

Ser and Estar: To be or not to be?

Figuring out Spanish “to be”!

Two “to be”s... but why?

In Spanish, there are two words that correlate with English’s “to be”.

That means when we try to sentences like:

*“I **am** at the store right now; I can’t talk.”*

and

*“I **am** from Naples, Florida.”*

we use two different words for **am**.

Verbs that mean “to be” in all of the world’s languages are often *very irregular*, and some language scientists think this is because they are used so often. When we say a word enough times, over enough years, it tends to change faster than if we don’t use it that much¹. Spanish is just special enough to have two words that fall into this category, where English only has one, very complex word.

Talking about things that don’t change: using ser

The general rule of thumb with using ser is that we use it to talk about topics or facts that are permanent (in a sense). These topics include:

What day it is	Jobs people have	What time it is	Characteristics of people	Where people are from	Describing relationships
 <p>Monday Tuesday Wednesday Thursday Friday Saturday Sunday</p> <p>“Today is Friday.”</p>	 <p>“He is a construction worker.”</p>	 <p>“It is almost 12 o’clock.”</p>	 <p>“He is a serious guy.”</p>	 <p>“Are you from Florida?”</p>	 <p>“David is my brother.”</p>

For each of these categories, there is (an at least momentary) permanence being described. You can find an example of what we mean by that on the next page:

¹ This process is called “suppletion” in language science.

Practicing with ser

In our second example of “to be” in English, we had this sentence:

*“I **am** from Naples, Florida.”*

Here, this “am” should be a form of ser in Spanish, **not** a form of estar since we’re talking about where someone is from.






Where someone is from does not ever change. It is a permanent relationship. Moreover, when we talk about someone’s brother, sister, or partner, these relationships do not change very often. They are more stable.

This is the overarching reason why we use ser in Spanish: to talk about interactions between subjects and objects that have the ability to last.

What about the other one, estar?

Estar, as you might guess, is what we use to talk about things that don’t last that long.

These are the overarching topics that we use estar to talk about:

Where something is positioned	Where something is located	Describing actions	Describing conditions	Describing emotions
 <p>“The coffee is on the table.”</p>	 <p>“David is at the store.”</p>	 <p>“David is running.”</p>	 <p>“It is raining.”</p>	 <p>“Ellis is sad.”</p>

Generally, these are topics and things that can change, and **do** change pretty often.

An emotion someone’s feeling at a given point probably won’t last forever; the coffee won’t be on the table forever; David’s just visiting the store, not living there, and he certainly won’t be running forever either; and when it rains, it sometimes pours, but in any case, it never rains forever.

Practicing with estar

As for our first example of “to be” in English, we had:

*“I **am** at the store right now; I can’t talk.”*

Here, we’re describing our current location, something that is understood as temporary in the sentence. Thus, we should use estar for this “am”.

Seeing the two side-by-side

If you're the type of person for whom mnemonic devices are helpful, here's a device that shows the two verbs side-by-side with an acronym for when to use which:

SER	ESTAR
Date	Position
Occupation	Location
Characteristic	Action
Time	Condition
Origin	Emotion
Relation	

Conjugation charts for the two verbs

Once you've decided which context is best for the sentence you're working with or trying to say, you'll need to choose the right conjugation based on the subject of the sentence.

These two verbs are both irregular, so typical conjugation steps might not always apply:

	SER	ESTAR
YO	SOY	ESTOY
TU	ERES	ESTÁS
EL/ELLA/USTED	ES	ESTÁ
NOSOTRAS/OS	SOMOS	ESTAMOS
USTEDES	SON	ESTÁN
ELLOS/ELLAS	SON	ESTÁN



Summary

You now have everything you need to figure out which “to be” verb you should choose in your Spanish homeworks. Nevertheless, getting some practice is still a good idea! Here's a [quiz](#) from SpanishDict.com that can test your knowledge of ser and estar in a low stakes environment². Best of luck with this!

² If you're using this resource in its print form, you can find this quiz online using one of the LC's computers by Googling “ser versus estar Spanishdict quiz”, and it should be the first search result.