


How to type special characters in Spanish

If you are new to learning Spanish and you use a computer, then the chances are that you are wondering how to put the accent marks (or *diacritics*) on vowels – such as é or ü – or type the letter *eñe* (Ñ) or the special punctuation marks used in the language – such as « and ¿. This article reviews a few of the solutions available for this problem.

Different methods are available for different types of computer and operating system – such as the Mac or PC, Windows, Linux, and so on. Although most of the information given here is for Windows, other systems are briefly mentioned and how to include these characters in HTML is also covered. The relevant information for each method is summarised in a handy [Reference Table](#) at the end.

Operating-system independent

There are websites available that allow you to compose text in a box on a page in your browser. One such site is spanish.typeit.org (shown below).



You can type your text as usual and then click on one of the buttons to enter a character such as ó.

Rather than having to stop typing and then reach for the mouse to click a button, you can instead use an equivalent keyboard shortcut (e.g. CTRL + o = ó).

There are, however, certain drawbacks with this approach: you have to be online to access the site; some of the characters you might want are missing (such as « » ° ª); and, you have to copy and paste the text that you create in order to use it elsewhere.

Mac (OS X)

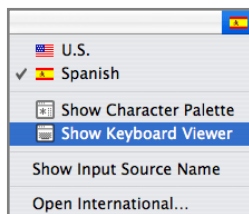
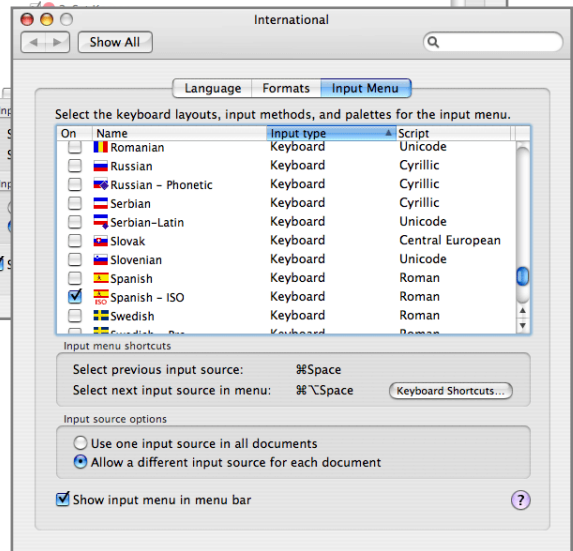
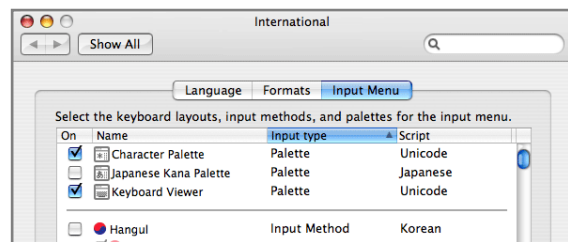
If you are using a standard English keyboard with a Mac, you can enter Spanish characters using *dead key*¹ combinations involving the Option key. For example OPT + e then a gives á and OPT + n then n gives ñ. All the relevant key combinations are given in the [Reference Table](#).

If you are using Microsoft Word on a Mac, then you can enter special characters into your document using the *Symbol* dialog available from the *Insert* menu. This is described later on in more detail in the [Microsoft Word](#) section.

¹ A dead key is one that has no visible effect when pressed on its own, but affects the key pressed immediately afterwards.

It is also possible to switch from English to Spanish keyboards by reconfiguring your keyboard layout. The steps required to do this are as follows²:

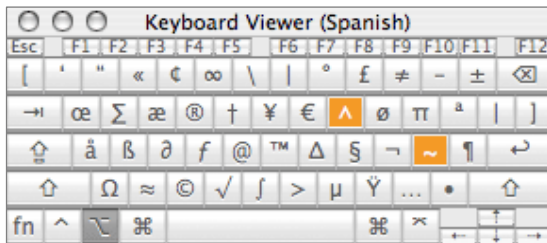
- Open *System Preferences* from the *Apple* menu
- Click *International* in the first row and then select the *Input Menu* tab
- Select the *Keyboard Viewer* and *Character Palette* options
- Select 'Spanish' or 'Spanish – ISO' from the list of keyboard layouts
- Select the *Show input menu in menu bar* option and close *System Preferences*



