

Gender of Nouns — Part I

A noun is a word used to denote a person, place, thing, or idea.

PERSON: John, girl, dentist

PLACE: garden, university, Venezuela

THING: book, car, tomato

IDEA: liberty, despair, intelligence

In Spanish, all nouns are either masculine or feminine.

MASCULINE

el chico boy
el jardín garden
el libro book
el miedo fear

FEMININE

la chica girl
la universidad university
la revista magazine
la libertad liberty

The idea that nouns have gender seems perfectly natural when the noun stands for a living creature. This is because in English, living creatures often have different names, depending upon whether they are male or female.

MASCULINE

man
tiger
aviator

FEMININE

woman
tigress
aviatrix

The following Spanish nouns all denote living creatures.

el gato male cat
el perro male dog
el chico boy
el abuelo grandfather

la gata female cat
la perra female dog
la chica girl
la abuela grandmother

How are all of these masculine nouns alike?

el gato
el chico

el perro
el abuelo

HINT: look at both the beginning and the ending of each word pair.

How are all of these feminine nouns alike?

la gata
la chica

la perra
la abuela

HINT: look at both the beginning and the ending of each word pair.

“El” and “la” both mean “the.”

el chico (the boy)
el perro (the male dog)

la chica (the girl)
la gata (the female cat)

NOTE: These two words (*el, la*) are called “definite articles.” You will learn more about them in a later lesson.

What do you notice about the last letter of these nouns?

MASCULINE

gato
perro
chico
abuelo

FEMININE

gata
perra
chica
abuela

Nouns that end in -o are usually masculine. Nouns that end in -a are usually feminine. Notice the word "usually!" There are exceptions to these two rules and you will soon be learning them.

One cannot predict the gender of a noun that stands for a non-living thing. Try to predict whether the Spanish words for the following things are masculine or feminine:

MASCULINE OR FEMININE?

book
money

house
window

One cannot predict the gender of a noun, except in the case of living creatures. Do not try to analyze the nature of the object, looking for some inherent masculinity or femininity. It won't work!

Take a guess. Do you think the Spanish word for "dress" is masculine or feminine? You might expect it to be feminine, since a dress is an article of clothing worn by females. Actually, the word for "dress" is a masculine word:

el vestido

Take another guess. Do you think the Spanish word for "necktie" is masculine or feminine? You might expect it to be masculine, since a necktie is an article of clothing worn by males. Actually, the word for "necktie" is a feminine word:

la corbata

When you learn a new noun, you should also learn its definite article (el, la). There are several reasons for this:

- Because you cannot predict the gender of most nouns.
- Because not every noun that ends in -o is masculine, and not every noun that ends in -a is feminine.
- Because many nouns end in letters other than o or a.
- Because the definite article (el, la) is your clue as to whether a noun is masculine or feminine.

Why do you care whether a noun is masculine or feminine? Good question! As you shall see in upcoming lessons, Spanish places a great deal more emphasis on gender than does English.