

Spanish-English Cognates

Noun, Adjective, Verb, and Adverb Patterns for Reading Instruction

Thousands of English words came into the language from Latin -- many directly, many through French -- and Spanish kept most of the same Latin words in a more direct form. This means a native Spanish speaker often already knows the meaning of an advanced English word without ever having seen it before, once they learn to recognize the spelling pattern that connects the two languages. The charts below group true cognates by their English/Spanish ending, so a student who learns one pattern unlocks dozens of words at once. Words marked with an asterisk (*) are near-cognates: the spelling shift is slightly less regular, or a more common everyday Spanish word is used instead.

Cognate Prefixes

Most Latin prefixes came into English and Spanish separately but stayed almost identical in both languages. These are the easiest cognates to teach first, since the prefix itself rarely changes.

No.	English Prefix	Spanish Prefix	Meaning	Example Words
1	re-	re-	again, back	rebuild → reconstruir, return → retornar*
2	in-, im-	in-, im-	not; into	invisible → invisible, impossible → imposible
3	dis-	dis-	apart, not, opposite of	disconnect → desconectar, disagree → discrepar*
4	ex-	ex-	out, former	export → exportar, express → expresar
5	con-, com-	con-, com-	with, together	connect → conectar, combine → combinar
6	pre-	pre-	before	prepare → preparar, predict → predecir
7	inter-	inter-	between	interrupt → interrumpir, international → internacional
8	sub-	sub-	under	submarine → submarino, subtract → sustraer*
9	trans-	trans-	across	transport → transportar, translate → traducir*
10	super-	super-	above, beyond	superior → superior, supervise → supervisar
11	anti-	anti-	against	antisocial → antisocial, antibiotic → antibiótico

Cognate Noun Patterns

Concrete Noun Cognates

Everyday objects, places, and people -- often identical or nearly identical in both languages. A good starting list for quick wins. The pronunciation will differ slightly in each language but they are easy beginning cognates to learn.

English	Spanish
animal	animal
hospital	hospital
camera	cámara
banana	banana
area	área
artist	artista

adult	adulto
restaurant	restaurante
hotel	hotel
music	música
radio	radio

Noun Suffix Patterns

No.	English	Spanish	Meaning	Example Words
1	-tion	-ción	the act or result of doing something	action → acción, condition → condición, education → educación, information → información, nation → nación, position → posición, relation → relación, situation → situación
2	-sion	-sión	same job as -tion, after certain consonants	decision → decisión, division → división, television → televisión
3	-ment	-mento	the result or means of an action	moment → momento, document → documento, department → departamento, argument → argumento
4	-ity	-idad	the state or quality of being something	activity → actividad, reality → realidad, opportunity → oportunidad, possibility → posibilidad
5	-or	-or	a person or thing that does something	actor → actor, doctor → doctor, error → error, director → director
6	-ist	-ista	a person who practices or believes in something	artist → artista, dentist → dentista, journalist → periodista*
7	-ism	-ismo	a belief system or practice	capitalism → capitalismo, optimism → optimismo
8	-ance, -ence	-ancia, -encia	the state or quality of something	importance → importancia, difference → diferencia, independence → independencia
9	-ary	-ario, -aria	pertaining to; a place or person for	ordinary → ordinario, primary → primario, secondary → secundario, dictionary → diccionario, salary → salario, contrary → contrario, necessary → necesario
10	-ology	-ología	the study of a field or science	biology → biología, psychology → psicología, technology → tecnología, sociology → sociología, geology → geología
11	-graphy	-grafía	writing about or recording of something	geography → geografía, photography → fotografía, biography → biografía

Cognate Adjective Patterns

No.	English	Spanish	Meaning	Example Words
1	-al	-al	relating to	natural → natural, national → nacional, actual → actual
2	-ble	-ble	able to be ____ed	possible → posible, flexible → flexible, visible → visible, comfortable → comfortable*
3	-ous	-oso, -osa	full of, having the quality of	famous → famoso, curious → curioso, dangerous → peligroso*
4	-ic	-ico, -ica	relating to, having the nature of	basic → básico, economic → económico, specific → específico
5	-ive	-ivo, -iva	tending to, having the nature of	active → activo, creative → creativo, effective → efectivo
6	-ant, -ent	-ante, -ente	describes a quality or state; often doubles as a noun for "one who"	important → importante, different → diferente, excellent → excelente, intelligent → inteligente, patient → paciente, present → presente, president → presidente, resident → residente

Cognate Verb Patterns

Spanish verbs keep a clear infinitive ending (-ar, -er, -ir); English usually drops it. Teach the infinitive form first -- the cognate pattern gives the root instantly.

