

Spanish Consonant Changes

Some consonants in Spanish are not pronounced as in English. For example, the first line of the table below shows that “J” is always pronounced like “H.” (I’ll stop using quotation marks around such single letters from now on ... okay?)

Spelling	Sound before:	
	A O U	E I
J	H	H
G	G	H
Gu	Gw	G
Gü	--	Gw
C	K	S(th)
Z	S(th)	S(th)
S	S	S
Qu	Kw	K

Several vary according to the vowel that follows the consonant. For example, when followed by A or O or U, a G in Spanish sounds like a G in English. (This is a “hard G” as in “game” or “go” or “gut.” Don’t confuse it with a J sound as in “genius” or “giant.”)

However, a G followed by E or I is also pronounced about like an H in English. This is shown on the second line of the table.

But what if a Spanish word is *supposed* to begin with a hard G sound before E or I? It has a U inserted after the G before the E or I; this prevents the sound from changing from G to H. Examples you may know are “*guerrilla*” and “*guinea*.”

What happens if a GU occurs before A or O? Then it sounds like a GW. Examples are “*guacamole*” and “*antiguo*” (ancient).

What if you actually *want* a GW sound before E or I? Then add two dots over the U, as in “*agüero*” (omen). There are few of examples of such words, so don’t worry much about them.

If you think about it, consonants in English can also change their sound depending on the following vowel. Think about “cat” and “cot” and “cut” versus “cedar” and “cider.” For the letter C, Spanish works the same. C becomes “hard” (like a K) before A or O or U but is “soft” like an S before E and I.

At least that’s true in most New World dialects of Spanish. In Castilian Spanish as spoken in Spain, C before E or I sounds more like TH. “Five cents” is like “sinko sentavos” in Mexico, but more like “thinko thentavos” in Madrid.

Z is also pronounced about like S, though it becomes more like TH in Castilian. And I'll add a line in the table for S ... it's easy because it's pronounced like an English S, even in Castilian Spanish.

What if you *want* a K sound before E or I? C won't work because it would sound like S or TH. So you use a QU as in "*que*" and "*quien*."

And QU followed by A or O sounds like QW. Perhaps the only examples are loan words like *quantum* and *quórum*.

The table above tells how each letter is pronounced depending on whether it is followed by A or O or U versus by E or I. It might be easier to reverse the columns and show how to spell a given pronunciation, like this:

Sound	Spelling before:	
	A O U	E I
H	J	J or G
G (hard)	G	Gu
Gw	Gu	Gü
K	C	Qu
Kw	Qu	Cu
S(th)	Z	C or Z
S	S	S

Note that I've included "Cu" to complete the Kw row in the table above. But note that this isn't really a "special rule." Try pronouncing "cue" or "cui" in Spanish; you'll see that "kw" is simply the way you might spell the "cu" portion of these sounds in English. Examples are "*cuestion*" (question) and "*cuota*" (quota). Notice that you can't use Q in these cases; as a test, figure out how "*question*" and "*quota*" would be pronounced in Spanish.

Otherwise, the table above is just a resorting of the first table. Isn't that final "SSS" row nice! Too bad the correspondence between Spanish and English is not so simple. But that's part of the fun of learning Spanish.