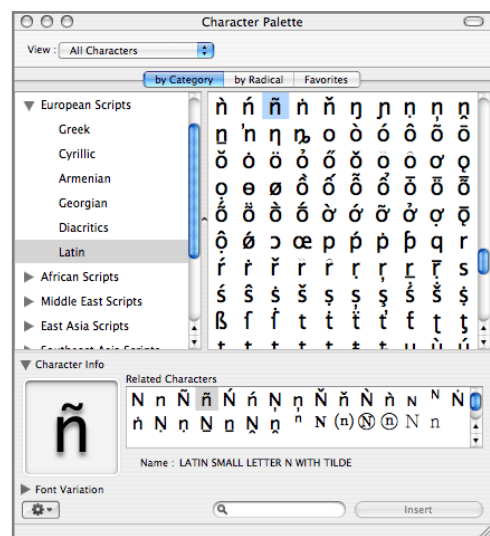
Clicking on the 'flag' icon in the upper-right corner of the menu bar will now reveal the *input menu*. You can use this to select the active keyboard layout. You can also view the keyboard layout by selecting the *Show Keyboard Viewer* option from this menu.

The keyboard arrangements for both the 'Spanish' and 'Spanish – ISO' variations are shown below. Layouts are given first for no modifier key, then for SHIFT, followed by OPTION, and finally for SHIFT+OPTION. Note that the keys shown in orange will now act as *dead keys*: when pressed once, no character will appear, and if followed by a vowel then that vowel will appear with an accent. The backquote key (`) adds a *grave* accent to the following vowel, e.g. ` then *a* gives *à*; the apostrophe (') adds an *acute* accent, e.g. *é*; the caret mark (^) adds a circumflex, e.g. *ô*; and the 'two dots' (¨) adds a dieresis, e.g. *ü*. The tilde (~) also acts as a dead key and when followed by *n* or *N* gives *ñ* and *Ñ*, respectively. In order to get one of the dead key characters, press it once followed by SPACE.

² For more information, refer to docs.info.apple.com/article.html?path=Mac/10.4/en/mh904.html



Select *Show Character Palette* from the *input menu* to browse all the available characters, from which you can choose a special character and then click *Insert* to enter it into your current document. Like the Windows Character Map described later, this is really only useful for reference or occasional use.



Linux

With Linux, various special characters can be entered using the ALT GR key (the right-hand Alt key) on a standard PC keyboard. Some of these are obtained using an ALT GR dead-key combination followed by the character to be modified (e.g. ALT GR + ; then o gives ó); others are obtained by holding down ALT GR and typing a single character (e.g. ALT GR + ! gives ¡). All the relevant key combinations are given in the [Reference Table](#)³.

Windows PC

A number of different approaches to solving the problem when using a Windows PC are described below. These include typing in numeric character codes, swapping to different keyboard layouts, and using helper utilities and applications.

Typing in character codes is tedious and the codes themselves are not intuitive and are therefore difficult to remember.

Swapping to a Spanish keyboard layout means having to get used to certain keys not matching the characters physically displayed on the keyboard. With an *International* layout the familiar keyboard arrangement is maintained and special characters can be entered using dead-key⁴ sequences and ALT GR key combinations. However, not all of the special characters are available in this way.

The standard Windows utility *Character Map* provides access to all the available characters and is handy for occasional reference. It is not, however, a satisfactory solution for quick typing. *Microsoft Word* provides access to all the special characters, too, via a Symbols menu and most of the special characters can also be entered using Word-specific dead-key sequences, but this is obviously less useful than a generic method that works with all Windows applications.

There are a number of third-party tools available, but these all have certain shortcomings, including: limited applicability (not working with all Windows applications); inconvenience (requiring mouse clicks in the middle of typing); and cost (licence fees).

But one notable exception is *AllChars*. This is a free utility that uses intuitive, easy-to-remember CTRL key sequences that work in any Windows application, and it provides access to all the special characters. AllChars is therefore recommended here as an excellent overall solution for use in Windows.

