SPANISH SYSTEM

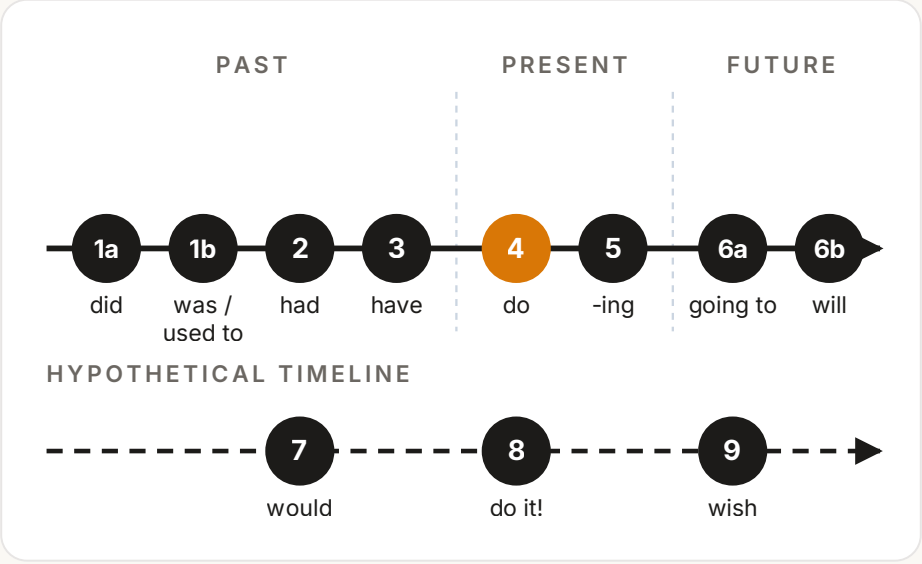
Learn pieces, not words.

LEVEL A · PART 1

Manual A1

Start speaking

The Sentence Builder, present, past and future, and the basics of the Ear.



Practice every chapter at **spanish-system.vercel.app**

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Four kinds of box appear in these books: ***Shortcut*** *(optional memory trick, always skippable),* ***Careful*** *(a trap for English speakers),* ***Later*** *(something from a higher level, named so you don't worry about it now),* ***Sidebar*** *(the story or the joke).*

Read this first

You don't need to know a lot of Spanish to speak Spanish. You need a small number of pieces and a way to put them together. That's what this book is.

There are three systems. Each does one job.

1. **The Sentence Builder** — how to say it. A few frames with empty slots. You memorize pieces and plug them in.
2. **The Timeline** — when. Nine numbered slots that move a sentence into the past or the future.
3. **The Ear** — understanding what comes back.

Manual A comes in two parts. **A1** (this book) gets you speaking: the Sentence Builder, the three anchor slots of the Timeline (present, past, future), and the basics of the Ear. **A2** finishes the Timeline, all nine slots. By the end of A you own the whole map. B and C never add a new place on the map; they fill in the places you already have.

One rule for the whole system: learn pieces, not words. A piece is a small chunk of Spanish that is already correct: *voy a*, *tengo que*, *en casa*, *un café*. You don't build a piece. You use it. That's what stops you translating from English in your head.

Three words you'll see

- **Infinitive** — the dictionary form of a verb. In Spanish it always ends in -ar, -er or -ir: *trabajar* (to work), *comer* (to eat), *vivir* (to live).
- **Conjugate** — change a verb's ending to match who is doing it. *Trabajar* becomes *trabajo* (I work), *trabajas* (you work).
- **Piece** — a ready-made chunk you memorize as one thing.

The website. Every section ends with a few things to build at the practice site. The site uses the same names, the same colors and the same slot numbers as this book, so nothing has to be learned twice.

1 · The Sentence Builder

The idea

When you learn a new language, your brain wants to build the sentence in English and then swap in the foreign words. That's slow, and the result is usually wrong, because Spanish doesn't put words in the same order.

