

Introduction to the Subjunctive Mood

Spanish for Beginners

One of the most confusing aspects of Spanish for beginners is the subjunctive mood. In fact, it usually isn't taught, at least to those using English as a first language, until at least the intermediate level.

With that in mind, since this lesson is part of a series aimed at beginners, we won't attempt now to discuss the subjunctive mood in detail. But even as a beginner you should be aware of what role the subjunctive mood plays, if only so you can recognize it when you come across it in speech or reading.

The mood of a verb, sometimes known as its mode, indicates what type of role it plays in a sentence and/or the speaker's attitude toward it. For the most part, in English as well as Spanish, the most common verb mood is the indicative mood. In general, it is the "normal" verb form, indicating both action and state of being.

Another mood you're familiar with, at least in English, is the imperative mood. In both English and Spanish, the imperative mood is used to give commands. Note that in a sentence such as "do it" (or the equivalent, "*hazlo*," in Spanish) the verb doesn't indicate what is happening, but what you are ordering to happen. Thus it plays a different role in the sentence than an indicative verb would. (In Spanish, this mood is indicated by its conjugation. In English, the imperative mood can be indicated by omitting the subject of the verb.)

A third mood, extremely common in Spanish and other Romance languages such as [French](#) and [Italian](#), is the subjunctive mood. The subjunctive mood also exists in English, although we don't use it very much and its use is less common than it used to be. You could speak English for days, perhaps years, and get by without ever using a subjunctive form. But that isn't true in Spanish. **The subjunctive mood is essential to Spanish**, and even many simple types of statements can't be made properly without it.

In general, the subjunctive is a verb mood that is used to express an action or state of being *in the context of the speaker's reaction to it*. Most commonly (although not always), the subjunctive verb is used in a clause that starts with the [relative pronoun](#) *que* (meaning "which," "that" or "who"). Frequently, the sentences that contain a subjunctive verb are used to express **doubt, uncertainty, denial, desire, commands** or **reactions** to the clause containing the subjunctive verb. Compare the following two sentences:

- **Indicative:** *Pedro come.* (Pedro **is eating**.)
- **Subjunctive:** *Espero que Pedro coma.* (I hope that Pedro **is eating**.)

The first sentence is in the indicative mood, and Pedro's eating is stated as a fact. In the second sentence, Pedro's eating is placed in the context of what the speaker hopes for. It isn't particularly important to the sentence whether Pedro eats or not; what is important is the speaker's reaction to it. Note also that while the Spanish distinguishes the subjunctive through the conjugation of *comer*, no such distinction is made in English.

See how the pattern holds true in the following sentences:

- **Indicative** (statement of fact): *Britney **está** enferma.* (Britney **is** sick.)
- **Indicative** (statement of fact): *Sé que Britney **está** enferma.* (I know that Britney **is** sick.)
- **Subjunctive** (doubt): *No es cierto que Britney **esté** enferma.* (It is uncertain that Britney **is** sick.)
- **Subjunctive** (denial): *No es verdad que Britney **esté** enferma.* (It is not true that Britney **is** sick.)
- **Subjunctive** (reaction): *Estoy feliz que Britney **esté** enferma.* (I am happy that Britney **is** sick.)
- **Subjunctive** (desire): *Espero que Britney **esté** enferma.* (I hope that Britney **is** sick.)
- **Subjunctive** (desire): *Preferemos que Britney **esté** enferma.* (We prefer that Britney **be** sick.)
- **Subjunctive** (command): *Insisto que Britney **esté** enferma.* (I insist that Britney **be** sick.)

Note the use of the subjunctive mood in the English translation of the final two examples. If the indicative mood were used in English in the final example (I insist that Britney is sick), the speaker would be insisting that a fact is true; when the subjunctive is used in this instance, it expresses what the speaker wants to be true (whether it is or not is immaterial to the meaning of the sentence). Similarly, in Spanish sentences where either the subjunctive or indicative mood can be used, the choice almost always affects the meaning of the sentence. In this way, the subjunctive mood can sometimes be used in Spanish to indicate doubt or feelings in ways that aren't available in English by merely changing the verb form.

As you study Spanish, even before you have formally studied the subjunctive, pay attention to verb conjugations that seem a bit unusual. They may be verbs in the subjunctive mood. Paying attention to when the mood is used will put you in a better position later to fully master Spanish verb usage.

In the Mood: The Subjunctive, Part 1

Learning when to use the subjunctive mood can be particularly challenging for English-speakers learning Spanish. That's probably because the subjunctive mood is distinguished from the indicative mood so infrequently in English.

Subjunctive? Indicative? Mood? What in the world do those mean?

