

# Ser vs Estar

Matthew Williams • Spanish • April 26, 2026











Both **ser** and **estar** translate to "to be" in English, but they are never interchangeable. The shortcut: **ser** describes what something is (permanent identity); **estar** describes how something is (temporary state or location).

## Ser



**Ser** expresses identity — things that define what or who something fundamentally is.

Use	Clue	Example
Identity / description	name, nationality, profession	Ella es médica
Origin	where from	Soy de Jamaica
Material / composition	made of	La mesa es de madera
Time / dates	what time / day is it	Son las tres
Possession	whose	El libro es de Ana
Relationships	family, connection	Él es mi hermano
Inherent characteristics	colour, shape, size	El cielo es azul
Events (location)	where an event takes place	La fiesta es en mi casa

### SER — IDENTITY & DESCRIPTION


-  Ella es médica.
-  She is a doctor.
-  Soy estudiante.
-  I am a student.
-  Somos venezolanos.
-  We are Venezuelan.
-  Mi padre es muy serio.
-  My father is very serious.
-  ¿Eres inteligente?
-  Are you intelligent?

### SER — ORIGIN


-  Soy de Jamaica.
-  I am from Jamaica.

 ¿De dónde eres?

 Where are you from?


 Mis padres son de Cuba.


 My parents are from Cuba.

 El café es de Colombia.

 The coffee is from Colombia.


#### SER — MATERIAL / COMPOSITION

 La mesa es de madera.

 The table is (made of) wood.

 El anillo es de oro.

 The ring is gold.

 La camisa es de algodón.

 The shirt is cotton.


 El puente es de acero.

 The bridge is made of steel.

#### SER — TIME & DATES

 Son las tres de la tarde.


 It is three o'clock in the afternoon.


 Hoy es lunes.

 Today is Monday.

 Es el quince de abril.

 It is the fifteenth of April.


 ¿Qué hora es?


 What time is it?

#### SER — POSSESSION & RELATIONSHIPS

 El libro es de Ana.

 The book is Ana's.

 Él es mi hermano mayor.

 He is my older brother.

 Ella es la profesora de matemáticas.

 She is the maths teacher.


 ¿De quién es esto?

 Whose is this?

#### SER — INHERENT CHARACTERISTICS

 El cielo es azul.

 The sky is blue.

 La torre es muy alta.

 The tower is very tall.


 El hielo es frío.

 Ice is cold.


 Las rosas son rojas.

 Roses are red.

### SER — EVENTS (LOCATION)

 La fiesta es en mi casa.

 The party is at my house.

 El concierto es en el estadio.

 The concert is at the stadium.

 El examen es en el aula dos.

 The exam is in room two.

## Estar


**Estar** expresses state — how something is right now, where it physically is, or what it is in the process of doing.

Use	Clue	Example
Location (people & things)	where something physically is	El banco está en la esquina
Health / mood	how someone feels right now	Estoy cansado
Temporary condition	current state	La puerta está abierta
Progressive tense	estar + gerundio	Estamos comiendo
Result of an action	past participle as result	La tarea está hecha

### ESTAR — LOCATION

 El banco está en la esquina.

 The bank is on the corner.

 ¿Dónde está el baño?


 Where is the bathroom?

 Los libros están en la mesa.

 The books are on the table.


 Madrid está en España.










 Madrid is in Spain.

 Mi madre está en casa.











 My mother is at home.

### ESTAR — HEALTH & MOOD











 Estoy cansado.

-  I am tired.
-  Ella está enferma hoy.
-  She is sick today.
-  Estamos muy contentos.
-  We are very happy.
-  ¿Cómo estás?
-  How are you?
-  Él está triste después del partido.
-  He is sad after the game.








#### ESTAR — TEMPORARY CONDITION

-  La puerta está abierta.
-  The door is open.
-  La sopa está fría.
-  The soup is cold.
-  La habitación está limpia.
-  The room is clean.
-  El teléfono está roto.
-  The phone is broken.
-  Estoy listo para salir.
-  I am ready to leave.

#### ESTAR — PROGRESSIVE TENSE

-  Estamos comiendo.
-  We are eating.
-  Ella está estudiando para el examen.
-  She is studying for the exam.
-  ¿Qué estás haciendo?
-  What are you doing?
-  Los niños están jugando afuera.
-  The children are playing outside.
-  Estoy escribiendo una carta.
-  I am writing a letter.

#### ESTAR — RESULT OF AN ACTION

-  La tarea está hecha.
-  The homework is done.
-  Las ventanas están cerradas.
-  The windows are closed.
-  La mesa está puesta.
-  The table is set.
-  El trabajo está terminado.