The Sentence Builder replaces that habit. You learn a few **frames** (fixed skeletons with empty slots) and small **banks** of pieces that fit each slot. The frame already has the grammar in it. You just pick pieces.

The Core Frame

Opener + Engine + Action + Thing + Connector + (start again)

Mañana voy a trabajar en la oficina, pero primero quiero tomar un café.
Tomorrow I'm going to work at the office, but first I want to have a coffee.

Taken apart:

Slot	Piece	English
Opener	Mañana	Tomorrow
Engine	voy a	I'm going to
Action	trabajar	work
Thing	en la oficina	at the office
Connector	pero	but
Opener	primero	first
Engine	quiero	I want
Action	tomar	have (a drink)
Thing	un café	a coffee

Not every sentence uses every slot. *Quiero comer* (I want to eat) is Engine + Action, and it's a complete, correct sentence.

The Engine is the secret

An Engine is a verb that is already conjugated and is followed by an infinitive. Because the Engine carries the conjugation, **the Action never changes.** Memorize eight Engines and you can use every verb in Spanish in its dictionary form.

The eight Engines, in the "I" form:

Engine	Means	Example
quiero	I want to	Quiero comer.
necesito	I need to	Necesito trabajar.
puedo	I can	Puedo ayudar.
voy a	I'm going to	Voy a salir.
tengo que	I have to	Tengo que ir.
me gusta	I like to	Me gusta viajar.
me gustaría	I'd like to	Me gustaría ver eso.
prefiero	I prefer to	Prefiero dormir.

Put **no** in front of any Engine to make it negative: *No quiero comer. No puedo ir.*

> **Careful.** After an Engine, the Action is always the infinitive, never the -ing form. *Quiero trabajar*, not *quiero trabajando*. English says "I like working"; Spanish says "I like to work." This one mistake marks a beginner faster than any other, and it's the easiest to stop making: if there's an Engine in front, the verb ends in -ar, -er or -ir.

Some Engines can take a Thing with no Action in between: *Quiero un café. Necesito la cuenta. Me gusta el café.* Others can't: *tengo que* and *puedo* and *voy a* always need an Action first. The site greys out what doesn't fit, so you'll learn the split by using it.

> **Later.** In A2, the Engines move through time: *quería* (I wanted to), *tuve que* (I had to), *voy a tener que* (I'm going to have to). The Action still never changes. That's the whole point of Engines, and it's why the Timeline is easy once you have them.

The starting banks

Start with these. You'll add more later, but these are enough to speak.

Actions (10) trabajar (work) · comer (eat) · ir (go) · comprar (buy) · hablar (talk) · ver (see, watch) · hacer (do, make) · salir (go out, leave) · dormir (sleep) · tomar (drink, have)

Things and places (14) Memorize these *with* the little word in front. Then you never have to think "el or la?" or "a, en or con?": it's already attached.

un café (a coffee) · la comida (the food) · la película (the movie) · un regalo (a gift) · el carro (the car) · algo (something) · nada (nothing) · eso (that) · en casa (at home) · en la oficina (at the office) · al trabajo (to work) · a la playa (to the beach) · con mi familia (with my family) · con mis amigos (with my friends)

Openers (8) hoy (today) · mañana (tomorrow) · ahora (now) · esta noche (tonight) · después (later) · primero (first) · normalmente (usually) · a veces (sometimes)

Connectors (8) y (and) · pero (but) · porque (because) · o (or) · si (if) · cuando (when) · entonces (so, then) · después (then)

Build some sentences

Take one piece from each bank. Every combination is correct Spanish.

- Hoy quiero comer en casa. — Today I want to eat at home.
- Ahora no puedo hablar. — I can't talk right now.

- Mañana tengo que ir al trabajo. — Tomorrow I have to go to work.
- Me gustaría ver la película, pero necesito dormir. — I'd like to see the movie, but I need to sleep.
- A veces voy a la playa con mis amigos. — Sometimes I go to the beach with my friends.
- No quiero comprar nada. — I don't want to buy anything.