Character codes (using the ALT key)

Every character displayed on screen has a corresponding numerical value or *code*. You can enter characters using these codes on a PC by holding down ALT and entering the code on the numeric keypad (on the right-hand side of a standard

³ A keyboard map showing all the special characters available in Linux can be found here wiki.linuxquestions.org/wiki/Accented_Characters

⁴ A dead key is one that has no visible effect when pressed on its own, but affects the key pressed immediately afterwards.

keyboard, or using the letter keys that double as the numeric keypad on a laptop keyboard) and then releasing ALT. Note that Num Lock has to be on for this to work. This provides a means of entering characters not shown on the keyboard and therefore allows the special characters to be entered.

There are three- and four-digit versions⁵ of the codes you can use with ALT, and when you use the four-digit ones the initial 0 must be included. For example, either ALT + 164 or ALT + 0241 gives ñ. All the appropriate codes are given here in the [Reference Table](#)⁶.

Typing characters via these ALT codes can of course prove to be somewhat irksome. The codes are not intuitive and so you will, at least at first, need to continually refer to a crib sheet. And even if you do manage to memorise them, you will still have to press a sequence of three or four keys in order to produce a single character. That said, however, this method can still prove useful in 'emergencies', such as having to use someone else's computer.

Changing keyboard layouts⁷

Spanish keyboard

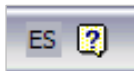
In Windows XP you can add a Spanish keyboard layout as follows:

- *Start / Control Panel*
- *Regional and Language Options / Languages* tab
- *Text services and input languages / Details...* button
- *Settings* tab / *Add...* button
- Select *Input Language: Spanish (International Sort)* and *Keyboard layout/IME: Spanish* and click OK.
- Once you have added a second input language, you can choose which one you want to have as your default by selecting from the *Default Input Language* drop-down list on the *Settings* tab.
- Click on the *Language Bar...* button in the *Preferences* panel and make sure that the *Show the Language bar on the desktop* and the *Show additional Language bar icons in the taskbar* options are selected.
- Click OK on the *Text services and input languages* dialog.

⁵ The ASCII (American Standard Code for Information Interchange) character set uses a 7-bit encoding, which means that it can represent a total of 128 different symbols, some of which are reserved for control purposes and the rest for printable characters. Making use of the eighth bit in each byte representing a character allows an additional 128 symbols to be encoded. Variations in the way that extra characters have been assigned to these *code points* has led to a number of different supersets of ASCII. One of these is the IBM PC Extended Character Set developed for the DOS operating system. It is this character set that is used when you enter three-digit codes with the ALT key. The four-digit codes, on the other hand, use the windows-1252 character set. This character encoding, or code page, is also called West European Latin and is a Windows superset of the ISO 8859-1 character set (the "ISO Latin 1 alphabet", which is itself a superset of ASCII). See en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Code_page for more about different code pages.

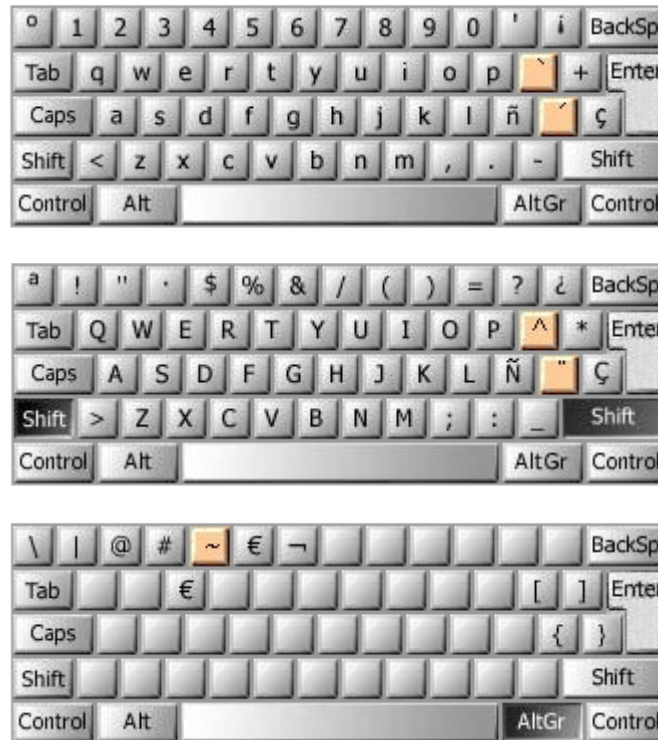
⁶ See en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Code_page_437 for a complete list of the 'three-digit' codes, and en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Windows-1252 for the 'four-digit' ones.

