

Style Guide for Spanish Writing

by Helen Eby

This style guide was written to help English speaking translation clients understand some of the key differences in the visible appearance of Spanish.

Capitalization:

In Spanish, for titles of stories, creative works, and articles written in magazines or newspapers, slogans, etc. sentence case and italics are used:

- *Cien años de soledad*
- *Las señoritas de Avignon* (Avignon is capitalized because it is a place)
- *West side story* (note that Spanish rules apply to an English text quoted in a Spanish document).

The rules are more similar to the English ones for titles of weekly publications, presentations and exhibitions, laws and official documents. Spanish capitalizes all words with lexical content, as well as italicizing the name of the publication to show where the title starts and ends:

Weekly publications

- *La Nación*
- *El Comercio*

Laws and official documents

- *el Código Civil*
- *la Ley 40/1998, de 9 de diciembre, de Impuesto sobre la Renta de las Personas Físicas y otras Normas Tributarias*
- *la Convención de Ginebra*

Names of historical eras, events and festivities:

- el Precámbrico
- la Contrarreforma
- Navidad, Año Nuevo, Día Internacional de la Mujer

Punctuation:

Semicolon: separates phrases of equal weight that are all affected by the same verb. Spanish sentences are often quite long, and phrases within them are separated by semicolons.

Comma: separates words of equal weight within the phrase.

Colon: no capital letter after a colon. Caps only go at the start of a sentence, the start of a book title, or the start of a proper name.

Traiga lo siguiente a la escuela: compás, transportador, lápiz, papel.

In this case no caps follow the colon since it is only a list of items to take to school.

However, note the following exceptions:

Cómo hacer puré: Hierva las papas, etc.

In the above case, using a capital letter after the colon is OK because a small sentence truly starts after the colon.

Muy señor mío:
Le agradeceré...

After the colon that follows the greeting in a letter.

CERTIFICA:
Que D. José Álvarez García ha seguido el Curso de Técnicas Audiovisuales...

After the colon that follows the main verb of an administrative legal document.

Pedro dijo: «No volveré hasta las nueve».

After the colon that introduces a citation or quotation.

Bulleted lists: treat the punctuation as if the items followed each other within a paragraph. In other words, each new item does NOT get a capital letter because it is on a new line. To make this point obvious, I used the same list as in the sentence above. In English, items in bulleted sentences are separated by semicolons, and in Spanish we can use commas.

Traiga lo siguiente a la escuela:

- compás,
- transportador,
- lápiz,
- y papel.

(Note that this list has commas, no capital letters, and ends in a period: it is a sentence graphically broken down into bullets to itemize the elements of the list.)

Simple quotes enclose meanings.

Quotation marks:

The period always goes outside of the quotation marks.

Me dijo: “Es una tontería”.

Long parenthetical comments should be replaced by footnotes.

Numbered lists should always have Arabic numerals followed by a closing parenthesis, as shown below. Lowercase Roman numerals are not used, nor is the (1) format. Even inside a paragraph, these rules are followed.

1)

2)

A long dash can be used to enclose explanations –. In these cases, the long dash needs to be on both sides of what it encloses, even if the end is just before the period at the end of the sentence or the paragraph. In this case, it is “kissing” the enclosed comment and “keeping its distance” from the rest of the sentence with a space. However, such use is somewhat rare, and often writers use commas or parentheses instead.

- La editorial ha publicado este año varias obras del autor –todas ellas de su primera época–.
- Para él la fidelidad –cualidad que valoraba por encima de cualquier otra– era algo sagrado.

(Examples taken from *Ortografía de la lengua española*, published by Real Academia Española, p. 374)

“Siglas” (Acronyms) don’t take periods (OTAN; ONU, EUA)

Acronyms are not pluralized in Spanish (“los CD”, not “los CDs”)

Translators should not create new acronyms, but use the official ones in Spanish (for example ONU for UN, SIDA for AIDS, etc.). If no official Spanish acronym exists, translators should use the acronym of the source text, spelling it out the first time, followed by (ABC, *por sus siglas en inglés*) or (ABC, *American Broadcasting Company*) and using it sparingly after that. Either format can be used as long as it is consistent. Note that in some cases, acronyms have been used as words often enough that they are commonly found in lowercase format, such as “sida”, and in some cases only the first word is capitalized, as in Renfe. Readers should not have to go to the previous page to find the definition of the acronym. If it is used once per page, it should be spelled out or the name should be abbreviated using words, not the acronym.

tú (informal you) vs usted (formal you): In Spanish business communications (from memos to manuals) should always be in the “usted” form *unless* the client insists. Of course, when addressing young people, the “tú” form is appropriate.

Business letters signed with only a first name are not culturally acceptable in Spanish. When an English document is signed by “Joe”, the Spanish should also give Joe’s last name and say “Joe Brown, President”.

Unit conversions: square feet, inches, pounds, etc., are not used in the Spanish speaking world. However, the units in the document should be those commonly used in the target country. The requester should specify

whether unit conversions should be made. Any unit conversions should be done carefully, verifying the accuracy of the conversion. In technical documents, however, units of measurement should not be converted to avoid confusion. One acceptable alternative is putting the conversion between parentheses, as follows: 450 sq. ft (45 m²). In any event, the unit should always be stated immediately after the number because significant mistakes have been made in the science field because of lack of attention to unit conversion.

