Placement of Adjectives

Spanish for Beginners

By Gerald Erichsen, About.com Guide

It is often said that adjectives come after nouns in Spanish. But this isn't entirely true — some types of adjectives frequently or always come before the nouns they modify, and some can be placed either before or after nouns. Often, the determining factor in an adjective's placement is its purpose in the sentence.

Beginners usually don't have much difficulty with the placement of numbers, indefinite adjectives (words like cada/“each” and algunos/“some”) and adjectives of quantity (such as mucho/“much” and pocos/“few”), which precede nouns in both languages. The main difficulty facing beginners is with descriptive adjectives. Students often learn that they are placed after the noun (which they usually are), but then they are surprised to find when they're reading “real” Spanish outside their textbooks that adjectives are often used before the nouns they modify.

Tip for beginners: Most of the material in this lesson is more appropriate for intermediate students than for beginners. If you're new to learning Spanish, it isn't important at this point to memorize the rules. What is important to remember is that while descriptive adjectives usually follow the nouns they modify, if one appears before the noun in something written or said by a native speaker it's probably not a mistake, and there is probably a reason why the adjective is where it is.

Most of the words we think of as adjectives are descriptive adjectives, words that impart a quality of some sort to the noun. Most of them can appear either before or after a noun, and here is the general rule for where:

After the noun: If an adjective classifies a noun, that is, if it is used to distinguish that particular person or object from others that could be represented by the same noun, it is placed after the noun. Adjectives of color, nationality, and affiliation (such as of religion or political party) usually fit in this category, as do many others. A grammarian might say in these cases that the adjective restricts the noun.

Before the noun: If the main purpose of the adjective is to reinforce the meaning of the noun, to impart emotional effect on the noun, or to convey appreciation of some sort for the noun, then the adjective often is placed before the noun. A grammarian might say these are adjectives used nonrestrictively. Another way of looking at it is that placement before the noun often indicates a subjective quality (one dependent on the view of the person speaking) rather than an objective (demonstrable) one.

Keep in mind that this is a general rule only, and sometimes there is no discernible reason for a speaker's choice of word order. But you can see some of the common differences in usage in the following examples:

- la luz fluorescente (the fluorescent light) — Fluorescente is a category or classification of light, so it follows luz.
- un hombre mexicano (a Mexican man) — Mexicano serves to classify un hombre, in this case by nationality.
- La blanca nieve estaba por todas partes. (The white snow was everywhere.) — Blanca (white) reinforces the meaning of nieve (snow) and could also impart an emotional effect.
- Es ladrón condenado. (He is a convicted thief.) — Condenado (convicted) distinguishes the ladrón (thief) from others and is an objective quality.
- ¡Condenada computadora! (Blasted computer!) — Condenada is used for emotional effect, making it emphatically subjective. For this reason, most vulgar adjectives of disparagement precede the nouns they describe.

To see how word order could make a difference, examine the following two sentences:

- Me gusta tener un césped verde. (I like having a green lawn.)
- Me gusta tener un verde césped. (I like having a green lawn.)

The difference between these two sentences is subtle and not readily translated. Depending on the context, the first might be translated as "I like having a green lawn (as opposed to a brown one)," while the second might be translated as "I like having a green lawn (as opposed to not having a lawn)" or "I like having a beautiful lawn." In the first sentence, the placement of verde (green) after césped (lawn) indicates a classification. In the second sentence verde, by being placed first, reinforces the meaning of césped and indicates some aesthetic appreciation.

The effects of word order indicate why some adjectives are translated into English differently depending on their location. For example, un amigo viejo usually is translated as "a friend who is old," while un viejo amigo is usually translated as "a longtime friend," indicating some emotional appreciation. Similarly, un hombre grande is usually translated as "a big man," while un gran hombre is "a great man," indicating a subjective quality rather than an objective one. (Grande, when it precedes a noun, is shortened to gran.) As you continue your studies, you will come across about another dozen adjectives that are similar.

