SOFTWARE & TECH

How To Say What In Spanish

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Introduction: The Many Faces of "What" in Spanish

If you are learning Spanish, one of the first words you will need is the English word "what." It seems simple enough, but as you dive deeper, you quickly realize that there is no single, perfect translation. The phrase **How To Say What In Spanish** is one of the most common questions beginners ask, and the answer is not as straightforward as you might hope. Depending on whether you are asking a question, making an exclamation, or referring to something in a relative clause, Spanish uses different words: *qué*, *cuál*, *cómo*, *lo que*, and even *que* without an accent. Mastering these distinctions is essential for sounding natural and avoiding confusion.

In this comprehensive guide, we will break down every major use of "what" in Spanish, provide clear examples, highlight common pitfalls, and give you practical tips to internalize the rules. By the end, you will have a complete understanding of **how to say what in Spanish**in any situation. Let's start with the most common form.

1. The Interrogative "What": ¿Qué? and ¿Cuál?

The most direct translation of "what" in a question is *qué* (with an accent mark). However, Spanish also frequently uses *cuál* (which means "which" or "what" when asking for a choice or identification). Knowing when to use each is the first step in answering **how to say what in Spanish** correctly.

Using ¿Qué? for Definitions and General Information

Use *qué*when you are asking for a definition, explanation, or general information. It often precedes a noun or a verb.

- ¿Qué es esto? – What is this?
- ¿Qué quieres comer? – What do you want to eat?
- ¿Qué hora es? – What time is it?
- ¿Qué significa “amigo”? – What does “amigo” mean?

Notice that in these examples, *qué* is used to ask for a definition or a broad concept. If you are asking “what” about an action or object without a limited set of options, *qué* is your go-to word.

Using ¿Cuál? for Selection and Identification

Cuál (plural *cuáles*) is used when you are asking about a choice from a known or implied set of options, or when identifying something specific. It often translates to "which" but can also mean "what" in contexts of selection.

- ¿Cuál es tu libro favorito? – What (which) is your favorite book?
- ¿Cuál prefieres, el rojo o el azul? – Which (what) do you prefer, the red or the blue?
- ¿Cuáles son tus canciones preferidas? – What (which) are your favorite songs?

Qué before a noun is used when identifying something. For example, saying *¿Qué es tu nombre?* is incorrect; the proper form is *¿Cuál es tu nombre?* (What is your name?). Why? Because a name is a specific identification from many possibilities, not a definition. This nuance is a cornerstone of **how to say what in Spanish** naturally.

Quick Rule of Thumb: Before *ser* (to be) when asking for a specific identity or choice, use *cuál*. For most other verbs and before nouns, use *qué*.

2. The Exclamatory "What": ¡Qué!

In English, we say "What a beautiful day!" or "What a surprise!" In Spanish, the same exclamation uses *qué* (again with an accent) plus a noun or adjective. This is a very common pattern and an essential part of **how to say what in Spanish** when expressing strong emotion.

- ¡Qué bonito! – How beautiful! (or "What a beautiful thing!")
- ¡Qué día tan perfecto! – What a perfect day!
- ¡Qué sorpresa! – What a surprise!
- ¡Qué rápido corres! – How fast you run! (literally "What fast you run!")

Notice that in exclamations, *qué* is followed by an adjective or noun, often with *tan* or *más* for emphasis. This usage is simple and intuitive once you practice it.

3. The Relative "What": Lo que and Que

When "what" is not a question but part of a statement (a relative pronoun), Spanish uses *lo que* (meaning "that which" or "what"). This is a crucial distinction for anyone learning **how to say what in Spanish** in complex sentences.

Using Lo que as a Relative Pronoun

Lo que means "what" in the sense of "the thing that." It introduces a clause that acts as a noun.

- No entiendo lo que dices. – I don't understand what you are saying.
- Lo que más me gusta es viajar. – What I like most is traveling.
- Haz lo que quieras. – Do what you want.
- Eso es lo que necesitamos. – That is what we need.

Note that *lo que* is always singular, even if the idea is plural. Also, do not confuse it with *que* without an article, which means "that" (e.g., *El libro que leí* – The book that I read). For "what" as in "the thing that," you need *lo que*.

When to use just que (without accent)

In some contexts, especially after prepositions, "what" can be translated as *que* when it is part of a fixed expression or a shortened form. However, this is less common. Generally, if you mean "what" as a relative, stick to *lo que*. For example, *en que* can mean "in what" but is often replaced by *en lo que* for clarity.

- ¿En qué piensas? – What are you thinking about? (Here qué is interrogative)
- Pienso en lo que me dijiste. – I'm thinking about what you told me. (Relative)

4. "What" in Indirect Questions

Indirect questions (questions embedded in statements) also require careful handling of **how to say what in Spanish**. The same rules apply: use *qué* for general information and *cuál* for identification.

- No sé qué hacer. – I don't know what to do.
- Pregúntale cuál es su opinión. – Ask him what his opinion is.

- Me pregunto qué pasó. – I wonder what happened.
- Dime cuál prefieres. – Tell me which one (what) you prefer.

Notice that in indirect questions, accents are retained on *qué*, *cuál*, etc., because they are still interrogative words.

5. Common Mistakes and How to Avoid Them

Even advanced learners struggle with certain aspects of **how to say what in Spanish**. Here are the most frequent errors and how to correct them.

Mistake 1: Using ¿Qué? before ser for identity.

Incorrect: *¿Qué es tu apellido?*

¿Cuál es tu apellido? (What is your last name?)

Remember: for definitions (*¿Qué es un sustantivo?*), use *qué*. For identification (*¿Cuál es tu casa?*), use *cuál*.

Mistake 2: Using que (without accent) in questions.

Incorrect: *¿Que hora es?*

¿Qué hora es? (What time is it?)

The accent mark changes *que* (that) into *qué* (what?). Always use the accent in questions and exclamations.

Mistake 3: Translating "what" as lo que when it is an interrogative.

Incorrect: *¿Lo que haces?*

¿Qué haces? (What are you doing?)

Lo que is only for relative clauses, not direct questions.

Mistake 4: Forgetting cuál when asking about preferences.

Incorrect: *¿Qué color te gusta más?* – This is actually acceptable in casual speech, but more precisely: *¿Cuál color te gusta más?* or better *¿Qué color te gusta más?* actually is fine because you are asking about a color from a range. However, when the verb is *ser*, *cuál* is strongly preferred.

6. Regional Variations and Informal Usage

The core rules of **how to say what in Spanish** are consistent across all Spanish-speaking regions, but there are minor differences in informal speech. In some countries, such as Argentina or Uruguay, you might hear *¿Qué tal?* as a greeting meaning "How are you?" or "What's up?" which uses *qué* in a fixed phrase. In Mexico, *¿Qué onda?* is a very common informal way to say "What's up?"

Also, in rapid speech, *¿Qué es eso?* might be shortened to *¿Qué 'eso?*but the written form remains the same. For learners, it's best to master the standard forms first.

7. Practice Exercises to Master "What" in Spanish

To truly internalize **how to say what in Spanish**, you need to practice. Below are a few exercises you can do on your own. Try to translate these English sentences into Spanish.

1. What is your phone number?
2. What a beautiful sunset!
3. I don't understand what you mean.
4. What do you want to drink?
5. Which (what) is the best option?

6. Tell me what happened.

Answers:

1. ¿Cuál es tu número de teléfono?
2. ¡Qué atardecer tan hermoso!
3. No entiendo lo que quieres decir.

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