

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

Spanish	English
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

Spanish	English
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

Spanish	English
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

Spanish	English
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

Spanish	English
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

Spanish	English
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)

Spanish	English
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

Spanish	English
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

Spanish	English
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

Spanish	English
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

Spanish	English
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

Spanish	English
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

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

CHANGING ADJECTIVES — MALO

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

CHANGING ADJECTIVES — LISTO

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

CHANGING ADJECTIVES — RICO

Spanish	English
Es rico.	He is rich. (wealthy)
Está rico.	It is delicious. (food / current quality)

CHANGING ADJECTIVES — SEGURO

Spanish	English
Es seguro.	It is safe. (inherently safe)
Estoy seguro.	I am sure / certain. (current mental state)

CHANGING ADJECTIVES — VIVO

Spanish	English
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.

PRACTICE — 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

Study Vault