Final note: If an adjective is modified by an adverb, it follows the noun. Compro un coche muy caro, I am buying a very (muy) expensive (caro) car (coche.)
Adjectives in Their Place

Spanish Adjective Can Come Before or After the Noun, Depending on Its Purpose

By Gerald Erichsen, About.com Guide

One of the first things you may be told when you start studying the Spanish adjective is that, unlike its English counterpart, it comes after the noun. But it doesn't take very much reading of Spanish to find out that the "rule" about word order is meant to be broken; it is actually quite common to place adjectives before nouns.

Certainly, adjectives — especially descriptive adjectives (ones that describe a quality of something) — usually come after nouns, and there are some cases where they must. But there are a some adjectives that preferably come before the noun, and even a few whose meanings change depending on where they're placed.

Here are some of the different types of adjectives and where you will find them:

Colors: These come after the noun.

Examples: La flor roja, the red rose; la Casa Blanca, the White House.

Adjectives indicating membership or classification: These include adjectives of nationality and various types of affiliation and nearly always come after the noun. Note that such adjectives aren't capitalized in Spanish.

Examples: La mujer ecuatoriana, the Ecuadoran woman; el sacerdote católico, the Catholic priest; el restaurante japonés, the Japanese restaurant; el juez demócrata, the Democratic judge.

Adjectives modified by an adverb or phrase: These come after the noun.

Examples: La taza llena de agua, the cup full of water; el libro muy interesante, the very interesting book; la computadora bastante buena, the quite good computer.

Multiple adjectives: When two or more adjectives of similar importance describe something, they go after the noun.

Example: La casa grande y cara, the big and expensive house.

Adjectives of appreciation: By placing an adjective before the noun, you can sometimes indicate a certain amount of appreciation for that quality and/or a certain amount of emphasis. In English we sometimes do the same thing by using a word such as "really" or by a change in intonation.

Examples: Es un músico bueno, he's a good musician; es un buen músico, he's a really good musician; la hermosa vista, the beautiful view; Hollywood, la ciudad de incontables películas, Hollywood, the city of countless movies.

Reinforcing adjectives: Adjectives that reinforce the meaning of the noun, such as adjectives that "go with" the accompanying noun, often are placed before the noun. In many cases, one might also say that the purpose of these adjectives is less for describing the noun that's modified and more for conveying some sort of an emotion to it.

Examples: Una oscura noche, a dark night; el horrible monstruo, the horrible monster; la alta montaña, the high mountain; la blanca nieve, the white snow.

Nondescriptive adjectives: Many adjectives other than those that describe go before the noun.

Examples: Pocos libros, few books; muchas palomas, many doves; mi casa, my house; esta mesa, this table; dos libros, two books. Sometimes these adjectives are known by other names, such as possessive pronouns and determiners.

Meaning-changing adjectives: Some adjectives change in meaning (or at least in English translation) depending on whether they're placed before or after the noun. Generally, the adjectives placed after nouns have an objective meaning or one that carries little or no emotional content, while one placed before the noun can indicate something about how the speaker feels toward the person or thing being described.

Example: Mi viejo amigo, my longtime friend; mi amigo viejo, my elderly friend.

Generally, except for the meaning-changing adjectives, you won't go wrong by placing a descriptive adjective after the noun. However, as you examine Spanish writing or listen to the spoken language, you will develop a "feel" for those cases where you can or should place adjectives ahead of the noun.
Placement of Some Adjectives Can Affect Their Meaning

Adjectives in Front Often Have More Subjective Meaning

By Gerald Erichsen, About.com Guide

Put an adjective before a noun or after the noun in Spanish, and usually it makes only a subtle difference, if any, in the meaning. But there are some cases where the placement of the adjective makes significant enough of a difference that we would translate it differently in English.

For an example, take the following two sentences: Tengo un viejo amigo. Tengo un amigo viejo. A "safe" translation of these two sentences would be fairly easy to come up with: "I have an old friend." But what does that mean? Does it mean that my friend is elderly? Or does it mean that the person has been a friend for a long time?

