I am - ser, estar, tener

In English, whenever you are happy, at home, or cold, you use the verb to be (am, are, is) to refer to all three things. However, in Spanish you say estoy feliz (or in some cases soy feliz), estoy en la casa, and tengo frío! There are three different verbs for the equivalent English verb ‘to be.’ Today, we will discuss when it is most appropriate to use each verb! If you’d like to learn more about how to express your feelings in Spanish, go have a look at our feelings blog!

Ser vs. Estar

Although they express something similar (the characteristics of a person or thing), estar and ser convey distinct ideas. Pointing out this difference to an English speaker, or a speaker of any language that doesn’t differentiate between these ideas, is a little complicated.

Since we use only one word to refer to both concepts, you’ll have to create an approach in your mind and learn how it works. As said above, don’t worry: the more you practice, the better you’ll get at it!

Ser

Ser expresses the attributes of a person or thing. When you use ser, you’re talking about characteristics that are a part of the essence of a person or thing: something unchangeable. Since ser helps us express the characteristics of a person or thing, what comes after the verb is an adjective! The structure for these sentences is ser + adjective:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Using Ser</th>
<th>Formula</th>
<th>Spanish</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ser + adjective</td>
<td>El gato es lindo.</td>
<td>The cat is cute.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>La casa es grande.</td>
<td>The house is big.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Another way you can remember when to use the verb **ser** is to completely get rid of the verb and see how the adjective matches your noun. Adding the verb **ser** turns this phrase into a sentence*:

*Sentences are grammatical units that include a subject (a person or thing) and a predicate (which includes a verb and whatever follows) and help us express a complete idea. On the other hand, phrases are a set of words that form part of a sentence or clause.

**Estar**

Think of **estar** as a status or condition. **Estar** expresses how a person or thing exists, finds itself in a place or situation, how it feels, or how it remains with stability in a place, situation or condition.

As you can see, **estar** refers to something that can change and that doesn’t belong to the nature of the person or thing. **Estar** can help you say how you’re feeling, express a place that you’re at, or something that you’re currently doing. When forming sentences with **estar**, you want to use the following structures:

---

### Using Ser

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Formula</th>
<th>Spanish</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>subject + adjective</td>
<td>el gato lindo</td>
<td>the cute cat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>la casa grande</td>
<td>the big house</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

### Using Estar

#### Condition

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Formula</th>
<th>Spanish</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>estar + adjective</td>
<td>Yo estoy bueno.</td>
<td>I am in good health.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>estar + adverb</td>
<td>Yo estoy bien.</td>
<td>I am (doing) well.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>estar + gerund*</td>
<td>Yo estoy leyendo.</td>
<td>I am reading.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### Place

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Formula</th>
<th>Spanish</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>estar + en + article + place</td>
<td>Yo estoy en una fiesta.</td>
<td>I’m at a party.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Yo estoy en el trabajo.</td>
<td>I’m at work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Yo estoy en el parque.</td>
<td>I’m at the park.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It’s important to remember that in Spanish we use articles a lot more than we do in English, so always remember to add it here, even when you wouldn’t in English.
*Gerund*: in Spanish, the gerund (verb with -ando and -iendo endings) helps us describe a continuous action that started taking place before we mentioned it and that is still taking place as we talk about it. The equivalent of this in English is the Present Continuous Tense that we form with the verb to be + another verb with the -ing ending.

**Ser vs Estar Examples**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>Spanish</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yo soy una persona feliz pero (hoy) estoy triste.</td>
<td>I am a happy person, but (today) I’m sad.</td>
<td>As you can see in this example, to be happy - ser una persona feliz - is a part of this person’s essence; however, being sad is a current emotional state for today that doesn’t define who the person is.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yo soy guatemalteca.</td>
<td>I am Guatemalan.</td>
<td>Being Guatemalan is something that is a part of who I am as a person and that won’t change, no matter how much time goes by, so we use ser.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yo estoy en la sala.</td>
<td>I am in the living room.</td>
<td>Being in the living room is something that I’m doing at this exact moment; it doesn’t define me and is something that will change. Therefore, we use estar.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Conjugating Ser and Estar

