

# Guide for Multilingual Student Writing

## Common English-Spanish Errors

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### Introduction

This guide categorizes and explains ten of the most common errors that Spanish speakers make when writing in English. The goal is for instructors to help their Spanish-speaking students with their composition in English. With this tool, instructors can give them both an early diagnostic and more personalized assistance.

This guide assumes that instructors have no knowledge of Spanish and that students are native Spanish speakers (referred to in this document as “speakers”). An asterisk (\*) before a word or fragment indicates an error; slashes (/) indicate sounds; *italics* indicate the Spanish translation.

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## 1. Mechanics

Type	Example	Error
Mechanics (spelling, punctuation, and capitalization)	government	*gobovernment

1.1. Many Latin-root English words have a Spanish counterpart that is close but differs in spelling.

- Spanish applies the same sound /b/ to the symbols “b” and “v.”  
Example: government  
Error: \*gobovernment (*gobierno*)
- Spanish applies the same sound /h/ to “j” and “g.”  
Example: garage  
Error: \*garaje (*garaje*)
- Spanish applies the sound /j/ to the digraph “ll.”  
Example: parallel  
Error: \*paralel (*paralelo*)
- Spanish applies the digraph “ch” to the sound found in words like “China.” For the /k/sound, it uses “k” or the digraph “qu.”  
Example: architecture  
Error: \*arquitecture (*arquitectura*)
- Spanish does not often repeat consonants and writes one letter for each consonant sound.  
Example: session  
Error: \*sesion (*sesión*)

1.2. Regarding capitalization and punctuation, a few differences can be noted.

- In Spanish, names of peoples, languages, months, or days of the week are not capitalized.  
Example: Mandarin  
Error: \*mandarin (*mandarín*)
- In Spanish, periods and commas are placed after quotation marks.  
Example: He said: “Know thyself.”  
Error: He said: “Know thyself”.\* (*Él dijo: “Conócete a ti mismo”.*)
- In Spanish, dashes are used to mark dialogue.  
Example: “Forget it,” Victor exclaimed.  
Error: \*–Forget it – Victor exclaimed. (*–Olvídalo –exclamó Víctor.*)
- In Spanish, a comma is not placed before the conjunction “and” (y) in a list.  
Example: My favorite countries to travel to are Italy, Romania, and Portugal.  
Error: My favorite countries to travel to are Italy, Romania \*and Portugal.  
(*Mis países favoritos para viajar son Italia, Rumania y Portugal.*)

## 2. Word Choice

Type	Example	Error
Word Choice	“Out of sight, out of mind.”	*“Eyes that don’t see, heart that doesn’t regret.”

- 2.1. This error is found when translating literally, especially with sayings and popular expressions (idioms). Errors in usage refer to choosing a word or phrase that is grammatically possible but unusual in standard English. (In this guide, the choice of a wrong preposition is discussed separately in section three.)

Example: “Out of sight, out of mind.”

Error: \*“Eyes that don’t see, heart that doesn’t regret.”  
(*Ojos que no ven, corazón que no siente.*)

Example: I will sleep on it.

Error: \*I will consult with my pillow. (*Lo consultaré con la almohada.*)

- 2.2. Occasionally the speaker’s choices are false cognates. False cognates are similar words with different meanings, e.g., carpet *-carpeta* (folder); to attend *-atender* (to pay attention); to assist *-asistir* (to help).

Example: She is sleeping.

Error: She is \*dormant. (*Está dormida.*)

Example: Then they looked for a flashlight.

Error: Then they looked for a \*lantern. (*Entonces buscaron una linterna.*)

- 2.3. Adjectives ending in “-al / -ic,” as classic/classical, electric/electrical, or mechanic/mechanical, have only one possibility in Spanish (*clásico, eléctrico, mecánico*).

Example: *Casablanca* is a classic. I like classical music.

Error: *Casablanca* is a \*classical. I like \*classic music.  
(*Casablanca es un clásico. Me gusta la música clásica.*)

### 3. Prepositions

Type	Example	Error
Prepositions	She is very good at tennis.	She is very good *in tennis.

Prepositions are used to show the relationship between two nouns, usually in either time or space (e.g., “I sat on my bike.”). This guide will address prepositions in phrasal verbs in a latter section.

#### 3.1. The Spanish preposition “in” (*en*) also means “on” and “at” (*sobre, a*).

Example: She is very good at tennis. She is an ace on the court.

Errors: She is very good \*in tennis. She is an ace \*in the court.  
(*Es muy buena en tenis. Es un as en la cancha.*)

#### 3.2. The Spanish preposition “of” (*de*) also means “from” and “by” (*desde, por*).

Example: Many pieces from Picasso are in Barcelona. There are 300 paintings by Picasso.

Error: Many pieces \*of Picasso are in Barcelona. There are 300 paintings \*of Picasso.  
(*Muchas piezas de Picasso están en Barcelona. Hay 300 pinturas de Picasso.*)

#### 3.3. Spanish has a list of verbs that are followed by a preposition. Those prepositions don’t always coincide with their English counterparts.

