

Everything engendered: the gender of Spanish nouns

In everyday life, we use the words **gender** and **sex**: both refer to the state of being male or female. But sex tends to refer to biological / physical differences, while gender refers to cultural or social ones.

In terms of grammar, **all nouns have gender**. Grammatical gender has nothing to do with physical appearance, and it applies to all nouns: living beings, inanimate objects and even feelings.

All nouns in Spanish are either masculine or feminine. You can usually identify the gender of nouns in 1 of 2 ways: by its ending letter(s) or by its meaning.

Usually (not always) if a word ends in **-a**, it's feminine. If it ends in **-o**, it's masculine.

el libro

book

el pueblo

village

la casa

house

la mesa

table

What is so feminine about a house and what is so masculine about a book? Nothing! It's a grammatical rule. It's not related to the appearance: it's simply grammatical information.

In English we always use **the** as a definite article to refer to a specific book or house. In Spanish, there are 2 forms of **the**, one for each gender. You'll be using **el** for **masculine** nouns and **la** for **feminine** nouns.

You may find it bizarre at the beginning - or discouraging. Give yourself time. Here are some general rules that will help you to get used to grammatical gender.

Masculine

For nouns that refer to people, it is very easy to determine the gender of the noun. If the noun refers to a male, then the noun is masculine. Some masculine nouns that refer to people are:

el hermano

brother

 **el marido**

 **el esposo**

husband

As a general rule (as stated above), nouns that end in **-o** are usually **masculine**. These make up the

majority of masculine nouns that you will come across.

el libro

book

el vino

wine

Other common endings for **masculine** nouns are **-r, -n (except -ión), -l, -ema, -aje**.

el conductor

driver

el corazón

heart

el poema

poem

el papel

paper

el viaje

trip

Feminine

If the noun refers to a female then the noun is feminine.

Some feminine nouns that refer to people are:

la hija

daughter

la hermana

sister

As a general rule (as stated above), nouns that end in **-a** are usually **feminine**. These make up the vast majority of feminine nouns that you will come across.

la casa

house

la música

music

Other common endings for **feminine** nouns are **-z, -ción, -sión, -umbre, -ad**.

la nariz

nose

la situación

situation

la decisión

decision

la cumbre

summit

la libertad

freedom

Professions/ family members

When naming people in terms of their profession or as members of a family, usually the masculine

form of the noun is given or listed (in the dictionary, for example) first. To make the feminine form of the noun:

add an **-a** to the masculine form of the noun (if it ends in **-r**)

OR

change the **-o** to **-a**

el profesor
teacher

la profesora
teacher

Ending in **-e**

Nouns ending in **-e** can be either masculine or feminine. You really just have to memorize their gender as you come across such nouns.

la calle
street

el restaurante
restaurant

Exceptions

There are always exceptions to every rule: here are some helpful examples concerning the gender of nouns that don't necessarily follow the rules mentioned in this lesson:

end in **-o** but are feminine

la radio
radio

la foto
picture (photo)

end in **-z** but are masculine

el lápiz
pencil

el pez
fish

To help you remember the gender of a noun we encourage you to learn it along with the meaning or the spelling in Spanish!

Culture is the logic by which one gives order to the world, and grammatical gender is probably a whole new concept. 1/4 of the world's languages use gendered nouns, and Spanish is just one of them.

Grammar is not a set of rules and exceptions: it is a system, a whole logic to the language. Take your time to get familiar with this concept and you will soon see what is relevant to nouns, i.e. their grammatical gender.