

## **RULES FOR ACCENT MARKS IN SPANISH: When are they used?**

### 1. To distinguish meaning between two words that are spelled the same, but have different meanings. Examples:

tu = your	tú = you (subject)
el = the	él = he
si = if	sí = yes
solo = alone	sólo = only

The following words have accent marks when they are used as question words:

- ¿Qué? = What?
- ¿Quién? / ¿De quién? = Who? / Whose?
- ¿Dónde? = Where?
- ¿Cuándo? = When?
- ¿Cuánto/a? = How much?
- ¿Cuántos/as = How many?
- ¿Cómo? = How?
- ¿Cuál? = Which?

### 2. To separate a diphthong (*diptongo* in Spanish), or the sound produced when a **strong vowel (a, e, o)** and a **weak vowel (i, u)** would normally be combined into a **single sound or syllable**. The accent is placed on the WEAK vowel to separate the sounds. This is called '*hiato*' in Spanish or 'hiatus' in English. Examples:

#### DIPHTHONG MAINTAINED: no accent mark

farmacia, historia, Mario, Ruiz, puede, prefiero, tiene, viene, continuo (*adjective*), caigo (= *I fall*), oigo (= *I hear*), siento (= *I feel*), diccionario, cuarto, escritorio

**NOTE:** It is possible to have an accent mark on a word with a diphthong, but it would be used to indicate that the syllable with the diphthong is the stressed syllable and breaks the rule for its 'group': *-n, -s, vowel endings* vs. *consonant [except -n, -s] endings*.

**Example:** suéter. This word ends in 'r', and therefore, according to the rule for words in that group, it should stress the final syllable. (See next page). Since the next-to-last syllable is stressed, it breaks the rule and requires an accent. The accent mark is placed on the strong vowel of the diphthong to indicate that the stress falls on that syllable and to maintain the two vowels as a diphthong (one sound).

#### HIATUS: DIPHTHONG SEPARATED with ACCENT MARK

día, librería, cafetería, biología, María, Raúl, continuo (*verb*), búho, caí (= *I fell*), oí (= *I heard*), ríe (= *He/ She laughs*), tío/a

The next two groups, 3 and 4, give the rules for using accent marks when the word breaks the stress rule that applies to the group it belongs to:

3. *Palabras llanas* (or *graves*). **Words ending in a vowel, n, or s should stress the next-to-last syllable**. If they do, they are called '*palabras llanas*' and do not require an accent.

**EXAMPLES of words that FOLLOW the rule for this group:**

usted-es	a-bri-go	bi-blio-te-ca	pro-fe-so-ra
fal-da	su-da-de-ra	con-se-je-ro	es-tu-dian-te***
pre-cio***	som-bre-ro	im-per-me-a-ble	om-pu-ta-do-ra

\*\*\*Note that the 'io' in the word *precio* is a diphthong, or a single sound, and hence a single syllable, thus making 'pre-' the next-to-last syllable. The '-ia' in *estudiante* is also a diphthong. These words therefore still follow the rule and need no accent.

Other examples: *ma-ter-ia*, *res-iden-cia*, *his-tor-ia*, *far-ma-cia*, *edi-ficio*, *dic-cio-nario*, *se-cre-taria*

Words with these endings (vowel, -n or -s) that stress the final syllable instead of the next-to-last syllable are called '*palabras agudas*' and break the rule. They require an accent on the stressed syllable to show that they break the rule.

**EXAMPLES of words that DO NOT FOLLOW the rule for this group:**

in-glés	*es-tá	es-táis	al-ma-cén	com-pu-ta-ción
a-diós	*es-tás	es-tán	vein-ti-dós	in-ves-ti-ga-ción
a-le-mán			vein-ti-trés	cin-tu-rón

\* = When these words are conjugations of the verb *estar*, they require an accent mark because the final syllable of the verb is stressed, as seen above: *¿Cómo está tu hermano?* = How is your brother?

= When these words are demonstrative adjectives, they are stressed on the next-to-last syllable and require no accent because they follow the rule in that case:  
*Quiero comprar esta mochila.* = I want to buy this backpack.

= When these words are demonstrative pronouns, they require an accent mark to distinguish them from the demonstrative adjectives: *Quiero comprar éstas.* = I want to buy these (ones).

**4. Palabras agudas.** Words ending in a consonant (except n, or s) should stress the last syllable. If they do, they called '*palabras agudas*' and require no accent.