No.	English	Spanish	Meaning	Example Words
1	-ate	-ar	from Latin -āre; the most common and reliable verb pattern	activate → activar, celebrate → celebrar, communicate → comunicar, concentrate → concentrar, create → crear, demonstrate → demostrar, educate → educar, eliminate → eliminar, generate → generar, imitate → imitar, participate → participar, separate → separar
2	-ize	-izar	to make or become; modern academic/business verbs	organize → organizar, specialize → especializar, visualize → visualizar
3	-ify	-ificar	to make or cause to become	classify → clasificar, identify → identificar, justify → justificar, modify → modificar, simplify → simplificar, verify → verificar
4	-ct	-ctar, -gir	smaller pattern -- check each word	act → actuar*, react → reaccionar, direct → dirigir
5	-mit	-mitir	to send, to let go	permit → permitir, transmit → transmitir, submit → someter*
6	-pose	-poner	to put, place	compose → componer, expose → exponer, propose → proponer

Note: not every -ize verb follows the -izar pattern -- recognize → reconocer and summarize → resumir are common exceptions worth teaching separately.

Caution: realize looks like it should match this pattern (realize → realizar), but realizar means "to carry out" or "to accomplish" in Spanish, not "to become aware of." See False Friends in the Appendix.

Cognate Adverb Pattern

No.	English	Spanish	Meaning	Example Words
1	-ly	-mente	added to the adjective to describe how, when, or how much	basically → básicamente, completely → completamente, exactly → exactamente, finally → finalmente, frequently → frecuentemente, generally → generalmente, immediately → inmediatamente, naturally → naturalmente, normally → normalmente, obviously → obviamente, possibly → posiblemente, quickly → rápidamente, really → realmente, recently → recientemente, seriously → seriamente, usually → usualmente

Caution: actually does not mean actualmente -- actualmente means "currently, right now." See False Friends in the Appendix.

All Patterns at a Glance

A quick reference combining every pattern above with the part of speech it forms.

Pattern	Part of Speech	Example
-tion / -ción	Noun	nation / nación
-sion / -sión	Noun	decision / decisión
-ment / -mento	Noun	document / documento
-ity / -idad	Noun	activity / actividad
-or / -or	Noun	actor / actor
-ist / -ista	Noun	artist / artista
-ism / -ismo	Noun	optimism / optimismo
-ance, -ence / -ancia, -encia	Noun	difference / diferencia
-ary / -ario	Noun (sometimes Adjective)	salary / salario
-ology / -ología	Noun	biology / biología
-graphy / -grafía	Noun	geography / geografía
-al / -al	Adjective	national / nacional
-ble / -ble	Adjective	possible / posible
-ous / -oso	Adjective	famous / famoso
-ic / -ico	Adjective	basic / básico
-ive / -ivo	Adjective	active / activo
-ant, -ent / -ante, -ente	Adjective (sometimes Noun)	important / importante
-ate / -ar	Verb	celebrate / celebrar
-ize / -izar	Verb	organize / organizar
-ify / -ificar	Verb	classify / clasificar
-ly / -mente	Adverb	quickly / rápidamente

The Most Common Patterns in Action

These eight patterns cover the highest volume of everyday academic vocabulary. Practice them first, in both directions.

-tion / -ción

Education is important. / *La educación es importante.*

I need more information. / *Necesito más información.*

-ity / -idad

Face reality. / *Enfrenta la realidad.*

There is a possibility. / *Hay una posibilidad.*

-ary / -ario

Primary education is key. / *La educación primaria es clave.*

What is your salary? / *¿Cuál es tu salario?*

-ic / -ico

Economic growth is slow. / *El crecimiento económico es lento.*

Be more specific. / *Sé más específico.*

-ant, -ent / -ante, -ente

The student is very intelligent. / *El estudiante es muy inteligente.*

Be patient with the process. / *Sé paciente con el proceso.*

-ate / -ar

We will celebrate her birthday. / *Vamos a celebrar su cumpleaños.*

Schools educate children. / *Las escuelas educan a los niños.*

-ize / -izar

Let's organize the files. / *Vamos a organizar los archivos.*

She wants to specialize in medicine. / *Ella quiere especializarse en medicina.*

-ly / -mente

Call me immediately. / *Lláname inmediatamente.*

She answered quickly. / *Ella respondió rápidamente.*

Cognate Pattern Exercise

For each English word, write the matching Spanish cognate and name the pattern (see the charts above for help).