OK. Let's start with the basics. (If you already know these basics of grammar, [skip ahead](#) to the explanation of when the subjunctive is used.) First of all, the **mood** (sometimes called the mode) of the verb expresses either the speaker's attitude toward the verb or describes how it is used in the sentence. This can better be described by examples of the six moods in both English and Spanish.

Mood	Description	Examples
infinitive (<i>infinitivo</i>)	The name of a verb. It can be used as the subject or object of a sentence. In English it takes the form of "to + verb." In Spanish, infinitives end in <i>-ar, -er, or -ir</i> .	I want to go . <i>Quiero ir.</i>
gerund (<i>gerundio</i>)	The gerund is used with the auxiliary "to be" (<i>estar</i>), and it can also be used as a noun (far more frequently in English than in Spanish).	He is speaking . <i>Él está hablando.</i>
participle (<i>participio</i>)	The participle is used with the auxiliary "to have" (<i>haber</i>) to form various tenses. In both languages, the participles frequently are used as adjectives.	I have fallen . <i>Me he caído.</i>
imperative (<i>imperativo</i>)	Commands or suggestions.	Click here. <i>Haz clic aquí.</i>
indicative (<i>indicativo</i>)	Indicates action, process, or identity as taking place in reality.	See examples below.
subjunctive (<i>subjuntivo</i>)	Indicates action, process, or identity as dependent on the speaker's reaction to it.	See examples below.

That may seem as clear as Mexico City on a smoggy day. Another way of expressing the concept is that the indicative expresses reality or what is believed to be reality. But the subjunctive is used for different purposes: It expresses facts that are **contrary** to reality. It expresses **doubt** that something is or will be a fact. It expresses how a person **feels** about a possible action or state of being. It expresses a **wish, intent** or **command** for a possible action or state of being. It is usually used in subordinate clauses that begin with *que* or *si*, although in some sentences (such as simple sentences expressing doubt), a subjunctive verb can be the main verb in the sentence.

How the subjunctive is used can best be seen through examples of various uses:

Example	Reason
<i>Quiero que no tengas frío.</i> I want you to be not cold.	It's irrelevant whether the person is cold or not. The sentence expresses a wish , not reality.
<i>Siento que tengas frío.</i> I'm sorry you're cold.	The sentence expresses the speaker's emotions about a perceived reality. What is important in this sentence is the speaker's feelings, not whether the other person is cold.
<i>Te doy mi chaqueta para que no tengas frío.</i> I'm giving you my coat so you won't be cold.	The sentence expresses the speaker's intent , not necessarily reality.
<i>Se permite que lleven chaquetas allí.</i> People are allowed to wear jackets there.	The phrase expresses permission for an action to take place.
<i>Di a ella que lleve una chaqueta.</i> Tell her to wear her jacket.	Expresses a command or wish of the speaker.
<i>No hay nadie que tenga frío.</i> Nobody is cold.	Expression of negation of the action in a subordinate clause.
<i>Tal vez tenga frío.</i> Perhaps he is cold.	Expression of doubt .
<i>Si yo fuera un rico, tocaría el violín.</i> If I were a rich man, I would play the fiddle.	Expression of a statement contrary to fact .

Here are some examples of sentences showing differences between the indicative and subjunctive.

Indicative	Subjunctive	Explanation
<i>Es cierto que sale tarde.</i> It is definitely leaving late	<i>Es imposible que salga tarde. Es probable que salga tarde.</i> It is impossible that it is leaving late. It is likely that it will leave late.	The indicative is used to express perceived reality, while the subjunctive is used to express doubt, negation or mere probability.
<i>Busco el carro barato que funciona.</i> I'm looking for the cheap car that works.	<i>Busco un carro barato que funcione.</i> I'm looking for a cheap car that works.	In the first example, the speaker knows that there is a car that matches the description, so the indicative is used as an expression of reality. In the second example, there is doubt that such a car exists, so the subjunctive is used.
<i>Creo que es ella.</i> I believe it is she.	<i>No creo que sea ella.</i> I don't believe it's she.	The subjunctive is used in the second example because the subordinate clause is negated by the main clause. Generally, the indicative is used with <i>creer que</i> or <i>pensar que</i> , while the subjunctive is used with <i>no creer que</i> or <i>no pensar que</i> . (The Spanish verb <i>pensar</i> has more of a feeling of definitiveness than does the English equivalent, "to think.")
<i>Es obvio que tienes dinero.</i> It is obvious you have money.	<i>Es bueno que tengas dinero.</i> It is good you have money.	The indicative is used in the first example because it expresses reality (or apparent reality). The subjunctive is used in the other example because the sentence is a reaction to the statement in the subordinate clause.
<i>Habla bien porque es un experto.</i> He speaks well because he's an expert.	<i>Habla como si fuera un experto.</i> He speaks as if he were an expert.	The subjunctive is used in the second example because it's irrelevant to the sentence whether he's an expert.
<i>Quizás lo pueden hacer.</i>	<i>Quizás lo puedan hacer.</i> Perhaps they can	In a sentence such as this, the subjunctive is used to emphasize uncertainty or doubt, the indicative to emphasize certainly.