**EXAMPLES of WORDS that FOLLOW the rule for this group:**

- NEARLY ALL verb infinitives follow this rule:

ha-**blar**      co-**mer**      vi-**vir**      ven-**der**      pre-gun-**tar**  
 es-cri-**bir**      re-ga-te-**ar**      en-se-**ñar**      bai-**lar**      en-ten-**der**

Here are some rare exceptions of infinitives with accent marks due to '*hiato*':  
 sonreír (= to smile), oír (= to hear)]

Other examples of words that follow the rule for this group:

- pa-**pel**      pa-ra-**sol**      re-**loj**      us-**ted**      Or-**tiz**      tra-ba-ja-**dor**  
 es-pa-**ñol**      ac-ti-**tud**      li-ber-**tad**      Cha-pul-te-**pec**      Mu-**ñoz**      pro-fe-**sor**

Words with these endings (consonant except -n or -s) that stress the next-to-last syllable instead of the last syllable are called '*palabras llanas*' and break the rule. They require an accent on the stressed syllable to show that they break the rule.

**EXAMPLES of words that DO NOT FOLLOW the rule for this group:**

**lá**-piz      **ál**-bum      **ár**-bol      **dó**-lar      **Ló**-pez      Her-**nán**-dez      **Nú**-ñez

**5. Palabras esdrújulas:** Words that have the stress on the third-to-last syllable are called '*esdrújulas*.' ALL words that have the stress on the third-to-last syllable require an accent on the stressed syllable:

a-**é**-re-o\*      bo-**lí**-gra-fo      es-**tó**-ma-go      mag-**ní**-fi-co      ar-**tí**-cu-lo  
 ma-te-**má**-ti-cas      sim-**pá**-ti-co      **mé**-di-co      ma-**trí**-cu-la      **úl**-ti-ma

\* Note that when strong vowels occur in succession, they are always pronounced as separate syllables. Since all four vowels in this word are strong vowels, they are all pronounced separately and hence the word also has 4 syllables.

## 6. Plural forms of nouns and adjectives.

### THE PLURAL FORM OF WORDS ENDING IN A VOWEL, -N OR -S in SINGULAR:

**A. Words ending in a vowel in the singular will not change in the plural form, since they only add -s in the plural, and therefore do not add an extra syllable. In other words, if they have an accent in the singular, they will have an accent in the plural, and vice-versa. Examples:**

NO ACCENT IN SINGULAR OR PLURAL:

ca-sa // ca-sas

ACCENT IN SINGULAR AND PLURAL: (due to being *esdrújulas*)

bo-lí-gra-fo // bo-lí-gra-fos

**B. Words ending in -n or -s will add -es in the plural, and therefore will add an extra syllable to the word. Whether they add or get rid of an accent in the plural form will depend on the stressed syllable according to the rules for the group of words ending in 'vowel, -n or -s', since in the plural they will all belong to that group. Examples:**

ACCENT DISAPPEARS IN PLURAL: Nouns and adjectives ending in -n or -s that stress the final syllable in the singular will lose the accent in the plural form:

- cin-tu-rón vs. cin-tu-ro-nes: The plural of the noun cinturón does not require an accent because the added syllable means that the word then follows the rule.
- cor-tés vs. cor-te-ses (= courteous, polite): The plural of the adjective cortés does not require an accent because the added syllable means that the word then follows the rule.

ACCENT IS ADDED IN PLURAL: Nouns and adjectives ending in -n or -s that stress the next-to-last syllable in the singular will add an accent in the plural form:

- ex-a-men vs. ex-á-me-nes: The plural of the noun examen requires an accent because the stress is maintained on the syllable -a, but with an added syllable in the plural, the word then breaks the stress rule and also becomes *esdrújula*.
- jo-ven vs. jó-ve-nes: The plural of the adjective joven requires an accent because the stress is maintained on the syllable -jo, but with an added syllable in the plural, the word then breaks the stress rule and also becomes *esdrújula*.

## **B. THE PLURAL FORM OF WORDS ENDING IN A CONSONANT EXCEPT -N or -S IN THE SINGULAR:**

Words in this group must add *-es* to the plural form, since all words ending in a consonant in Spanish add *-es* to form the plural. This change does create any change in accent marks: words in this group that have an accent in the singular will maintain their accent in the plural. Words without an accent in the singular will not have an accent in the plural form, either.

### EXAMPLES:

#### ACCENT IN SINGULAR AND PLURAL:

- **lá**-piz // **lá**-pi-ces: The noun *lápiz* requires an accent in the singular and plural forms because, in each case, it breaks the stress rule of the group it pertains to based on its ending. (In its plural form, it is also an *esdrújula* and would automatically require an accent for that reason.)

#### NO ACCENT IN SINGULAR OR PLURAL:

- pa-ra-**sol** // pa-ra-**sol**-es: The noun *parasol* does not require an accent in the singular or plural because, in each case, it follows the stress rule of the group it pertains to based on its ending.