Now that you know when you should use each verb, let’s have a look at the conjugation since they are both irregular verbs (*estar* only varies on the first person singular - the rest of its conjugation is regular):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Ser</th>
<th>Examples</th>
<th>Estar</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>yo</td>
<td>soy</td>
<td>Yo soy linda. I am cute.</td>
<td>estoy</td>
<td>Yo estoy bien. I am doing well.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tú</td>
<td>eres</td>
<td>Tú eres feliz. You are happy.</td>
<td>estás</td>
<td>Tú estás muy feliz hoy. You are very happy today.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>usted</td>
<td>es</td>
<td>Usted es muy trabajador. You are very hardworking.</td>
<td>está</td>
<td>Usted está trabajando. You are working.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>él, ella</td>
<td>es</td>
<td>Ella es bailarina. She is a dancer.</td>
<td>está</td>
<td>Ella está bailando. She is dancing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nosotros</td>
<td>somos</td>
<td>Nosotros somos pescadores. We are fishermen.</td>
<td>estamos</td>
<td>Nosotros estamos en alta mar. We are in high seas.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ustedes</td>
<td>son</td>
<td>Ustedes son hermanas. You are sisters.</td>
<td>están</td>
<td>Ustedes están con sus padres. You are with your parents.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ellos, ellas</td>
<td>son</td>
<td>Ellos son muy unidos. They are very close.</td>
<td>están</td>
<td>Ellos están peleados. They are mad at each other.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Tener

*Tener* means to have, to own, or to possess. This verb may be a little easier to understand because it is a verb that exists in English. We can use *tener* to express something that we physically possess or a way we feel at a certain point in time - a feeling or need we “have.”

As we learned in our blog about expressing the way we feel, we can use *tener* (to have) to express needs or emotions at a specific point in time.
The construction for this is **tener + a noun**. Let’s have a look at some examples and what a literal translation would look like:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Spanish</th>
<th>Literal English</th>
<th>Actual English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yo tengo hambre.</td>
<td>I have hunger.</td>
<td>I am hungry. (I feel hunger.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tú tienes miedo.</td>
<td>You have fear.</td>
<td>You are fearful. (You feel fear.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ellos tienen sed.</td>
<td>They have thirst.</td>
<td>They are thirsty. (They feel thirst.)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Tener** is, like **estar** and **ser**, an irregular verb. You need to keep that in mind when building sentences with it:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Conjugation</th>
<th>Spanish</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>yo</td>
<td>tengo</td>
<td>Yo tengo hambre.</td>
<td>I am hungry.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tú</td>
<td>tienes</td>
<td>Tú tienes sueño.</td>
<td>You are tired.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>usted</td>
<td>tiene</td>
<td>Usted tiene 36 años.</td>
<td>You are 36 years old.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>él, ella</td>
<td>tiene</td>
<td>Ella tiene sed.</td>
<td>She is thirsty.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nosotros</td>
<td>tenemos</td>
<td>Nosotros tenemos frío.</td>
<td>We are cold.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ustedes</td>
<td>tienen</td>
<td>Ustedes tienen calor.</td>
<td>You are cold.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ellos, ellas</td>
<td>tienen</td>
<td>Ellos tienen miedo.</td>
<td>They are scared.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Common Mistakes

Like we reviewed in our common mistakes blog, there are some things you need to keep in mind to make your Spanish even better. When it comes to expressing the way we feel, make sure you remember this list:

- **Tengo calor:** while in English you say ‘I’m hot’, in Spanish you say ‘I have heat’ (I experience heat). Saying *estoy caliente* or *soy caliente* means that you are aroused by something, so you really want to avoid making this common mistake and having people look at you funny.

- **Tengo frío:** in Spanish we say that we ‘have cold’ (we experience cold). To properly say that you’re cold, you need to say *tengo frío*. To say *estoy frío* or *soy frío* means that you’re a cold person - a person who doesn’t show their feelings.