Example: I have thought of that: it depends on me.

Errors: I have thought \*in that: it depends \*of me. (*He pensado en eso: depende de mí.*)

Example: I am waiting for the day that I enter the garage without any problems.

Errors: I am waiting \*the day that I enter \*in the garage without problems.  
(*Estoy esperando el día en que entre en el garaje sin problemas.*)

#### 4. Phrasal Verbs

Section	Example	Error
Phrasal Verbs	My dog broke out of his kennel.	My dog broke* his kennel.

- 4.1. Spanish doesn't have phrasal verbs, the combination {verb + preposition/adverb} to extend the meaning of the original verb, e.g., to put/to put off (*poner/postponer*). In some cases, the additional meaning of the preposition/adverb is inferred in Spanish.

Example: My dog broke out of his kennel.

Error: My dog broke \*his kennel. (*Mi perro rompió su jaula.*)

Example: The building burned down.

Error: The building burned\*. (*El edificio se quemó.*)

In other cases, the speaker may add an adverb or a phrase to complete the meaning.

Example: My dog broke out of his kennel.

Error: My dog broke \*his kennel and left. (*Mi perro rompió su jaula y salió.*)

Example: The building burned down.

Error: The building burned \*completely. (*El edificio se quemó completamente.*)

- 4.2. In the Spanish language, a reflexive pronoun can be added to complete the meaning of a verb.

Example: The same day, I broke up with Elena, and my car broke down.

Error: The same day, I broke up with Elena, and my car broke \*itself.  
(*El mismo día, rompí con Elena y mi carro se rompió.*)

Example: I sat down.

Error: I sat \*myself. (*Me senté.*)

- 4.3. In Spanish, prepositions aren't used to emphasize or complete the meaning of actions (as English phrasal verbs do). As a result, the speaker may omit the preposition part of the phrasal verb and, consequently, lose emphasis.

Example: I'm saving up for my big trip.

Error: I'm saving \* for my big trip. (*Estoy ahorrando para mi gran viaje.*)

## 5. Pronouns

Type	Example	Error
Pronouns	Mary said that she would not go.	Mary said that *he would not go.

5.1. Spanish personal pronouns (I, you, he or she) are normally omitted. As a result, speakers may use the wrong pronoun “he” or “she.”

Example: Mary said that she would not go.

Error: Mary said that \*he would not go. (*Mary dijo que no irá.*)

5.2. Spanish object pronouns “him/her” are both the same word in Spanish (*su*). As a result, speakers may place the wrong pronoun “him” or “her.”

Example: Mary said that her car has problems.

Error: Mary said that \*his car has problems. (*Mary dijo que su carro tiene problemas.*)

5.3. Spanish uses the masculine gender for any collection containing male and female elements. This is why a speaker tends to use the masculine form in those situations.

Example: When a student fails, his or her environment is responsible too.

Error: When a student fails, his \* environment is responsible too.  
(*Cuando un estudiante fracasa, su ambiente es responsable también.*)

## 6. Reflexivity

Type	Example	Error
Reflexivity	That day, he stayed at home.	That day, he stayed himself* at home.

6.1. Spanish uses the reflexive pronouns “myself,” “yourself,” “himself,” etc. (*me, te, se, etc.*) to alter the meaning of the verb.

Example: That day, he stayed at home.

Error: That day, he stayed \*himself at home. (*Ese día, se quedó en casa.*)

6.2. Spanish reflexive pronouns are also reciprocal pronouns.

Example: Romeo and Juliet love each other.

Error: Romeo and Juliet love \*themselves. (*Romeo y Julieta se aman.*)

6.3. Spanish uses reflexive pronouns or the verb “put” (*poner*) instead of the transitional verb “to turn” or “to get.”

Example: My skin turned red.

Error: My skin \*put itself red. (*Mi piel se puso roja.*)

Example: The pan will get hot very fast.

Errors: The pan will put \*itself hot very rapidly. (*La sartén se pondrá caliente muy rápidamente.*)

6.4. Spanish uses the reflexive form to create another verb with another meaning. (As discussed previously, Spanish does not have phrasal verbs.)

Example: I sat down there.

Error: I sat \*myself there. (*Me senté allí.*)

6.5. Spanish prefers to use the reflexive pronoun form to create the passive voice construction.

Example: The problem was resolved.

Error: The problem resolved \*itself. (*El problema se resolvió.*)

## 7. Articles

Type	Example	Error
Articles	Patience is a virtue.	The* patience is a virtue.

7.1. In Spanish, the article “the” (*el/la/los/las*) is not just used to point at a specific noun, but also to precede any noun.

Example: Patience is a virtue.

Error: \*The patience is a virtue. (*La paciencia es una virtud.*)

Example: I will send you a reminder with details of the procedure.

Error: I will send you a reminder with \*the details of the procedure.

(*Te enviaré un recordatorio con los detalles del procedimiento.*)

7.2. Spanish also uses the article “the” instead of the possessives “my,” “your,” “his,” etc. when the owner is inferred.

