GENERAL

how to say what in spanish

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How to Say “What” in Spanish: A Complete Guide

Learning a new language is a journey that often begins with simple words that open doors to everyday conversation. One of the most frequently used English words is *“what.”* Whether you’re asking for clarification, expressing surprise, or simply trying to understand a conversation, knowing how to say *what* in Spanish is essential. This guide will walk you through the Spanish equivalents, pronunciation tips, common usage patterns, and practical ways to master the word in both spoken and written form. By the end, you’ll feel confident using **qué** in a variety of contexts and be ready to explore deeper aspects of Spanish grammar.

Understanding the Word “What” in English

The English word *what*serves multiple grammatical roles. It can function as an interrogative pronoun (e.g., “What is that?”), a relative pronoun (e.g., “The book, what I read, was fascinating”), or an adjective (e.g., “What a surprise!”). In everyday conversation, it’s almost always used to ask a question or express disbelief. This versatility makes it a cornerstone of language learning because it appears in countless idiomatic expressions and sentence structures.

When translating into Spanish, the target word must match the function it plays in the sentence. Spanish has a dedicated interrogative pronoun, **qué**, that covers most of the uses of *what* in English. However, Spanish also employs other words like **cuál** (which) and **qué tipo** (what kind) to convey nuances that *what*sometimes expresses in English. Understanding these subtle differences will help you choose the right word for each situation.

Spanish Equivalent: “Qué”

The primary Spanish translation for *what* is **qué**. It is an interrogative pronoun used to ask questions, identify unknown information, or express surprise. The accent on the “e” is crucial because it distinguishes the interrogative form from the conjunction **que**(which means “that” or “which” in certain contexts). Without the accent, the word loses its interrogative function and becomes a relative pronoun or conjunction.

Pronunciation Guide

Spanish pronunciation can differ from English, especially with accents. The word **qué** is pronounced as /ke/, similar to the English “kay.” The stress on the accented “e” ensures it is spoken with a clear, open vowel sound. A quick practice tip: say “kay” and then add a slight emphasis on the “e” sound. This subtle difference sets it apart from the unaccented **que**, which is pronounced /ke/ but with a neutral stress.

Different Forms and Usage

- Qué – Interrogative pronoun (What?)
- Qué tal – How are you? (literally, “What is good?”)
- Qué pasa – What’s happening? (slang)
- Qué onda – What’s up? (informal)
- Qué es – What is it?
- Qué tipo – What kind/type?

Each form has its own context, but they all share the core idea of asking for information or clarification.

How to Use “Qué” in Questions

When forming a question in Spanish, the word order often follows the pattern *Interrogative Pronoun + Verb + Subject*. This is the standard structure for most interrogative sentences. For instance, “What is your name?” translates to **¿Cuál es tu nombre?** or, more directly, **¿Qué es tu nombre?** However, the preferred word in this context is **cuál** because it refers to a choice among options. Nonetheless, **qué**is used when the question is more open-ended or when the answer is not limited to a set of known alternatives.

Standard Questions

Below are some everyday questions that use **qué**:

- ¿Qué hora es? – What time is it?
- ¿Qué quieres comer? – What do you want to eat?
- ¿Qué película viste? – What movie did you watch?
- ¿Qué pasó? – What happened?

Notice how each question begins with **qué** and is followed by a verb that indicates the action or state being queried.

Embedded Questions

Spanish also allows embedded questions, which are questions inserted into a larger sentence. In these cases, **qué** remains at the beginning of the embedded clause. For example:

- Me pregunto qué sentía cuando lo conoció. – I wonder what he was feeling when he met her.
- No sé qué significa esta palabra. – I don’t know what this word means.
- Te contaré qué descubrí en la biblioteca. – I’ll tell you what I discovered in the library.

Embedded questions often appear after verbs of thinking, saying, or asking.

Common Mistakes and How to Avoid Them

Even native Spanish speakers can occasionally mix up **qué** and **que** or confuse it with **cuál**. These mistakes can lead to misunderstandings or awkward phrasing. Below are common pitfalls and how to steer clear of them.

Confusing “Qué” with “Que”

The unaccented **que** functions as a relative pronoun or conjunction. For example:

- El libro que compré es interesante. – The book that I bought is interesting.
- Quiero que vengas. – I want you to come.

When you need to ask a question, always use the accented **qué**. If you drop the accent, the sentence will lose its interrogative tone and may be interpreted differently.

Using “Qué” as a Pronoun vs. Adjective

In Spanish, **qué** can act as a pronoun (asking for an object or concept) or an adjective (modifying a noun). When it modifies a noun, it usually appears before the noun and is not accented. For instance, **qué tipo de música prefieres?** – What type of music do you prefer?

To avoid confusion, pay attention to the word’s position in the sentence. If **qué**comes before a noun and is not accented, it’s functioning as an adjective. If it stands alone or follows a verb, it’s a pronoun.

Choosing Between “Qué” and “Cuál”

Both **qué** and **cuál** translate to “what” in English, but they serve slightly different purposes. Use **cuál** when you’re asking for a specific choice among known options. Use **qué**when the answer is open-ended or when you’re seeking a definition.

Examples:

- ¿Cuál es tu color favorito? – Which is your favorite color? (options: red, blue, green, etc.)
- ¿Qué es eso? – What is that? (asking for an explanation)

Extended Forms and Idiomatic Expressions

Spanish is rich with idiomatic expressions that incorporate **qué**. These phrases are frequently used in everyday conversation and can add color and authenticity to your speech.

Expressions with “Qué”

- ¿Qué tal? – How are you? (literally, “What good?”)

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