



The Personal A

In English, there's no difference in the way the following two sentences are structured, but in Spanish, there is.

I see the tree.	Yo veo <i>el árbol</i> .
I see Teresa.	Yo veo <i>a Teresa</i> .

The difference is only a one-letter word: "a"—but it's an important one to learn. Known as the personal "a", this preposition comes before direct objects that represent people.

Don't mistake this "a" for the preposition "to"; the personal "a" doesn't really have a translation. Spanish speakers can't even

tell you what it means—they just know when it's supposed to be present because they have heard it used in context so many times.

We have similar ambiguities in English. For example, in asking "Do you want to eat tacos?" we can define "you" and "want" and "eat" and "tacos"—but what do the words "do" and "to" mean?

The basic rule for using the personal "a" is that it precedes the mention of a specific person(s) who is being acted upon or "receiving" the action. For example:

He lifted the cup.	<i>Él levantó la taza.</i>
He lifted the girl.	<i>Él levantó <u>a</u> la muchacha.</i>

I hear the orchestra.	<i>Yo oigo la orquesta.</i>
I hear the musicians.	<i>Yo oigo <u>a</u> los músicos.</i>

I remember the book.	<i>Yo recuerdo el libro.</i>
I remember my grandmother.	<i>Yo recuerdo <u>a</u> mi abuela.</i>

The personal "a" is not used if the object doesn't refer to someone specific. For example:

I know two carpenters.	<i>Conozco <u>a</u> dos carpinteros.</i>
I need two carpenters.	<i>Necesito dos carpinteros.</i>

In the first sentence above, the speaker is referring to two particular people who happen to be carpenters—two people he knows. In the second, he just states that he needs two carpenters and any two will do—none in particular.

Usage with Pronouns

The personal "a" clarifies the use of certain pronouns like *alguien* (someone), *nadie* (no one), *quién* (whom), *alguno* (some) and *ninguno* (none).

I see someone over there!	<i>¡Yo veo <u>a</u> alguien allá!</i>
I don't see nobody.	<i>Yo no veo <u>a</u> nadie.</i>

Who does this chair belong to?	<i>¿<u>A</u> quién pertenece esta silla?</i>
Some people like to run.	<i><u>A</u> algunos les gusta correr.</i>

Taxis? I don't see any.	<i>¿Taxis? Yo no veo ningunos.</i>
Taxi drivers? I don't see any.	<i>¿Taxistas? Yo no veo <u>a</u> ningunos.</i>

Personification

Many pet owners think of their animals as family members and apparently, so does Spanish grammar because the personal "a" is used in reference to them. It is not used with ordinary animals, though. For example:

I see three elephants.	<i>Yo veo tres elefantes.</i>
I see my dog, Ruff.	<i>Yo veo <u>a</u> mi perro, Ruff.</i>

A country or other object can also be treated as a person. In such cases, use of the personal "a" implies an emotional attachment. For example:

I really miss Miami.
Yo extraño mucho a Miami.

I hugged my doll because she was my friend.
Yo abracé a mi muñeca porque era mi amiga.

Tener

Generally, the personal "a" is not used after tener. Notice how the following sentences objectify the people to which they refer.

I have three daughters.	<i>Tengo tres hijas.</i>
I don't have a gardener.	<i>No tengo jardinero.</i>

However, in more intimate circumstances, it is necessary. For example:

I have my son here.	<i>Tengo <u>a</u> mi hijo aquí.</i>
If I'm sad, I have my friends.	<i>Si estoy triste, tengo <u>a</u> mis amigos.</i>