English Word	Spanish Cognate	Pattern
popularity		
famous		
generate		
organize		
frequently		
artist		
possible		
energetic		
tourism		
assistance		
secondary		
rapidly		
narrate		
creative		
excellent		
technology		

Answer Key: Cognate Pattern Exercise

English Word	Spanish Cognate	Pattern
popularity	popularidad	-ity / -idad
famous	famoso	-ous / -oso
generate	generar	-ate / -ar
organize	organizar	-ize / -izar
frequently	frecuentemente	-ly / -mente
artist	artista	-ist / -ista
possible	posible	-ble / -ble
energetic	energético	-ic / -ico
tourism	turismo	-ism / -ismo
assistance	asistencia	-ance / -ancia
secondary	secundario	-ary / -ario
rapidly	rápidamente	-ly / -mente
narrate	narrar	-ate / -ar
creative	creativo	-ive / -ivo
excellent	excelente	-ent / -ente
technology	tecnología	-ology / -ología

Appendix: False Friends (Falsos Amigos)

These words look like cognates but are not -- they can cause real misunderstandings in school, medical, and workplace settings. When a word feels too familiar, double-check the meaning in context.

Dangerous False Friends (completely different meaning)

English word	Looks like Spanish...	But that Spanish word means	Correct usage
embarrassed	embarazada	pregnant	Me sentí avergonzado/a cuando tropecé.
actually	actualmente	currently, right now	En realidad, prefiero el café.
library	librería	bookstore	Pedí libros de la biblioteca.
carpet	carpeta	folder	La alfombra es nueva.
constipated	constipado	having a cold	Él está estreñido.
sensible	sensible	sensitive, emotional	Ella es muy sensata. (use sensato/a)
attend	atender	to help, serve	Voy a asistir a la reunión.

Partial False Friends (overlap a little, main meaning differs)

English word	Looks like Spanish...	But that Spanish word means	Correct usage
realize	realizar	to carry out, to do	Me di cuenta del error. (realize = darse cuenta)
assist	asistir	to attend (a class, event)	¿Puedes ayudarme? (assist = ayudar)
pretend	pretender	to intend, to plan	No fingas que no sabes. (pretend = fingir)
sympathetic	simpático	nice, friendly	Él es muy compasivo. (sympathetic = compasivo)
large	largo	long (in length)	El cuarto grande. (large = grande)
fabric	fábrica	factory	La tela es suave. (fabric = tela)

Spelling & Pronunciation Traps

English word	Spanish trap	Actual meaning	Quick tip
success	suceso	event, happening	success = éxito
exit	éxito	success	exit = salida
college	colegio	elementary/high school	college = universidad
lecture	lectura	reading	lecture = conferencia
mayor	mayor	bigger, older	mayor (the office) = alcalde

Why Cognate Rates Vary by Topic

Not every topic has the same cognate rate, even among equally difficult topics. This is worth teaching students directly, since it is a useful reading skill on its own: cognate density is a clue about a word's history, not a simple measure of how hard a topic is. Three patterns show up again and again:

Pattern	Effect on Cognate Rate	Example
Vocabulary added by Latin/Greek roots	The cognate rate rises as material gets harder. Simple words stay simple; advanced words are usually built from the Latin/Greek patterns taught in this guide.	A biology unit: cell and animal are plain words, but herbivore, metamorphosis, and photosynthesis are cognates (herbívoro, metamorfosis, fotosíntesis).
Vocabulary borrowed whole into both languages	The cognate rate can be HIGH at every level, because the "hard" words are the same word in both languages from the start -- neither language built them from Latin roots, both just borrowed them from a third language.	Japanese loanwords: karate, samurai, and sushi are spelled almost identically in Spanish and English at any grade level, because both languages simply adopted the Japanese word.
Vocabulary that is native English (Old English/Old French)	The cognate rate can stay LOW even in advanced material, because there is no shared Latin root to begin with.	A topic like medieval castles: moat, drawbridge, and siege are everyday words in that topic at any level, and none of them has a Spanish cognate.