- **Estoy mal vs. soy malo**
  - *Estoy mal*: since we’re using the verb *estar*, we’re referring to a condition that is not a part of the character of a person. In this case, *estoy mal* means that you feel physically sick or that you’re upset about something.

  - *Soy malo*: *ser* expresses qualities about a person or thing that are part of them and therefore unchangeable. If we say *soy malo*, we’re saying that we’re a bad person, not that we’re feeling unwell. Another thing to keep in mind here is that if you want to say that you’re ‘bad at something’ like I am at playing soccer, you say *soy malo para el fútbol*. We use *ser* in this case because not being able to play soccer well is a part of me that’s not going to change because I’m not interested in soccer.

- **Estoy bien vs. soy bueno:** *estoy bien* and *soy bueno* work the same way as *estoy mal* and *soy malo*.

  - *Estoy bien*: we’re using *estar* so we refer to a condition that we’re currently at. When you say *estoy bien*, it can either been that you’re physically or psychologically fine.

  - *Soy bueno*: since we’re using *ser*, we’re talking about a part of our character. We’re saying that we’re a good person. Like with *soy malo*, if we want to say that we’re good at something - at something being the keyword here - we say *soy bueno para jugar ajedrez* (I’m good at playing chess). This means that being good at playing chess is a part of our skills.
I am - ser, estar, tener

Instructions: Fill out the space in blank. Make sure you conjugate the verbs in the right form!

Yo _________________ muy bien. (estar)
I’m doing really well.

Tú _________________ frío. (tener)
You are cold.

Ella _________________ muy linda. (ser)
She’s very cute.

Nosotros _________________ hermanos. (ser)
You are brothers.

Ustedes _________________ miedo. (tener)
They are afraid.

Ellos _________________ felices. (ser)
They are happy.

Las niñas _________________ bailarinas. (ser)
The girls are dancers.

Los gatos _________________ están aquí. (estar)
The cats are here.
I am - ser, estar, tener

Instructions: Write the correct sentences in Spanish! Make sure to use the right verb: ser, estar, tener. If you’re unsure which verb to use, you can always go back to the lesson!

I am in the living room. __________________________________________

You are tired. __________________________________________

She is Guatemalan. __________________________________________

We are at work. __________________________________________

You are soccer players. __________________________________________

They are siblings. __________________________________________

I’m good at football. __________________________________________

The baby is afraid. __________________________________________

Dogs are cute. __________________________________________

We are thirsty. __________________________________________

The dress is cute. __________________________________________

The house is big. __________________________________________
Answer Key: I am - ser, estar, tener

Instructions: Fill out the space in blank. Make sure you conjugate the verbs in the right form!

Yo *estoy* muy bien. (estar)  
I’m doing really well.

Tú *tienes* frío. (tener)  
You are cold.

Ella *es* muy linda. (ser)  
She’s very cute.

Nosotros *somos* hermanos. (ser)  
You are brothers.

Ustedes *tienen* miedo. (tener)  
They are afraid.

Ellos *son* felices. (ser)  
They are happy.

Las niñas *son* bailarinas. (ser)  
The girls are dancers.

Los gatos *están* están aquí. (estar)  
The cats are here.
Instructions: Write the correct sentences in Spanish! Make sure to use the right verb: **ser, estar, tener**. If you’re unsure which verb to use, you can always go back to the lesson!

I am in the living room.  
**Estoy en la sala.**

You are tired.  
**Tú estás cansado.**

She is Guatemalan.  
**Ella es guatemalteca.**

We are at work.  
**Estamos en el trabajo.**

You are soccer players.  
**Ustedes son jugadores de fútbol.**

They are siblings.  
**Ellos son hermanos.**

I’m good at chess.  
**You soy buena para el ajedrez.**

The baby is afraid.  
**El bebé tiene miedo.**

Dogs are cute.  
**Los perros son lindos.**

We are thirsty.  
**Tenemos sed.**

The dress is nice.  
**El vestido es bonito.**

The house is big.  
**La casa es grande.**