

Taking the Confusion out of 'Por' and 'Para'

Both Prepositions Can Mean 'For'

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How does one say "for" in Spanish?

Simple question, huh?

Not really. In fact, understanding the answer to that seemingly simple question is one of the more difficult problems facing many Spanish students.

The problem is that two Spanish prepositions, **por** and **para**, frequently are used for the English word "for." (Actually, there are number of other words that also can fit the bill, but we won't concern ourselves with them now because they don't seem to be the cause of so much confusion.) The differences between them sometimes are subtle.

If it's any consolation, prepositions can be as difficult for people learning English. Why do we sometimes say something is *under* control, and sometimes say something is *in* control? Why are we *in* the house but *at* home? The rules sometimes escape logic.

In Spanish, The key to understanding which preposition to use is to think of the **meaning** you want to convey. If I use a phrase such as "three *for* a dollar" in English, the "for" has a different meaning than it does in "this book is *for* you." In the first case, "for" indicates an exchange or a rate, while in the second case it indicates an intention or direction. Thus the Spanish translation of the two phrases are different, "*tres por un dólar*" and "*este libro es para ti.*"

The following chart shows some of the major uses of these two prepositions.

Uses for **por**:

Expressing movement **along, through, around, by** or **about**: *Anduve por las calles de la ciudad.* I walked through the streets of the city.

Denoting a **time** or **duration** when something occurs. *Viajamos por tres semanas.* We're traveling for three weeks.

Expressing the **cause** (not the purpose) of an action: *Me caí por la nieve.* I fell down because of the snow.

Meaning **per**: *Dos por ciento.* Two percent.

Meaning **supporting** or **in favor of**: *Trabajamos por derechos humanos.* We work for human rights.

Introducing the **agent of an action** after a passive verb: *Fue escrito por Bob Woodward.* It was written by Bob Woodward.

Indicating **means of transportation**: *Viajaré por avión*. I will travel by plane.

Used in **numerous expressions**: *Por ejemplo*. For example. *Por favor*. Please.

Uses for *para*:

Meaning **for the purpose of** or **in order to**: *Para bailar la bamba, necesita una poca de gracia*. In order to dance the bamba you need a little grace.

With a noun or pronoun as object, meaning **for the benefit of** or **directed to**: *Es para usted*. It's for you.

Meaning **to** or **in the direction of** when referring to a **specific place**: *Voy para Europa*. I'm heading to Europe.

Meaning **by** or **for** when referring to a **specific time**: *Necesito el regalo para mañana*. I need the gift for tomorrow. *Vamos a la casa de mi madre para el fin de semana*. We're going to my mother's for the weekend.