Perhaps they do it (but I doubt
can do it (and it).
I'm sure of
it).

Hay políticos que tienen There are politicians who have courage.
¿Hay políticos que tengan coraje? Are there politicians with courage?

The subjunctive is used in the second example to express doubt.

Llegaré aunque mi carro no funciona. I will arrive even though my car isn't running.
Llegaré aunque mi carro no funcione. I will arrive even if my car isn't running.

The indicative is used in the first sentence because the speaker knows his car isn't working. In the second sentence, the speaker doesn't know whether it is running, so the subjunctive is used.

A final note: The subjunctive used to be used in English more than it is today, and today it is used more frequently in formal speech than in everyday use. Cases where it is still in English used might help you remember some of the instances where it is used in Spanish.

- **Contrary-to-fact condition:** If I **were** the president, I'd keep us out of war.
- **Expression of a desire:** I would like it if he **were** my father.
- **Expressions of request or advice:** I insist that he **go**. We recommended that he **fill** out the form.

But remember that there are numerous instances where the subjunctive is used in Spanish where we make no distinction in English.

In the Mood: The Subjunctive, Part 2

Learning not only when to use the subjunctive mood, but which form of the subjunctive to use, can be one of the most difficult parts of learning Spanish verb usage. The rules can appear quite complicated at first, partly because the subjunctive mood is nearly absent in English. But learning the tenses — either in the traditional way of memorizing rules and then applying them, or by becoming familiar enough with the language to know what sounds right — is essential to gaining fluency.

In an earlier lesson, we learned the principles that determine when to use the indicative and when to use the subjunctive. In this lesson, we will look at which tense to use, and the next lesson will look at the basic rules of forming the subjunctive. The goal here isn't to convey a complete understanding of the subjunctive tenses, but to supplement other study materials you have and to help you gain a basic understanding of how the verbs in a sentence work together.

The subjunctive has four tenses:

- present subjunctive
- present perfect subjunctive
- imperfect subjunctive
- past perfect (or pluperfect) subjunctive

Remember that, generally speaking, the subjunctive is used in dependent clauses. Which form of the subjunctive is used depends on two factors:

- the tense of the verb in the main clause
- the time relationship between the verb in the dependent clause and the subjunctive verb

Although there are some exceptions, the following chart shows the most common ways in which the tenses are differentiated:

Main verb is ...	Dependent (subjunctive) verb refers to action that ...	Tense to use in the dependent clause	Sample sentence (subjunctive in boldface)
in the present, future, present perfect, or imperative tense	takes place at the same time or after the main verb	present subjunctive	<i>Espero que comas.</i> (I expect you to eat.)
in the present, future, present perfect, or imperative tense	has been completed	present perfect subjunctive	<i>Espero que hayas comido.</i> (I expect you to have eaten.)
in the	takes place at	imperfect	<i>Esperé que comieras.</i> (I expected you to



preterite, imperfect, past perfect, or conditional tense	the same time or after the action of the main verb	subjunctive eat.)	
in the preterite, imperfect, past perfect, or conditional tense	has been completed	past perfect subjunctive (also called pluperfect subjunctive)	<i>Esperé que hubieras comido.</i> (I expected you to have eaten.)

Note that in many cases there are various ways of translating the sentence to English. For example, *espero que comas* also could be translated as "I expect that you will eat." Because there is no future subjunctive, verbs in the present subjunctive form often are translated into English using the future tense. *Dudo que me compres recuerdos*, I doubt you will buy souvenirs for me.

Here's another way to look at the sequence of verb tenses:

- If the main verb is in a present or future tense, use either the present subjunctive or present perfect subjunctive, depending on whether the subjunctive verb refers to action (or presumed action) that has been completed.
- If the main verb is in a past or conditional tense, use either the imperfect or past perfect subjunctive, depending on whether the subjunctive verb refers to action that has been completed at the time of the action in the main verb.

In the Mood: The Subjunctive, Part 3

Except those rare few of us who can learn verb conjugations without effort, mastering them at some point will require rote memorization. While the verb forms can be confusing at first, with use they become natural as conjugations in the native tongue.