Example: I got my car and followed Ana.

Error: I got \*the car and followed Ana. (*Agarré el carro y seguí a Ana.*)

7.3. Spanish speakers tend to use the article “the” when using the possessive apostrophe plus the letter “s.”

Example: John’s hotel is near.

Error: \*The John’s hotel is near. (*El hotel de John está cerca.*)

7.4. Spanish also uses the article “the” for general ideas or fictitious situations instead of the indefinite article “a/an” (*un/una/unos/unas*).

Example: In an ideal class, a student can learn and be assessed at any time.

Errors: In \*the ideal class, \*the student can learn and be assessed at any time.

(*En la clase ideal, el alumno puede aprender y ser evaluado en cualquier momento.*)

## 8. Plurals

Type	Example	Error
Plurals	Bear Lake has that name because there are many bears.	*Bears Lake has that name because there are many bears.

8.1. Spanish adjectives can have plural forms. When a noun functions as an adjective, it is pluralized, too.

Example: Bear Lake has that name because there are many bears.

Error: \*Bears Lake has that name because there are many bears.

*(El lago de los osos se llama así porque hay muchos osos.)*

Example: In the fair, public attention focused on the strange cars.

Error: In the fair, public attention focused on the \*stranges cars.

*(En la feria, la atención del público se centró en los carros extraños.)*

Example: This is a two-dollar bill.

Error: This is a \*two-dollars bill.

*(Este es un billete de dos dólares.)*

8.2. In Spanish, the grammatical number of zero count nouns is singular; in English, it is plural.

Example: There are no figs in the basket.

Error: There \*is no fig in the basket. *(No hay ningún higo en la cesta.)*

8.3. In Spanish, all collective nouns (e.g., police, audience, crowd, etc.) are always singular as they are considered “one” set.

Example: Police are investigating the case.

Error: Police \*is investigating the case. *(La policía está investigando el caso.)*

8.4. Spanish counterparts of “any” (*cualquier, algún/alguna*) are singular.

Example: Let me know if you have any questions.

Error: Let me know if you have any \*question.

*(Déjame saber si tienes cualquier pregunta.)*

8.5. Spanish always marks plural with an “s” at the end. English has some exceptions.

Example: Take-offs are dangerous here; pilots only have five days off a year.

Errors: \*Takes-off are dangerous here; pilots only have five \*day offs a year.

*(Los despegues son peligrosos aquí; los pilotos sólo tienen cinco días libres al año extra.)*

## 9. Gerunds and Infinitives

Type	Example	Error
Gerunds and Infinitives	I'm looking forward to seeing you.	I'm looking forward to *see you.

9.1. In Spanish, a verb after “to” (*a*) is always an infinitive; in English, it can be a gerund or an infinitive.

Example: I'm looking forward to seeing you.

Error: I'm looking forward to \*see you. (*Espero verte.*)

Example: I will help him do it.

Error: I will help him \*to do it. (*Le ayudaré a hacerlo.*)

9.2. In Spanish, a gerund cannot follow the preposition “to” (*a/para*).

Example: There are nine steps to creating a résumé.

Error: There are nine steps to \*create a résumé.  
(*Hay nueve pasos para crear un curriculum.*)

9.3. In Spanish, a gerund never functions as an adjective.

Example: The Laughing Cow<sup>TM</sup> is my favorite brand of cheese.

Error: \*The Cow that Laughs<sup>TM</sup> is my favorite brand of cheese.  
(*La vaca que ríe<sup>TM</sup> es mi marca favorite de queso.*)

9.4. Spanish doesn't have the structure {verb + pronoun + infinitive}. Instead, it adds a dependent clause starting with “that”: {verb + “that” + dependent clause}.

Example: I want him to study this case.

Error: I want \*that he studies this case. (*Quiero que él estudie este caso.*)

Example: Let him go.

Error: Let \*that he goes. (*Deja que él vaya.*)

## 10. Word Order

Type	Example	Error
Word Order	Not only was he my doctor, but my best friend.	Not only *he was my doctor, but my best friend.

10.1. In Spanish, the subject-verb order does not change in questions, negations, or conditions.

Example: Not only was he my doctor, but my best friend.

Error: Not only \*he was my doctor, but my best friend.

*(No solo era mi doctor, sino mi mejor amigo.)*

Example: When did he come?

Error: When \*he came? (*¿Cuándo vino?*)

Example: Should you have any questions, let me know.

Error: \*You should have any questions, let me know.

*(Si tuvieras cualquier pregunta, déjame saber.)*

10.2. Spanish is very flexible and admits many changes in the order of the elements within a sentence.

Example: I mean that.

Error: \*To that, I mean. (*A eso me refiero./Me refiero a eso.*)

10.3. Spanish doesn't have phrasal verbs (as explained in section four), and consequently, speakers may misplace the preposition.

Example: He tried to cheer me up.

Error: He tried to cheer \*up me. (*Intentó animarme.*)

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