Eight Openers × eight Engines × ten Actions × fourteen Things is over 8,000 sentences from 40 pieces, and none of them needed conjugating.

> **Shortcut.** *Optional. If this doesn't click, skip it. Nothing later depends on it.* Some Things only go with some Actions. *Ir* (go) wants a place to go: *ir a la playa*, never *ir un café*. *Comprar* (buy) wants an object: *comprar un regalo*, never *comprar en casa*. You don't need a rule for this; English works the same way, and the site shows you. But if you like rules: places start with *en* or *a*, objects start with *un*, *una*, *el* or *la*, and people start with *con*.

Say it out loud

Reading a sentence in your head is not speaking. Before you turn the page, say each of the six sentences above out loud, twice. Then build three of your own and say those. The mouth has to learn the pieces too.

On the site: open the builder, pick *Say it*, and build five sentences. Tap *Listen* on each one and say it back. Press *Save* on the two you like most; you'll see them again in the drill.

2 · Three more frames

The Core Frame does most of the work. Three small frames cover the rest of a beginner's day: describing something, asking for something, and filling the silence while you think.

Describe: Thing + es / está + Descriptor

Spanish has two words for "is." You'll hear the rule many ways; here is the version that works:

- **es** = what something is. Its nature. The kind of thing it is.
- **está** = how or where something is. Right now.

El café es caro. — Coffee is expensive. (That's what it's like.) *El café está frío.* — The coffee is cold. (Right now. It could be reheated.) *Mi familia está en casa.* — My family is at home. (Where.)

The Thing starts the sentence, so it takes *el* or *la*, not *un* or *una*: *el café, la comida, mi amigo*. The site shows Things in that form when you're in Describe.

Descriptors to start with. Each one is marked **es** or **está**, because the descriptor decides the verb, not you:

es (what it is)	está (how it is right now)
grande (big)	caliente (hot)
interesante (interesting)	frío (cold)
fácil (easy)	listo (ready)
difícil (hard)	triste (sad)
importante (important)	feliz (happy)
excelente (excellent)	cerrado (closed)
horrible (horrible)	abierto (open)
increíble (incredible)	

Put *muy* (very) in front of any of them: *La comida está muy rica.*

> **Careful.** A descriptor has to fit the thing. *El café está triste* is grammatical and ridiculous: coffee doesn't get sad. Food gets hot, cold, ready, excellent; people get sad, happy, smart; places get open, closed, big. The site greys out descriptors that don't fit what you picked. In real life, nobody greys anything out, so when in doubt, use one of the three that fit everything: *excelente, horrible, increíble*.

> **Later.** Some descriptors change their ending to match the thing: *el café frío*, but *la comida fría*. The site does this for you in Level A, and you'll see it happen. Level B explains the rule. For now, copy what you see.

Ask: Question piece + Thing

A question piece carries its own question mark and its own verb. Add a Thing and you're done.

Question piece	Means	Example
¿Dónde está...	Where is...	¿Dónde está el baño?
¿Cuánto cuesta...	How much is...	¿Cuánto cuesta el café?
¿Hay...	Is there...	¿Hay café?
¿Qué es...	What is...	¿Qué es eso?
¿A qué hora es...	What time is...	¿A qué hora es la cena?
¿Tienes...	Do you have...	¿Tienes un carro?

Notice the Thing changes shape with the question. After *¿Dónde está* and *¿Cuánto cuesta* it starts a clause, so it takes *el* or *la*: *¿Dónde está el café?* After *¿Hay* it goes bare: *¿Hay café?* After *¿Tienes* it keeps its *un*: *¿Tienes un café?* You don't have to reason this out each time; the site shows the right form, and after a week the shapes are just how those questions sound.

You can also turn any Core Frame sentence into a question by saying it as one. Spanish doesn't rearrange the words; the voice goes up at the end. *¿Puedo ver la película?* — Can I see the movie?