It may surprise you to find out that in Spanish the sentences aren't so ambiguous, for viejo can be understood differently depending on where it is in relation the noun that is described. Word order does make a difference. In this case, tengo un viejo amigo typically means "I have a longtime friend," and tengo un amigo viejo typically means "I have an elderly friend." Similarly, someone who has been a dentist for a long time is un viejo dentista, but a dentist who is old is un dentista viejo. Of course it is possible to be both — but in that case the word order will indicate what you're emphasizing.

Viejo is far from the only adjective that functions that way, although the distinctions aren't nearly always as strong as they are with viejo. Here are examples of some of the more common such adjectives. Context still matters, and there may be exceptions, but these are guidelines to pay attention to:

- **antiguo**: la antigua silla, the old chair; la silla antigua, the antique chair
- **grande**: un gran hombre, a great man; un hombre grande, a big man
- **mismo**: el mismo atleta, the same athlete; el atleta mismo, the athlete himself
- **nuevo**: el nuevo libro, the brand-new book, the newly acquired book; el libro nuevo, the newly made book
- **pobre**: esa pobre mujer, that poor woman (in the sense of being pitiful); esa mujer pobre, that woman who is poor
- **propio**: mi propios zapatos, my own shoes; mis zapatos propios, my appropriate shoes
- **solo**: un solo hombre, only one man; un hombre solo, a lonely man
- **triste**: un triste viaje, a dreadful trip; un viaje triste, a sad trip
- **único**: la única estudiante, the only student; la estudiante única, the unique student

You may notice a pattern above: When placed after a noun, the adjective tends to add a somewhat objective meaning, while placed before it provides often provides an emotional or subjective meaning.

These meanings aren't always hard and fast and can depend to a certain extent on context. Some of the words also have other meanings; solo, for example, can also mean "alone." And in some cases, as with nuevo, placement can also be a matter of emphasis rather than simply of meaning. But this list does provide a guide that should be useful in helping determine the meaning of some double-meaning adjectives.

Generally, except for the meaning-changing adjectives, you won't go wrong by placing a descriptive adjective after the noun. However, as you examine Spanish writing or listen to the spoken language, you will develop a "feel" for those cases where you can or should place adjectives ahead of the noun.
**Objective and Subjective Adjectives**

**Putting Adjective Before Noun Can Affect How It’s Understood**

By Gerald Erichsen, About.com Guide

**Question:** I read recently on your French Language site an article on fickle French adjectives. It said that adjectives placed after nouns have objective or literal meanings, while those coming before the noun often have subjective or figurative meanings. Is that true in Spanish also?

**Answer:** Yes, it is. The distinction isn’t a hard and fast one, but placing a descriptive adjective before a noun often gives it an emotive or figurative quality, while an adjective placed after a noun is generally understood to be merely descriptive.

As an example, look at an adjective such as oscuro, which means "dark." A phrase such as una noche oscura would be understood as meaning the night is literally dark, perhaps a night with no moon showing. But una oscura noche offers a different image, one that may not be apparent in English translation. It could be the difference between "a dark night" and "a d-a-a-r-r-k night." In context, it might mean the night was somewhat spooky or scary, for example. Or it could mean that even though the night isn't particularly dark in a literal sense, it is nevertheless gloomy.

To take another example, un hombre triste would typically refer to a sad man. But when the adjective is placed first, it makes the adjective into an evaluation of sort, so un triste hombre might be understood as referring to a wretched man, a man who is a sad example of humanity. Other examples of adjectives whose means vary with placement are listed in our lesson on adjectives' placement and meaning.

Because an adjective before the noun often has an emotional quality, most adjectives used as epithets or highly emotional descriptions are typically placed before nouns. A few examples: mi negra suerte, my rotten luck; esos cochinadas computadoras, those lousy computers; malditos yanquis, damn Yankees.

Here are some examples of sentences where the emotive qualities of the adjective can be seen. As is often the case, the translations given here are not the only ones possible:

- *Y cuando llega el último acto, y la muerte hace su aparición y el cuerpo es enterrado en la fría tierra, no importa que todos los amigos hayan partido.* And when the final act arrives and death makes its appearance and the body is buried in the cold ground, it doesn't matter that all your friends have departed. (The writer here isn't speaking so much about the temperature of the ground, but conveying a feeling about the nature of death.)