⁷ More information on this topic can also be found here www.microsoft.com/globaldev/DrIntl/faqs/kbfaq.msp



The Language Bar, displaying the currently selected keyboard input language (e.g. EN for English), should now appear on the taskbar. You can switch your input language by clicking on this and selecting Spanish (ES) from the list. There is also a keyboard shortcut for switching languages (Left Alt + Shift by default, but you can change this if required by clicking on the *Key Settings...* button in the *Preferences* section of the *Text Services and Input Languages / Settings* tab). Note that these keyboard changes will only apply to the profile of the current user.

The layout of characters on the Spanish keyboard⁸ is shown below.



As noted earlier, the positions of certain characters will not correspond to the actual keys on your keyboard, so it will take a little time to get used to using this alternate arrangement.

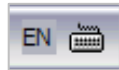
The keys shown above in orange will now act as *dead keys*: when pressed once, no character will appear, and if followed by a vowel then that vowel will appear with an accent. The back-quote key (`) adds a *grave* accent to the following vowel, e.g. ` then *a* gives à; the apostrophe (´) adds an *acute* accent, e.g. ´e gives é; the caret mark (^) adds a *circumflex*, e.g. ô; and the 'two dots' (¨) adds a *dieresis*, e.g. ü. The tilde (~) also acts as a dead key and when followed by *n* or *N* gives ñ and Ñ, respectively. In order to get one of the dead key characters, press it once followed by SPACE.

Note that with this arrangement you will still have to use ALT codes to get the angle quote characters (« and »).

⁸ Keyboard layouts for all the Windows input languages can be found here www.microsoft.com/globaldev/reference/keyboards.msp.

US International keyboard

As an alternative to the Spanish keyboard layout you can use an international one. The advantage of this is that all the keys will remain in their familiar positions but accented characters can now be obtained using the dead keys as described above.



Follow the steps given above for installing a Spanish keyboard, but select English as the Input Language and United States-International as the Keyboard layout/IME. A keyboard icon will now appear in the Language Bar next to the Language indicator. You can click on this to choose between your normal keyboard and the international one when English is set as the input language. The keyboard layout for this is shown below.



The dead key characters are the same as with the Spanish keyboard (although the keys are in different positions and " is used as the " dead key).

As an alternative to using the dead keys, all the accented vowels and the letter *eñe* can also be obtained by holding down ALT GR and pressing the appropriate key, as shown in the diagram above. Various other characters, including the angle quotes (« and »), can be obtained in this way, but note that this time the ordinal indicators (° and ª) are not available directly via the keyboard.

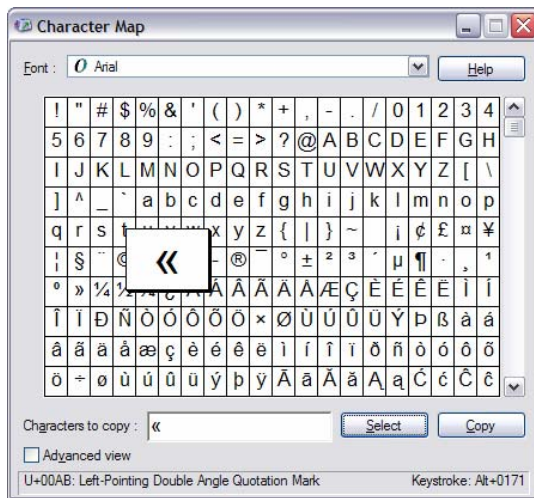
English (United Kingdom)

Note that with the default UK keyboard – English (United Kingdom) – there are no dead keys, but some of the special characters (áéíóúÁÉÍÓÚ€) can be obtained with the ALT GR key, as shown below.



Helper applications

Character Map



This is a standard Windows utility that you can use to find out the code for any given character or to copy the character to the clipboard so that you can then paste it into your text. In Windows XP you can start this program by pressing WINDOWS KEY + R then typing *charmap* followed by ENTER, or by clicking on *start / All programs / Accessories / System Tools / Character Map*.