Gender neutrality: In Spanish, the masculine singular is the neutral case. Filling the text with “**él o ella**” makes for cumbersome reading. As a matter of fact, when referring to a group of men and women as “them”, the Spanish is “ellos” (masculine plural).

Sex (male/female) refers to people, but nouns in Spanish have gender (the table is “la mesa”, a glass of water is “el vaso”, the president could be “el presidente” or “la presidente”, etc.). The fact that a noun ends in the letter “a” does not necessarily mean that the article should be “la”: “el pianista” could refer to a male pianist, for example, and “el mapa” is “the map.”

Conversations: In Spanish, conversations are punctuated by a dash, not by quotation marks. Please note that in English we assume that the speaker continues to speak if there are no ending quotation marks. In Spanish, we assume the speaker changes from one dash to the next. If there is any ambiguity or change from this norm, the author will clarify it.

–¿Cómo estás? –dijo José—. [Note: no space between dash and spoken text, no space between dash and explanatory text]

–Muy bien, –dijo María– pero siéntate, por favor.

–¿Qué te trae por aquí? [José is assumed to be speaking.]

–Vengo a devolver un libro. [María is assumed to be speaking.]

–Bueno, me alegro de haberte visto acá en la biblioteca. Hasta la próxima.

–Nos vemos.

Numbers: N.º 1, or Núm. 1 are correct, but #1 is not Spanish.

Units of measurement don’t take caps or periods (10 km, 5 cm, etc.)

MPH is OK because it is an English only unit. However, KPH doesn’t exist. It would be km/h

Prefixes are not independent units; therefore, they are used in three ways:

- attached to the word they precede: antiadherente, cuasidelito, exalcohólico, expresidente;
- with a dash separating the prefix from the main word only when the root word is capitalized (e.g. pre-Obama) or it is a number; and,
- separated only when they modify more than one word: ex relaciones públicas, anti pena de muerte, pro derechos humanos, vice primer ministro, super en forma.

Periods and commas in numbers:

Half of Latin American countries use commas for thousands and periods for decimals, and the other half go the other way. The European Union is going with hard spaces. Any of these choices is acceptable as long as consistency is maintained through the document. However, when the document is written with a single target country in mind, the translator should make an effort to be consistent with the usage in that country.

Abbreviations should be easy to understand with no previous knowledge. They take accents, periods, and can be pluralized.

Days, months, seasons, job titles, languages, tribes, religions are not capitalized. The General Manager is “el *gerente general*”. If the title is at the start of the line, only capitalize the first word (Gerente general de Operaciones). However, names of departments do take more than one capital letter (e.g. Recursos Humanos, Operaciones y Mantenimiento). NEVER capitalize articles or prepositions, though!

Use italics for

- *names of titles of books, articles, etc.,*
- *foreign words*
- *invented words*
- *scientific names*

Bold type: avoid it as much as possible, as overuse makes reading difficult. However, bold type **can** be used to emphasize a word within a sentence, since capital letters and italics are not used for emphasis in Spanish.

To give multiple options, señores(as) is widely used in Mexico, but señores/as is used in other places (Spain and Argentina, at least).

~~DO NOT USE ALL CAPS.~~ There are other ways to denote emphasis. A text in all caps is visually convoluted and hard to read. Capitalization for emphasis is not used in Spanish texts.

Paragraphs should have a left indent, except for the first paragraph. This applies to writing an article, a letter, or something of that type. When working on a PowerPoint, the rules change for the sake of space. Depending on the type of text, it may be important to maintain the same style as the source.

Names of institutions, laws, medications, etc.: Use the Spanish names when translating to English, and when the English source text is using material that has been translated from Spanish, use the original terminology from the source country. However, when translating the name of a law from English to Spanish and the name of the law is not commonly known in Spanish, give the name of the law in English in italics followed by a translation of its meaning in Spanish between parenthesis. Users will be searching for it by the English name, not the Spanish name, in any event.

The official Spanish names of many US government institutions can be found [on this page](#).

Tenses:

Translation from English to Spanish does not require keeping the same tense. The following are just a few examples.

- Spanish uses the subjunctive much more frequently than English does.
- Spanish uses tacit subjects unless the subject must be specified to avoid ambiguity.
- The English passive voice is often replaced by the impersonal *se hace* or by the active voice.

Keeping English terms in the Spanish text:

This practice can lead to clumsy Spanish writing and confusion. When technical terms must be kept in English because they will be on the computer screen in English, the translator should receive a list of the terms the user will see on the screen to be able to avoid leaving unnecessary terms untranslated. In any event, all English terms should be followed by a Spanish translation in parenthesis and the English term should be in italics, as follows:

Haga click en la pestaña *Design* (diseño).

This practice allows the reader to follow the text as a Spanish paragraph with no loss of meaning or fluency.

Redundancy:

In Spanish we avoid redundancy. If the concept is repeated too many times throughout a text, the English would use the exact same term throughout, whereas the Spanish would use two or three variations of the term so as not to sound so repetitive. Especially in legal documents or instructions, when the English is very repetitive, it will seem like the Spanish is missing a sentence, and it may actually be missing a sentence, but it is deliberate when the meaning of the sentence is included in previous content. This also happens with legal doublets (e.g. “terms and conditions”, “cease and desist”).

Source materials:

Many ideas came from Xosé Castro, presentation to AATIA in September 2010

Discussions with Gabriela Penrod

Ortografía de la lengua española, Real Academia Española, 2010

El buen uso del español, Real Academia Española, 2013

Reviewed by Andreea Boscor in 2020