React: one piece, on its own

These aren't sentences. They fill the gap while you think, and they make you sound like someone in the conversation rather than someone frozen at the edge of it.

pues (well…) · bueno (okay, well) · claro (of course) · a ver (let's see) · no sé (I don't know) · ¿en serio? (really?) · qué bien (great) · listo (okay, got it) · perfecto (perfect) · más o menos (so-so)

Learn these first, before the grammar. A learner who says *pues… a ver…* while finding the next piece sounds Spanish. A learner who goes silent sounds lost. Same amount of Spanish in their head.

> **Shortcut.** *Optional. If this doesn't click, skip it. Nothing later depends on it.* *Listo* is in both the Describe list (ready) and the React list (okay, got it). Same word, two jobs: *¿Listo?* — Ready? *Listo.* — Done, got it. Half of Spanish small talk is these two uses of *listo*.

On the site: switch to *Describe* and build four sentences, two with *es* and two with *está*; notice which descriptors the site offers for each thing. Switch to *Ask* and ask where three things are. Switch to *React*, tap *Listen* on every reaction, and say each one back with feeling.

3 · Talking about other people

Everything so far has been "I." Do this section once "I" feels automatic.

Every Engine is a verb, and verbs in Spanish change their ending to say who is doing it. There are five endings to know. The Action still never changes.

	I	you	he / she / you (polite)	we	they / you all
quiero	quiero	quieres	quiere	queremos	quieren
necesito	necesito	necesitas	necesita	necesitamos	necesitan
puedo	puedo	puedes	puede	podemos	pueden
voy a	voy a	vas a	va a	vamos a	van a
tengo que	tengo que	tienes que	tiene que	tenemos que	tienen que
me gusta	me gusta	te gusta	le gusta	nos gusta	les gusta
me gustaría	me gustaría	te gustaría	le gustaría	nos gustaría	les gustaría
prefiero	prefiero	prefieres	prefiere	preferimos	prefieren

- Mi hijo quiere comer. — My son wants to eat.
- Tenemos que salir. — We have to leave.
- ¿Quieres comer? — Do you want to eat?
- Mis amigos van a ir a la playa. — My friends are going to go to the beach.

Three things to notice in that table:

1. **The columns rhyme.** "You" always ends in -s. "We" always ends in -mos. "They" always ends in -n. Once you've seen it for one Engine, you can hear it in all of them.

2. **"He" and "you (polite)" are the same form.** *Quiere* means he wants, she wants, or you (sir/ma'am) want. Spanish treats a stranger with the same grammar as a third person. It's not rude; it's respectful.
3. **Me gusta is different.** The verb stays *gusta*; only the little word in front changes: *me, te, le, nos, les*. Literally "it pleases me, it pleases you." Don't fight it; just memorize the five pieces.

Careful. Spanish usually drops "I," "you," "we." The ending already says who. *Quiero comer* is complete. *Yo quiero comer* is also correct, but it sounds like you're insisting: "*I* want to eat (not him)." Beginners who put *yo* in front of everything sound slightly like they're arguing. Drop it unless you mean it.

Sidebar · the polite "you." Latin America uses *usted* (polite you) a lot: with waiters, taxi drivers, anyone older, anyone you've just met. The grammar is the "he/she" column, so you already have it. When in doubt, use the *usted* form; the worst outcome is sounding a little formal, which is a fine way to be wrong.

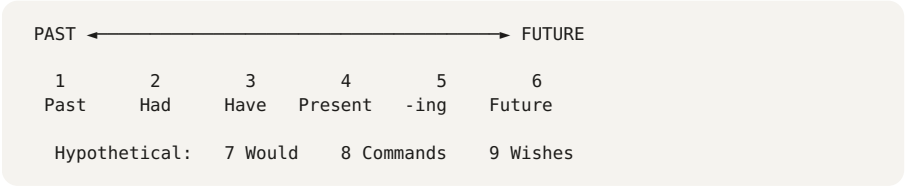
On the site: build a sentence, then tap through the five *Who* chips and watch only the Engine change. Build one for *nosotros* and one for a friend (*tú*) and save both; the drill's "Change the who" mode will quiz you on them.