This is useful for reference, but it would prove incredibly tedious in practice to use this for entering special characters when typing a passage of Spanish text.

Third-party applications

*CharPad*⁹ is a text editor similar to Notepad that allows accented characters to be entered by first of all typing the base character then 'remapping' it by typing \ followed by an appropriate 'modifier'. For example, the sequence u\" will result in ü. The application is intended for use with short texts and does not provide any general word-processing facilities.

*LangPad*¹⁰ is a utility that works only with Notepad and Wordpad and provides a dialog containing buttons for the each of the special Spanish characters (but not the ordinal indicators ° and ª). Clicking on one of these buttons will insert the appropriate character into the Notepad or Wordpad document.

*PopChar*¹¹ is similar to Character Map but is always available simply by clicking its icon in the taskbar. Selecting and then clicking on a special character then inserts that character in the document you are currently editing in any another application. Although more generally applicable, this method still requires you to break your typing rhythm and click to open the dialog, scan for the desired character, and click it.

*Diacrit*¹² is another clickable-dialog utility allowing you to click on an accented character and then paste it into any other application.

⁹ Available free from www.usna.edu/LangStudy/charpad.html

¹⁰ Available for \$7 from www.wiscocomputing.com/language/spanish.htm

¹¹ Available for \$29.99 from www.ergonis.com/products/popchar

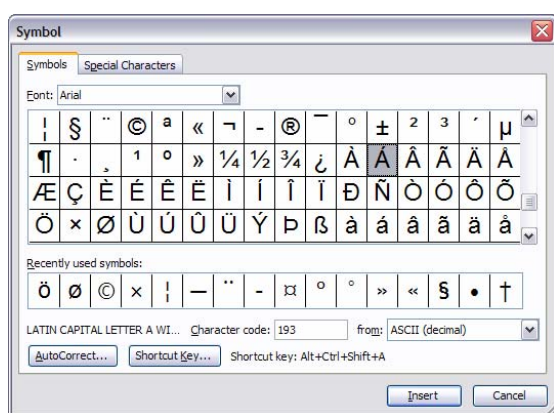
¹² Available for \$20 from www.diacrit.sandrila.co.uk

AllChars

*AllChars*¹³ can be used to enter any of the available special characters into any Windows application. To do this it uses very intuitive, and therefore easy to remember, key sequences. These all consist of CTRL followed by two characters. To get an ñ, for example, you press and release CTRL and then type ~ followed by n. A few more examples: CTRL, <, < = «, CTRL, ?, ? = ¿, CTRL, ", u = ü, and so on. All the relevant sequences for the special characters in Spanish are given in the [Reference Table](#).

Microsoft Word

Special characters can be entered in Microsoft Word either via the *Insert* menu or by using Word-specific sequences of keystrokes. (Note that entering characters via the *Insert* menu also works when using Word on a Mac.)



For the first method, click on *Insert / Symbol...* This results in a dialog similar to Character Map, from which the appropriate character can be selected. Clicking *Insert* then places the selected character at the insertion point in your document. The *Symbol* dialog also tells you the relevant code in the Windows character set (which can be used prefixed with zero with the ALT key as described earlier). It also gives the shortcut key combination for the character if there is one.

In a manner similar to that described above with the alternate keyboard layouts, you can also use Word's own dead-key sequences. To obtain an accented vowel, type CTRL + ' followed by the vowel, e.g. CTRL + ' then o gives ó. The dead keys for eñes (ñ and Ñ) and dieresis (e.g. ü) are CTRL + ~ and CTRL + : respectively. These, together with the default keyboard shortcuts for ¿ and ¡, are listed in the [Reference Table](#).

HTML

For completeness, we will also briefly mention HTML *entity references*. If you are, say, creating a web page by editing the HTML source, you can include any of the special characters by specifying the appropriate code. There are three different ways of doing this: by name, by decimal number, and by hexadecimal number. For example: `Ü`, `Ü` and `Ü` all correspond to the character Ü. All the relevant entity codes have been included in the [Reference Table](#)¹⁴.