- *Los turistas de muchos países confluyen con los domésticos para visitar esta relativamente aislada ciudad sureña.* Tourists from many countries join with locals to visit this relatively isolated southern city. (The writer here may be suggesting that the city is more than geographically isolated. It may be culturally isolated as well, for example.)

- *El secretario general abrió hoy la puerta a una nueva etapa de relación con Rusia basada en el "realismo".* The secretary general today opened the door to a new stage in relations with Russia based on "realism." (The placement of nueva here may say something about the step being an important one, or it may convey the idea of hope.)

- *El cantante debutó con resonante éxito en Tokio.* The singer debuted with resounding success in Tokyo. (The placement of the adjective strengthens its meaning.)
**Adjectives and Word Order: A Quiz**

By Gerald Erichsen, About.com Guide

Do you know where to put adjectives in sentences? Find out by taking this test.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Correct Answer</th>
<th>Incorrect Answers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>My home is your home.</td>
<td>Mi casa es tu casa.</td>
<td>Mi casa es casa tu.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>I bought a powerful, expensive, green car.</td>
<td>Compré un poderoso, caro, verde carro.</td>
<td>Compré un carro poderoso, caro y verde.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Tokyo is a grand city.</td>
<td>Tokio es una grande ciudad.</td>
<td>Tokio es una granda ciudad.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Tokyo is a big city.</td>
<td>Tokio es una grande ciudad.</td>
<td>Tokio es una gran ciudad.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>I have three blue pencils</td>
<td>Tengo tres azules lápices.</td>
<td>Tengo azules tres lápices.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Tokyo is the biggest city.</td>
<td>Tokio es la más grande ciudad.</td>
<td>Tokio es la más gran ciudad.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Mr. Lopez is a big man.</td>
<td>Sr. López es un gran hombre.</td>
<td>Sr. López es un hombre grande.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>The leader is a Canadian woman.</td>
<td>La líder es una canadiense mujer.</td>
<td>La líder es una mujer canadiense.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>I read a very important book.</td>
<td>Lei un muy importante libro.</td>
<td>Lei un libro muy importante.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>I would like this bicycle.</td>
<td>Quisiera esta bicicleta.</td>
<td>Quisiera bicicleta esta.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>My mother is a lonely woman.</td>
<td>Mi madre es una sola mujer.</td>
<td>Mi madre es una sola mujer solo.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>He bought a very old car.</td>
<td>Compró un muy viejo carro.</td>
<td>Compró un carro muy viejo.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>I have few shoes.</td>
<td>Tengo poco zapatos.</td>
<td>Tengo zapatos poco.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Each man ought to leave.</td>
<td>Cado hombre debe salir.</td>
<td>El hombre cada debe salir.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Quiero comprar two antique tables.</td>
<td>Quiero comprar dos antiguas mesas.</td>
<td>Quiero comprar dos antiguas mesas.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>I have my own shirt.</td>
<td>Tengo mi propia camisa.</td>
<td>Tengo la camisa mi propia.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>I have an appropriate shirt.</td>
<td>Tengo una propia camisa.</td>
<td>Tengo una camisa propia.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Roberto is a longtime friend.</td>
<td>Roberto es un tiempo mucho amigo.</td>
<td>Roberto es un tiempo mucho amigo.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Adjectives and Word Order: The Answers

Here are the answers to the quiz.

1. Mi casa es tu casa.
2. Compré un carro poderoso, caro y verde.
3. Tokio es una gran ciudad.
4. Tokio es una ciudad grande.
5. Tengo tres lápices azules.
6. Tokio es la ciudad más grande.
7. Sr. López es un hombre grande.
8. La líder es una mujer canadiense.
9. Leí un libro muy importante.
10. Quisiera esta bicicleta.
11. Mi madre es una mujer sola.
12. Compré un carro muy viejo.
13. Tengo pocos zapatos.
15. Quiero comprar dos mesas antiguas.
16. Tengo mi propia camisa.
17. Tengo una camisa propia.
18. Roberto es un viejo amigo.
19. El Canadá es el país más hermoso del mundo.
20. ¿Dónde está el restaurante mexicano?