4 · The Timeline: three anchors

The idea

Everything so far happens now. The Timeline is how a sentence moves into the past or the future.

Picture a line. The past is on the left, the future on the right, now in the middle. Every verb form in Spanish is a point on that line, except for three that sit just off it.



Nine slots. That's the whole map. In this book you learn three of them, the anchors: **4** (now), **1** (then) and **6** (later). With those three you can say almost anything, roughly. A2 fills in the rest.

How the Timeline connects to the Sentence Builder

The Engine slot in the Sentence Builder *is* a Timeline slot. Every Engine you know sits in slot 4, except *voy a*, which is slot 6. To move a sentence in time, you move the Engine. Nothing else changes.

- Quiero trabajar. — I want to work. (4)
- Quería trabajar. — I wanted to work. (1)
- Voy a querer trabajar. — I'm going to want to work. (6)

Same Action, same Thing, same Opener. One word moved. That's the entire trick, and it's why the Sentence Builder was worth learning first.

Slot 4 · Present

Spanish name: presente · **form:** trabajo

What's true now, what you do regularly, and, in conversation, what you're about to do. You have been using this slot since page one; every Engine in the eight is a slot-4 verb.

	-ar (trabajar)	-er (comer)	-ir (vivir)
I	trabajo	como	vivo
you	trabajas	comes	vives
he / she / usted	trabaja	come	vive
we	trabajamos	comemos	vivimos
they / ustedes	trabajan	comen	viven

- Trabajo en una oficina. — I work in an office.
- Mañana trabajo. — I'm working tomorrow.

Careful. English uses "I am working" for right now and "I work" for habits. Spanish uses slot 4 for both: *Trabajo en un barco* means "I work on a ship" and also, in context, "I'm working on a ship." There is a separate -ing form (slot 5, in A2), but Spanish reaches for it far less than English does. When in doubt, slot 4.

Slot 6 · Future

Two flavors. Learn 6a first; it costs nothing.

6a · Going to · *voy a trabajar*

This is the Engine *voy a* from the first chapter: present-tense *ir* plus a verb you already know. It is the future most Spanish speakers use most of the time.

voy a · vas a · va a · vamos a · van a + Action

- Mañana voy a trabajar temprano. — Tomorrow I'm going to work early.
- Vamos a comer. — We're going to eat. (Also "let's eat.")

6b · Will · *trabajaré*

Promises, predictions, and more formal plans. Also for guessing: *¿Qué hora será?* — I wonder what time it is.

Build it from the whole infinitive plus one set of endings, the same for every verb:

trabajar + **é · ás · á · emos · án** → trabajaré, trabajarás, trabajará, trabajaremos, trabajarán

- Te llamaré mañana. — I'll call you tomorrow.
- Será difícil. — It'll be hard.

A few common verbs shorten first: tener → **tendr**é · poder → **podr**é · hacer → **har**é · decir → **dir**é · salir → **saldr**é · poner → **pondr**é · venir → **vendr**é · querer → **querr**é · saber → **sabr**é.

> **Shortcut.** *Optional. If this doesn't click, skip it. Nothing later depends on it.* Slot 6b's endings are *haber* in the present with the h knocked off: **he, has, ha, hemos, han → -é, -ás, -á, -emos, -án**. Historically that's exactly what happened: *trabajar he* ("I have to work") squashed into *trabajaré*. You don't need to know that. But if you already know *he, has, ha*, you already know the future.

Slot 1 · Past

The past has two flavors too, and unlike the future, you need both to tell any story. Learn them together.

1a · It happened · *trabajé*

Spanish name: pretérito. A snapshot. Something happened, it's done, it's over.

	-ar	-er / -ir
I	trabajé	comí
you	trabajaste	comiste
he / she / usted	trabajó	comió
we	trabajamos	comimos
they / ustedes	trabajaron	comieron

- Ayer trabajé diez horas. — Yesterday I worked ten hours.
- Comí en casa. — I ate at home.

