Ser vs. Estar

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One of the most stressful parts of learning Spanish for many language learners, other than the [subjunctive](http://www.spanishdict.com/answers/100055/subjunctive) and [para vs. por](http://www.spanishdict.com/answers/100035/para-and-por), is knowing the [difference between ser and estar](http://www.spanishdict.com/answers/100040/ser-and-estar). But it doesn´t have to be stressful! While both of these verbs mean "to be" and are used all the time in daily communication, the following simple rules should help you to differentiate between the two. If you have any doubts on how to conjugate either verb (because they can be a little irregular), check out the [verb conjugator.](http://www.spanishdict.com/conjugation)

Uses of [Ser](http://www.spanishdict.com/translate/Ser)

General Ser Rule

Ser is used to classify and identify permanent or lasting attributes. If the general rule isn´t specific enough for you, think of the acronym DOCTOR, which stands for Description, Occupation, Characteristic, Time, Origin, and Relationship.

1. Description

For description, think of what you would say if someone asked you "What´s he like?" These are the essential qualities that define a person and probably won´t change. They can be a name or a physical description.

Yo soy Raúl. (I am Raúl.)

Yo soy alta, morena, y delgada. (I am tall, dark-skinned, and thin.)

2. Occupation

Occupations are seen as life-long careers and are therefore seen as more "permanent" than many people would think in the United States.

Soy profesora del español. (I am a Spanish teacher.)

Ellos son estudiantes. (They are students.)

Mi padre era jardinero. (My father was a gardener.)

No Indefinite Articles

Notice that the indefinite articles un, una, unos, and unas are omitted when describing an occupation after the verb ser.

3. Characteristic

Characteristics are personality descriptions of a person. These would probably be the second thing you say to "What´s he like?"

Amalia es inteligente, atrevida, y amable. (Amalia is intelligent, daring, and friendly.)

Mi esposo es romántico y cariñoso. (My husband is romantic and caring.)

4. Time

Time includes days, dates, and hours. For hours, use es for one o´clock and son for all other hours.

Hoy es miércoles. (Today is Wednesday.)

Ayer fue mi cumpleaños. (Yesterday was my birthday.)

Ahora es la una y media. (Right now it´s one thirty.)

Son las cinco y veintecinco. (It´s five twenty five.)

5. Origin

As the place a person is from or the material something is made from is not going to change we use ser for origin.

Celia es de España. (Celia is from Spain.)

Adela es peruana. (Adela is Peruvian.)

Mi anillo es de oro. (My ring is gold.)

6. Relationship

Even after someone dies or someone breaks up, relationships are described using ser.

Religion is a Relationship

Also, since religion is considered a relationship with a higher power, religions are also described using ser.

Lynne es mi madre. (Lynne is my mother.)

Marcos es mi ex-novio. (Marcos is my ex-boyfriend.)

Andrés es católico. (Andrés is Catholic.)

Uses of [Estar](http://www.spanishdict.com/translate/Estar)

General Estar Rule

Estar is used to indicate temporary states and locations. If the general rule doesn´t suffice, think of the acronym PLACE, which stands for Position, Location, Action, Condition, and Emotion.

1. Position

Position is the physical position or posture a person or thing is in.

Mi abuela está sentada. (My grandmother is sitting down/seated.)

Yo estaba acostada cuando me llamaste. (I was lying down when you called me.)

2. Location

The location of someone or something describes where it is permanently, temporarily, actually, or conceptually.

El baño está a la derecha de la sala. (The bathroom is to the right of the living room.)

Estamos en el café ahora y estarémos en el cine en 20 minutos. (We are at the café right now and we will be at the movie theatre in 20 minutes.)

Mi abuelo está en la luna. (My grandfather is out of it/lost.)

Exception for Parties

This is a big one: The location of an event or party is described using SER. Not ESTAR!

La fiesta es en mi casa. (The party is at my house.)

3. Action

Estar is used to describe an ongoing action using the present progressive tense.

Estoy lavando los platos sucios. (I am washing the dirty dishes.)

Estamos leyendo los periódicos. (We are reading the newspapers.)

Mi bisabuelo está muerto. (My great-grandfather is dead.)

Death is Ongoing Action

In Spanish, death is seen as an ongoing action, not a permanent state, thus you use the verb estar and not ser.

4. Condition

Physical and mental conditions are described using estar.

Estoy tan cansada esta mañana. (I am so tired this morning.)

Mis niños están enfermos hoy. (My children are sick today.)

Mi madre está un poca loca. (My mother is (acting) a little crazy.)

5. Emotion

How a person is feeling at a certain moment is described using estar.

Estoy triste. (I am sad.)

Ella está contenta porque recibió unas flores de su novio. (She is happy because she received some flowers from her boyfriend.)

Meaning Changes With Ser and Estar

There are some words that can be used with both ser and estar, but take on different meanings depending on the verb. Below you will find a chart with both forms and their meanings in English.

Same Adjective, Different Meaning

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Ser |  | Estar |  |
| ser aburrido | to be boring | estar aburrido | to be bored |
| ser bueno | to be good | estar bueno | to be tasty/attractive |
| ser cansado | to be a tiring person | estar cansado | to be tired |
| ser grave | to be serious | estar grave | to be seriously ill |
| ser listo | to be clever | estar listo | to be ready |
| ser malo | to be bad | estar malo | to be ill |
| ser orgulloso | to be conceited or vain | estar orgulloso | to be proud |
| ser moreno | to be dark-skinned | estar moreno | to be tanned |
| ser pálido | to be pale skinned | estar pálido | to be pale |
| ser pesado | to be heavy | estar pesado | to be tiresome |
| ser rico | to be rich | estar rico | to be tasty |
| ser seguro | to be safe | estar seguro | to be certain |
| ser verde | to be green | estar verde | to be unripe |
| ser viejo | to be old | estar viejo | to look old |
| ser vivo | to be sharp | estar vivo | to be alive |

Exercises

1) Pick the correct conjugated form of ser or estar for each phrase and list the reason for why you chose your answer.

Example: (Soy/Estoy) bajo y perezoso. -> Soy - description and characteristic

La cena (es/está) en la mesa.

(Son/Están) las siete de la mañana.

Yo (soy/estoy) muy cansado. Tengo muchos exámenes mañana.

Mi madre (es/está) llamandome. Tengo que irme.

¿De dónde (es/está) la Srta. Peris-Peris?

Ángela (es/está) policía en Nueva York.

Ahora (somos/estamos) en la oficina.

Mi ex-novio todavía (es/está) enojado.

Sus abuelos (son/están) muertos.

(Soy/Estoy) acostado ahora.

Answers

está - location

Son - time

estoy - condition

está - action

es - origin

es - occupation

estamos - location

está - emotion

están - action remember death is ongoing in Spanish

Estoy - position