of the word itself.

Why does it matter? Because the article ("the" → **el / la**), any adjective, and other words in the sentence must **agree** with the noun's gender. Getting the gender right helps you sound natural from day one.

◆ QUICK-REFERENCE CARD — All the rules at a glance

Ending	Gender	Examples
-o	Masculine → EL	el gato, el libro, el perro, el niño
-a	Feminine → LA	la casa, la mesa, la niña, la ventana
-ma / -pa / -ta	EXCEPTION → EL ⚠	el problema, el mapa, el planeta, el tema
-ción / -sión	Feminine → LA	la canción, la pasión, la televisión
-dad / -tad / -tud	Feminine → LA	la ciudad, la libertad, la actitud
-o (surprise!)	Feminine → LA ⚠	la foto, la moto, la radio, la mano

→ **Golden strategy:** Always learn a new noun together with its article. Don't just learn "**casa**" — learn "**la casa**". This way the gender becomes automatic. Think of the article as part of the word itself.

◆ RULE 1 — The Basic Rule (-o and -a)

Words ending in -o are usually **masculine** → **el**. **Words ending in -a** are usually **feminine** → **la**.

This is the most reliable pattern in Spanish. It works for the vast majority of common nouns.

MASCULINE → EL

- el gato (cat)
- el libro (book)
- el niño (boy)
- el perro (dog)
- el hermano (brother)
- el bolígrafo (pen)
- el cuaderno (notebook)
- el teléfono (phone)

FEMININE → LA

- la casa (house)
- la mesa (table)
- la niña (girl)
- la ventana (window)
- la hermana (sister)
- la silla (chair)
- la escuela (school)
- la palabra (word)

◆ RULE 2 — The Greek Exception (-ma, -pa, -ta → el)

→ **Watch out! These words end in -a but they are masculine.**

Many Spanish words ending in **-ma**, **-pa**, or **-ta** come from **ancient Greek** and kept their original masculine gender. They look feminine but use **el**. This group is large and very common — worth memorizing as a set!

-ma words → EL	-pa / -ta words → EL	More -ma words → EL	In a sentence
el problema (problem)	el mapa (map)	el clima (climate)	El problema es grave.
el idioma (language)	el planeta (planet)	el tema (topic)	El mapa está aquí.
el sistema (system)	el cometa (comet)	el poema (poem)	El idioma es difícil.
el programa (program)	el profeta (prophet)	el drama (drama)	El clima es bueno.

◆ RULE 3 — Reliable Feminine Endings

These endings are **almost always feminine**. Many of them have an English equivalent that makes them easy to recognize — use the connection to English as your memory hook!

-ción / -sión → LA

-dad / -tad → LA

-tud → LA

English link: -tion / -sion	English link: -ty	English link: -tude
la acción (action)	la ciudad (city)	la actitud (attitude)
la canción (song)	la verdad (truth)	la gratitud (gratitude)
la pasión (passion)	la libertad (liberty)	la multitud (multitude)
la televisión (television)	la amistad (friendship)	la juventud (youth)
la nación (nation)	la realidad (reality)	la virtud (virtue)

→ **Memory trick:** If the word ends in **-ción/-sión** and reminds you of an English word ending in **-tion/-sion**, it is almost certainly feminine. Same logic: **-dad** → English **-ty**; **-tud** → English **-tude**. Use English as your guide!

◆ RULE 4 — Surprise! Feminine words ending in -o

→ **A small but important group: -o words that are feminine.**

Most of these are **abbreviations of longer feminine words**. Because the full word was feminine, the short version keeps that gender — even though the ending changed to -o. **La mano** is the only true exception with no abbreviation logic — it is simply a historical irregularity.

Word	Full form (why it's feminine)	In a sentence
la foto	la fotografía (photography)	La foto es muy bonita.
la moto	la motocicleta (motorcycle)	La moto es nueva.
la radio	la radiodifusión (broadcasting)	La radio está encendida.
la mano	No abbreviation — historical exception	La mano derecha es hábil.

→ **Remember:** Because these words are feminine, all adjectives must match: **"la moto rápida"** (not rápido), **"la foto bonita"** (not bonito). The adjective always follows the noun's gender, not the ending.

◆ GOING FURTHER — Extra patterns not in the slides

These are patterns that go beyond what the slides show. They appear frequently in everyday Spanish and will help you identify gender even for words you have never seen before.

01 — More masculine endings

Ending	Gender	Examples
-or	Masculine → EL	el color, el amor, el error, el calor, el sabor (flavor)
-aje	Masculine → EL	el viaje (trip), el personaje (character), el garaje (garage)
-ista	Same for both → EL / LA	el/la artista, el/la turista, el/la periodista (journalist)
-nte	Same for both → EL / LA	el/la estudiante, el/la cantante (singer), el/la gerente (manager)

→ Words ending in **-ista** and **-nte** are **invariable** — they do not change based on gender. The **article** (el or la) is the only thing that changes: "el artista" / "la artista".

02 — Words that change meaning with gender (Advanced tip — good to know!)

Word	Masculine (EL) vs. Feminine (LA)	Example
capital	el capital = financial capital (money) / la capital = capital city	La capital de España es Madrid.
orden	el orden = order (sequence) / la orden = order (command)	El orden es importante. / La orden del jefe.
cura	el cura = priest / la cura = cure, remedy	El cura habla. / La cura es efectiva.
guía	el guía = tour guide (person) / la guía = guidebook	El guía nos llevó. / La guía de viaje.

→ **These word pairs are called "heterónimos de género"**. They are not common at A1 level, but knowing they exist helps you understand **why gender matters** in Spanish — it can completely change the meaning of a sentence!

◆ EXERCISES

Exercise 1 — Identify the gender | Look at the ending of each word and decide: is it **el** or **la**? Write your answer and name the rule you used.

Word	El or La?	Which rule did you use?
1. conversación (conversation)		
2. programa (program)		
3. libertad (freedom)		
4. foto (photo)		
5. viaje (trip)		
6. idioma (language)		
7. gratitud (gratitude)		
8. mano (hand)		
9. calor (heat)		
10. televisión (television)		

Exercise 2 — Correct the mistake | Each sentence has a gender error. Find it, fix it, and explain why.

1. El ciudad de Bogotá es muy bonita.



2. La problema es muy difícil.



3. Tengo la mapa en mi teléfono.





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