Time words that point to 1a: **ayer** (yesterday) · **anoche** (last night) · **la semana pasada** (last week) · **el año pasado** (last year) · **de repente** (suddenly)

1b · It was going on · *trabajaba*

Spanish name: imperfecto. The background. What was happening, what used to happen, what things were like.

	-ar	-er / -ir
I	trabajaba	comía
you	trabajabas	comías
he / she / usted	trabajaba	comía
we	trabajábamos	comíamos
they / ustedes	trabajaban	comían

Only three verbs in the whole language are irregular here: **ser → era**, **ir → iba**, **ver → veía**. That's the list.

- Antes trabajaba en un banco. — I used to work in a bank.
- En esa época vivía en Florida. — Back then I lived in Florida.

Time words that point to 1b: **antes** (before) · **siempre** (always) · **todos los días** (every day) · **mientras** (while) · **en esa época** (back then)

1a and 1b together

1b sets the scene. 1a is what happened in it.

- *Trabajaba* (1b) *cuando sonó* (1a) *el teléfono.* — I was working when the phone rang.
- *Estaba en casa* (1b) *y llamó* (1a) *mi hijo.* — I was at home and my son called.

The test that works nine times out of ten: if the English has "was ***ing" or "used to*** ," it's 1b. If it's a plain "___ed," once, and finished, it's 1a.

Careful. This is the distinction that trips up English speakers most, and it's the one most Spanish courses explain worst, because they explain it with grammar words. Don't. Think camera: 1b is the video running in the background; 1a is the photo. *Llovía* — it was raining (video). *Llovió* — it rained (photo). Both are true of the same afternoon; they're different shots of it.

Sidebar · why the teacher's "Past" is really two slots. The original timeline has one slot called Past. In practice everyone who learns from it discovers within a week that they can't describe anything in the past (*era, tenía, estaba, quería* are all 1b) with only 1a. So this book splits slot 1 into 1a and 1b from the start. The number stays 1 so the map doesn't change; the letter says which camera.

The Engines in three slots

Here are your eight Engines moved through the anchors. These are the forms the site shows when you change *When*.

Engine	1a · it happened	1b · it was going on	4 · now	6a · going to	6b · will
quiero	quise	quería	quiero	voy a querer	querré
necesito	necesité	necesitaba	necesito	voy a necesitar	necesitaré
puedo	pude	podía	puedo	voy a poder	podré
voy a	fui a	iba a	voy a	voy a	voy a
tengo que	tuve que	tenía que	tengo que	voy a tener que	tendré que
me gusta	me gustó	me gustaba	me gusta	me va a gustar	me gustará
me gustaría	—	—	me gustaría	—	—
prefiero	preferí	prefería	prefiero	voy a preferir	preferiré

Two notes. *Me gustaría* doesn't move; it already means "would," which is slot 7, in A2. And for *voy a*, the past you'll actually use is 1b, *iba a* ("I was going to"); *fui a* means you physically went somewhere.

> **Later.** The remaining slots (2 had, 3 have, 5 -ing, 7 would, 8 commands, 9 wishes) are A2. Nothing in them changes what you've learned here; they're more points on the same line.

On the site: build any sentence, then tap through *When*: 4, then 1b, then 1a, then 6a, then 6b. Watch only the Engine change. Then open the *Drill* and play "1a or 1b?" until you get five in a row. Then "Change the when."

5 · The Ear: the basics

The idea

Speaking is half a conversation. The moment someone answers you, you have to understand them. The Ear is how you catch what comes back. Start it on day one, a few minutes at a time, alongside everything else.

Five sound rules

Spanish is nearly phonetic: it sounds the way it's spelled. Five rules cover almost everything.

