

## Hispanic Studies 204

### Rules for writing accent marks

Accentuation in the Spanish language can seem a little haphazard, but with a little study a mystery can easily unfold.

Essential principals:

- Spanish is primarily an oral language for which a written form has evolved over the centuries.
- In order to make the rules for the written form of Spanish to conform to the spoken word, we sometimes must write accent marks. That is, when there appears to be a violation of a rule, we must write an accent mark.

Usual stressed syllables in Spanish:

- Most words in Spanish carry a stress on the next to the last syllable. (CA/SA)
- Fewer words in Spanish carry a stress on the last syllable. (MAR/FIL)
- Even fewer words carry a stress on the antepenultimate (third to the last) syllable. (AN/TE/PE/NÚL/TI/MO)

Normal conditions that govern which syllables are stressed:

- A word is usually stressed on the next to the last syllable (penultimate) when the word ends in a VOWEL, an S, or an N. (CASA, CASAS, CASAN)
- A word is usually stressed on the last syllable if the word ends in any consonant other than an S or an N. (HA/BLAR or OR/DE/NA/DOR)

So what happens (usually) when you see an accent mark?

- *If the spoken stress is not on the next to the last syllable when the word ends in a vowel, s or n, then we must add an accent mark. (HA/BLÁIS, PE/NÚL/TI/MO)*
- *If the spoken stress is not on the last syllable when the word ends in a consonant other than s or n, then we must add an accent mark. (LÁ/PIZ, MÁR/MOL)*
- *And, of course, there are a relatively few exceptions such as where accent marks are added simply to distinguish between otherwise identical words. [DE (of, from) and DÉ (formal command for GIVE)]*

So now you have the basics. Are you ready for a couple of complications? They have to do with diphthongs (vowels coming together and running together into one syllable as they are pronounced).

*Knowing about diphthongs helps us understand why there is one word (HA/CIA) without an accent mark and a similar appearing word (HA/CÍ/A) with an accent mark. This all has to do with strong and weak vowels.*

Strong Vowels in Spanish are A, E, and O.

Weak Vowels in Spanish are I (or Y) and U.

- If you combine a strong vowel with a weak vowel, you get 1 syllable as in HA/CIA or IO/NES (a diphthong).
- Also, if you combine two weak vowels you get 1 syllable as in MUY.
- If you combine two strong vowels you get 2 syllables as in LE/O or LO/A (not a diphthong).

If one applies the rules above it becomes clear when to use accent marks when vowels are flying all around.

QUE/RÍ/A, PO/DÍ/AN, ES/CRI/BÍ/AS

But...

LE/O, VE/O, LO/A, LE/EN

And don't forget to add accent marks when syllables start piling up and where the strong vowel/weak vowel distinctions continue to pertain:

LÉ/A/ME/LO, VE/Á/MOS/LAS

**Finally, please let me know if there are any inaccuracies or important omissions to this overview.**