In order to ensure that these codes are displayed correctly when the page is viewed in a browser, it is a good idea to specify the character set. This can, for example, be done by including the following declaration inside the <head> element of your document.

```
<meta http-equiv="Content-Type" content="text/html; charset=ISO-8859-1">
```

¹³ Available free from allchars.zwolnet.com

¹⁴ A complete list of all the 'ISO Latin 1' HTML entity references can be found here www.webmaster-toolkit.com/html-entity-chart.shtml

Reference Table

	Mac (OS X)	Linux	MS Windows						HTML entity codes		
			ALT +	ALT +	Spanish keyboard	US International keyboard	AllChars CTRL then	MS Word	Decimal	Hex	Name
Á	OPT+e, A	ALT GR+;, A	181	0193	' , A	' , A or ALT GR+A	'A	CTRL+' , A	Á	Á	Á
á	OPT+e, a	ALT GR+;, a	160	0225	' , a	' , a or ALT GR+a	'a	CTRL+' , a	á	á	á
É	OPT+e, E	ALT GR+;, E	144	0201	' , E	' , E or ALT GR+E	'E	CTRL+' , E	É	É	É
é	OPT+e, e	ALT GR+;, e	130	0233	' , e	' , e or ALT GR+e	'e	CTRL+' , e	é	é	é
Í	OPT+e, I	ALT GR+;, I	214	0205	' , I	' , I or ALT GR+I	'I	CTRL+' , I	Í	Í	Í
í	OPT+e, i	ALT GR+;, i	161	0237	' , i	' , i or ALT GR+i	'i	CTRL+' , i	í	í	í
Ó	OPT+e, O	ALT GR+;, O	224	0211	' , O	' , O or ALT GR+O	'O	CTRL+' , O	Ó	Ó	Ó
ó	OPT+e, o	ALT GR+;, o	162	0243	' , o	' , o or ALT GR+o	'o	CTRL+' , o	ó	ó	ó
Ú	OPT+e, U	ALT GR+;, U	233	0218	' , U	' , U or ALT GR+U	'U	CTRL+' , U	Ú	Ú	Ú
ú	OPT+e, u	ALT GR+;, u	163	0250	' , u	' , u or ALT GR+u	'u	CTRL+' , u	ú	ú	ú
Û	OPT+u, U	ALT GR+[, U	154	0220	" , U	" , U or ALT GR+Y	"U	CTRL+; , U	Ü	Ü	Ü
ü	OPT+u, u	ALT GR+[, u	129	0252	" , u	" , u or ALT GR+y	"u	CTRL+; , u	ü	ü	ü
Ñ	OPT+n, N	ALT GR+] , N	165	0209	Ñ	~, N or ALT GR+N	~N	CTRL+~ , N	Ñ	Ñ	Ñ
ñ	OPT+n, n	ALT GR+] , n	164	0241	ñ	~, n or ALT GR+n	~n	CTRL+~ , n	ñ	ñ	ñ
¡	OPT+1	ALT GR+!	173	0161	¡	ALT GR+1	!!	CTRL+ALT+!	¡	¡	¡
¿	OPT+?	ALT GR+_	168	0191	¿	ALT GR+?	??	CTRL+ALT+?	¿	¿	¿
«	OPT+\	ALT GR+Z	174	0171		ALT GR+[<<		«	«	«
»	OPT+	ALT GR+X	175	0187		ALT GR+]	>>		»	»	»
º	OPT+0	ALT GR+m	167	0186	º		.o		º	º	º
ª	OPT+9	ALT GR+F	166	0170	ª		.a		ª	ª	ª
€	OPT+@	ALT GR+4		0128	ALT GR+e	ALT GR+5	=e		€	€	€

NOTES

- A plus sign (+) indicates that keys are pressed at the same time, and a comma (,) separates keys pressed in sequence. For example "CTRL+;, U" means: *hold down the CTRL key and type : then release both keys and type U.*
- ALT GR is the right-hand ALT key.
- If you are using the ALT + number codes, make sure that Num Lock is on and that you enter the digits using the numeric keypad on the right-hand side of the keyboard. When using the four-digit codes, remember that the initial zero is required.
- With the Spanish keyboard layout the dead key required to get ü and Û is the dieresis key (¨) and not the double quotes ("). This corresponds to the position of the " character on the US keyboard layout and @ on the UK one.
- To get one of the actual dead-key characters ('¨ " ~) when using the alternate keyboard layouts, press the appropriate dead key followed by SPACE.

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