1. **Five vowels, one sound each, always.** a (ah) · e (eh) · i (ee) · o (oh) · u (oo). They never change and never go lazy the way English vowels do. *Casa* is CAH-sah, not CASS-uh.
2. **r and rr.** A single *r* is a quick tap, like the *tt* in "butter" said fast. A double *rr*, or an *r* at the start of a word, is rolled. *Pero* (but) and *perro* (dog) are different words.
3. **j, and g before e or i,** sound like a strong English *h*: *trabajo*, *gente*.
4. **ll and y** sound like English *y*: *llamar* (yah-MAR). In Argentina and parts of Colombia it's closer to *sh* or *zh*. Both are normal.
5. **h is silent.** *Hola* is OH-la. And *c* before e or i sounds like *s*: *cinco* is SEEN-koh.

Stress. If a word ends in a vowel, *n* or *s*, stress the second-to-last syllable: tra-BA-jo. If it ends in any other letter, stress the last: tra-ba-JAR. A written accent overrides both: ca-FÉ. This matters more than it looks: *trabajo* (I work) and *trabajó* (he worked) are different words, and the only difference is where the weight falls.

Words run together

The main reason "they talk so fast" is not speed. It's linking. Spanish speakers don't pause between words, and a word ending in a vowel flows straight into the next one.

- *¿Cómo estás?* → sounds like *comoestás*
- *Voy a ir a la playa* → *voyairalaplaya*
- *Es que no sé* → *eskenosé*

So when you listen, don't hunt for word boundaries. Hunt for pieces you know, *voy a*, *tengo que*, *es que*, and let the sentence assemble itself around them. This is the Sentence Builder running backwards, and it's why you learned pieces instead of words.

Hearing the three anchors

You already know slots 1, 4 and 6. The ending tells you which one you're hearing:

You hear	It's slot	Meaning
-ó, -é, -aste, -aron (trabajó, comí)	1a	it happened
-aba, -ía (trabajaba, comía)	1b	it was going on
-o, -as, -a, -amos, -an (trabajo, come)	4	now
voy a / va a / vamos a + verb	6a	going to
-ré, -rá, -rán (trabajará)	6b	will

Catch the ending, place it on the line, and you know the *when* before you've caught every word.

Repair phrases

These do more to get you speaking than any grammar, because they take away the fear of getting lost. Memorize them as pieces and use them without shame.

- **¿Cómo?** — Sorry? What?

- **Más despacio, por favor.** — Slower, please.
- **No entendí.** — I didn't understand.
- **¿Qué significa *?** — ***What does*** mean?
- **¿Cómo se dice *?** — ***How do you say*** ?
- **¿Puedes repetir?** — Can you repeat that?
- **Un momento.** — One moment.
- **Estoy aprendiendo español.** — I'm learning Spanish.

Say *estoy aprendiendo español* early in any conversation. People slow down, simplify, and help you. It is the single most useful sentence in this book.

> **Later.** The glue words, the hundred tiny words that make up half of speech (*que, ya, pues, es que, o sea*), are in A2, with a drill on the site. You'll have been hearing them all along.

On the site: open *The Ear* and play "Hear and build" ten times with *Show text* off. Then "Hear the slot" until you get five in a row. Then say the repair phrases back to the *Listen* button until they come out without thinking.

What you can now do

Stop and take stock. With A1 you can:

- say what you want, need, can, have to, like and are going to do, for yourself and for other people → Core Frame, chapter 1 and 3
- describe things and say where they are → Describe, chapter 2
- ask where something is, how much it costs, whether there is any → Ask, chapter 2
- stay in a conversation while you think → React, chapter 2
- tell a simple story: what was going on and what happened → slots 1b and 1a, chapter 4
- make plans and promises → slots 6a and 6b, chapter 4
- understand the shape of what comes back, and ask for help when you don't → chapter 5

That's a conversation. Not a sophisticated one, but a real one, in the present, the past and the future, with questions and answers. Most people who "took Spanish" for years can't do that, because they learned words instead of pieces.

Use it before you move on. Order a coffee. Tell someone what you did yesterday. Ask where the bathroom is. Say *pues… a ver…* while you find the next piece.

Then open A2, where the other six slots are waiting, and none of them is harder than what you've just done.