The charts below show the forms of the subjunctive for regular verbs and most of the irregular ones. See earlier lessons on [when to use the subjunctive](#) and the [four tenses of the subjunctive](#). Note that the verbs in the subjunctive follow a pattern similar to that used in the indicative mood. Note also that some verbs (such as those ending in **-car**, **-gar**, and **-gir**, may make change in spelling to maintain the correct sound).

Present subjunctive

Type of verb	Formation	Examples
Most -ar verbs	Remove the -o from the first-person indicative form and add the appropriate ending: -e, -es, -e, -emos, -éis, en.	que yo hable , que tú hables , que él (o ella o usted) hable , que nosotros (o nosotras) hablemos , que vosotros (o vosotras) habléis , que ellos (or ellas o ustedes) hablen
Most -er verbs	Remove the -o from the first-person indicative form and add the appropriate ending: -a, -as, -a, -amos, -áis, an.	que yo coma , que tú comas , que él coma , que nosotros comamos , que vosotros comáis , que ellos coman
Most -ir verbs	Remove the -o from the first-person indicative form and add the appropriate ending: -a, -as, -a, -amos, -áis, an.	que yo resista , que tú resistas , que él resista , que nosotros resistamos , que vosotros resistáis , que ellos resistan
Stem-changing -ar and -er verbs	Follow the regular rule, except that a stressed -o- in the stem becomes an -ue- , and a stressed -e- becomes an -ie- .	que yo cuente , que tú cuentes , que él cuente , que nosotros contemos , que vosotros contéis , que ellos cuenten que yo pierda , que tú pierdas , que él pierda , que nosotros perdamos , que vosotros perdáis , que ellos pierdan
Stem-changing -ir verbs	Follow the regular rule, except an -e- becomes an -i- in the next-to-last syllable except in the <i>nosotros</i> and <i>vosotros</i> forms in some verbs. In some others, the -e- becomes an -i- in all forms. The -o- in the next-to-last syllable	que yo mienta , que tú mientas , que él mienta , que nosotros mintamos , que vosotros mintáis , que ellos mientan que yo repita , que tú repitas , que él repita , que nosotros repitamos , que vosotros repitáis , que ellos repitan que yo duerma , que tú duermas , que él duerma , que nosotros durmamos , que vosotros durmáis , que ellos duerman



	becomes -ue- except in the <i>nosotros</i> and <i>vosotros</i> forms, where it becomes a -u- .	
caber	irregular	que yo quepa , que tú quepas , que él quepa , que nosotros quepamos , que vosotros quepáis , que ellos quepan
dar	irregular	que yo dé , que tú des , que él dé , que nosotros demos , que vosotros deis , que ellos den
estar	irregular	que yo esté , que tú estés , que él esté , que nosotros estemos , que vosotros estéis , que ellos estén
haber	irregular	que yo haya , que tú hayas , que él haya , que nosotros hayamos , que vosotros hayáis , que ellos hayan
ir	irregular	que yo vaya , que tú vayas , que él vaya , que nosotros vayamos , que vosotros vayáis , que ellos vayan
jugar	irregular	que yo juegue , que tú jueges , que él juegue , que nosotros juguemos , que vosotros juguéis , que ellos jueguen
saber	irregular	que yo sepa , que tú sepas , que él sepa , que nosotros sepamos , que vosotros sepáis , que ellos sepan
ser	irregular	que yo sea , que tú seas , que él sea , que nosotros seamos , que vosotros seáis , que ellos sean

Imperfect subjunctive

Type of verb	Formation	Examples
All verbs	Remove the -on from the third-person indicative preterite form and add the appropriate ending: -a , -as , -a , -amos , -áis , an . Put the stress on the last syllable of	que yo hablara , que tú hablaras , que él hablara , que nosotros habláramos , que vosotros hablarais , que ellos hablaran que yo hablase , que tú hablases , que él hablase , que nosotros hablásemos , que



the stem in the *nosotros* form.

vosotros **hablaseis**, que ellos **hablasen**

There is also a seldom-used form of this tense that is used primarily in literature. It is seldom heard in speech. It is conjugated as above, except the **-ra** becomes **-se**. It normally is not necessary to memorize this form, but you should be able to recognize it when you see it.

Present perfect subjunctive

Type of verb	Formation	Examples
All verbs	Use the present subjunctive form of haber and follow it with the past participle.	que yo haya salido , que tú hayas salido , que él haya salido , que nosotros hayamos salido , que vosotros hayáis salido , que ellos hayan salido

Past perfect subjunctive (pluperfect)

Type of verb	Formation	Examples
All verbs	Use the past subjunctive form of haber and follow it with the past participle.	que yo hubiera puesto , que tú hubieras puesto , que él hubiera puesto , que nosotros hubiéramos puesto , que vosotros hubieráis puesto , que ellos hubieran puesto