 The work is finished.

## Adjectives That Change Meaning





Some adjectives pair with either verb — but the meaning shifts completely:

Adjective	With Ser	With Estar
aburrido	He is boring (personality)	He is bored (current feeling)
malo	He is bad / evil (character)	He is sick (current state)
bueno	He is good / kind (character)	It is tasty / he looks good
listo	He is clever (naturally)	He is ready (prepared)
rico	He is rich (wealthy)	It is delicious
seguro	It is safe (inherently)	I am sure / certain
vivo	He is sharp / shrewd	He is alive
muerto	—	He is dead (state)





### CHANGING ADJECTIVES — SER VS ESTAR

-  Es aburrido.
-  He is boring. (always like that)
-  Está aburrido.
-  He is bored. (right now)




### CHANGING ADJECTIVES — MALO

-  Es malo.
-  He is bad / evil. (character)
-  Está malo.
-  He is sick. (state of health)

### CHANGING ADJECTIVES — LISTO


-  Es listo.
-  He is clever. (inherent trait)
-  Está listo.
-  He is ready. (prepared right now)

### CHANGING ADJECTIVES — RICO


-  Es rico.
-  He is rich. (wealthy)
-  Está rico.


 It is delicious. (food / current quality)

### CHANGING ADJECTIVES — SEGURO


 Es seguro.

 It is safe. (inherently safe)

 Estoy seguro.

 I am sure / certain. (current mental state)

### CHANGING ADJECTIVES — VIVO

 Es muy vivo.

 He is very sharp / shrewd.

 Está vivo.

 He is alive.

## Common Confusions

Phrase	Translation	Why
La fiesta es en mi casa	The party is at my house	Ser = location of an event
El gato está en mi casa	The cat is in my house	Estar = physical location of a person/thing
Mi madre es nerviosa	My mother is a nervous person	Ser = permanent personality trait
Mi madre está nerviosa	My mother is nervous (right now)	Estar = current emotional state
El café es frío	Coffee is (served) cold	Ser = defining characteristic
El café está frío	The coffee is cold (right now)	Estar = temporary condition
Él es aburrido	He is boring (as a person)	Ser = character
Él está aburrido	He is bored (at this moment)	Estar = current feeling

#### Exam Tip

Ask yourself one question: **am I describing what it IS, or how it IS right now?**

- **What it is** (identity, origin, material, permanent trait) '**Ser**
- **How it is right now** (location, mood, health, temporary state) '**Estar**

Special cases to memorise: **events use ser** (La fiesta es aquí), even though locations normally use **estar**. And **estar + past participle** describes the result of an action (La puerta está cerrada = the door is [in the state of being] closed).

## Practice

Test yourself. Fill in the blank with **ser** or **estar**, then flip to check.

### [Code: flashcard[Ser vs Estar]]

Ella \_\_\_ médica. === es – identity (profession uses ser)  
--  
¿Dónde \_\_\_ el baño? === está – physical location uses estar  
--  
Hoy \_\_\_ lunes. === es – time/date uses ser  
--  
Estoy \_\_\_ cansado. 'Wrong pattern. ¿Cómo \_\_\_? === estás – health/state uses estar  
--  
La mesa \_\_\_ de madera. === es – material/composition uses ser  
--  
Los libros \_\_\_ en la mesa. === están – physical location uses estar  
--  
Ella \_\_\_ enferma hoy. === está – temporary health condition uses estar  
--  
El cielo \_\_\_ azul. === es – inherent characteristic uses ser  
--  
Soy \_\_\_ de Jamaica. 'Wrong pattern. ¿De dónde \_\_\_? === soy – origin uses ser  
--  
La fiesta \_\_\_ en mi casa. === es – location of an event uses ser  
--  
El gato \_\_\_ en el jardín. === está – physical location of a thing uses estar  
--  
Él \_\_\_ aburrido. [personality] === es – permanent character trait uses ser  
--  
Él \_\_\_ aburrido. [right now] === está – current emotional state uses estar  
--  
Estamos \_\_\_iendo. [comer] === comiendo – estar + gerundio for progressive  
--  
La tarea \_\_\_ hecha. === está – estar + past participle = result of action  
--  
\_\_\_ las tres de la tarde. === son – time uses ser (plural for plural hours)  
--  
Ella \_\_\_ lista. [prepared] === está – temporary state (ready) uses estar  
--  
Él \_\_\_ listo. [clever] === es – inherent trait uses ser  
--  
El café \_\_\_ rico. [delicious] === está – temporary quality (taste) uses estar  
--  
Él \_\_\_ rico. [wealthy] === es – permanent characteristic uses ser