

1

El hidalgo de la Mancha

The gentleman of La Mancha

A quiet, poor man of fifty, with an old house and a set of dangerous books.

1 Objectives

By the end of this lesson you will be able to:

- Describe what a person is like, using the verb *ser*.
- Tell whether a Spanish word is masculine or feminine, and make everything around it match.
- Tell *tú* from *usted*, and know which one you would be using.

2 Before you read

Ten words and expressions from the text. Read them once. You are not expected to memorise anything yet.

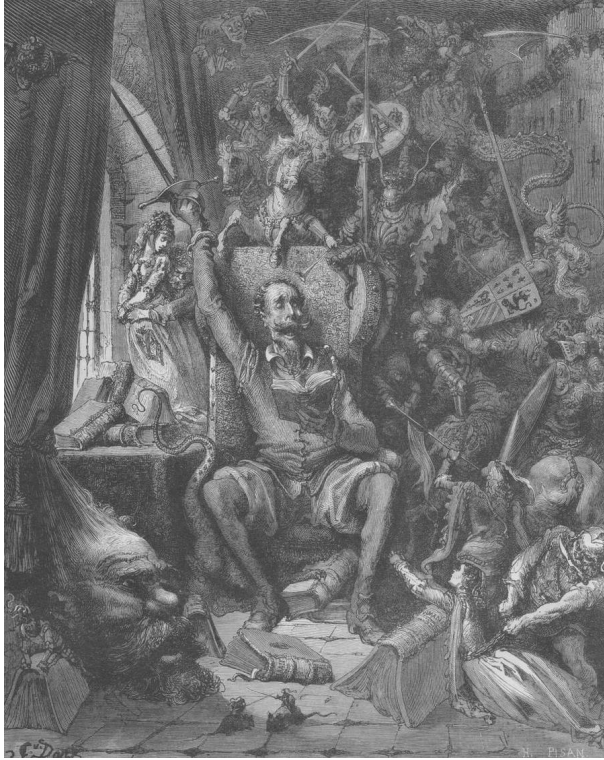
ESPAÑOL	ENGLISH
el hidalgo	the gentleman A nobleman from the very bottom of the ladder: he has a family name and no money. There is no good English word for it, so we keep the Spanish one.
el pueblo	the village False friend. Looks like “people”. Here it means the place: a small village.

ESPAÑOL	ENGLISH
las armas	the weapons, the armour
la caza	hunting
flaco	skinny Used of people and animals. Of this particular horse, constantly.
seco	dry, lean (of a face)
amable	kind
extraño	odd, strange
peligroso	dangerous
unos cincuenta años	about fifty years old <i>Unos</i> in front of a number means “roughly”, “about”.

HEADS UP

The verb *ser* is in nearly every sentence below: *es, son*. Do not study it yet. Just notice it. Notice too that some adjectives end in -o, some in -a and some in -s. That is not decoration, and we come back to it.

3 The text



The gentleman among his books. Wood engraving by Gustave Doré, 1863.

En un pueblo de la Mancha vive un hidalgo pobre. Su nombre es Alonso Quijano.

In a village of La Mancha there lives a poor gentleman. His name is Alonso Quijano.

Alonso Quijano es alto y delgado. Su cara es seca y su cuerpo es fuerte.

Alonso Quijano is tall and thin. His face is lean and his body is strong.

No es joven: es un hombre de unos cincuenta años.

He is not young: he is a man of about fifty.

Es tranquilo, serio y muy amable, pero también es un poco extraño.

He is calm, serious and very kind, but he is also a little odd.

Su casa es vieja, sus armas son antiguas y su caballo es flaco.

His house is old, his weapons are ancient and his horse is skinny.

El perro es rápido y bueno para la caza. Pero el hidalgo no es rico.

The dog is fast and good for hunting. But the gentleman is not rich.

Alonso Quijano es un hidalgo pequeño, no un gran señor. Es un hombre feliz con pocas cosas.

Alonso Quijano is a minor gentleman, not a great lord. He is a man who is happy with few things.

Pero sus libros son peligrosos.

But his books are dangerous.

4 Comprehension

Four quick questions. They do not count for anything: they are here so you know whether you understood before you go on. The answers are in the answer key.

1. ¿Dónde vive Alonso Quijano?
Where does Alonso Quijano live?
2. ¿Es joven?
Is he young?
3. ¿Es rico?
Is he rich?
4. ¿Qué cosa suya es peligrosa?
Which of his possessions is dangerous?

5 SER + what you are. Gender and number

LOOK FIRST

Alonso Quijano es alto y delgado.

Sus armas son antiguas.

El perro es rápido y bueno para la caza.

What do these three have in common? And a second question: why does the middle one say antiguas and not antiguo?

All three sentences use the same verb, **ser**, to say what someone or something is. It is the commonest verb in Spanish and it is irregular, so you learn the whole thing on day one and stop worrying about it.

	SER	
yo	soy	I am
tú	eres	you are (familiar)
él / ella / usted	es	he / she is, you are (formal)
nosotros / nosotras	somos	we are
vosotros / vosotras	sois	you are (plural, Spain)
ellos / ellas / ustedes	son	they are

One English form, *are*, covers four of those boxes. Spanish never repeats a form, which is why the ending alone tells you who is talking.

Gender. Every Spanish noun is either masculine or feminine, not just people and animals, but also tables, books and Tuesdays. There is nothing feminine about a table. Gender is a grammatical label glued to the word, left over from Latin, and looking for a reason behind it is time you will never get back. Learn each new noun with its article attached: not *casa* but *la casa*.

	SINGULAR	PLURAL
masculine	el libro	los libros
feminine	la casa	las casas

Words ending in *-o* are usually masculine and words ending in *-a* are usually feminine. That rule gets you most of the way, and the exceptions arrive one at a time.

Agreement. Now the answer to the second question. A Spanish adjective copies the gender and number of its noun: *el caballo flaco*, *la casa vieja*, *las armas antiguas*. English adjectives never move (“old house”, “old houses”, “old man”), so this is a habit you have to build rather than a rule you have to understand. Adjectives ending in *-e* or in a consonant do not change for gender: *un hombre amable*, *una mujer amable*.

Talking to people. Spanish has two “you”. *Tú* is the everyday one and in Spain it is what you use with almost everybody, including shopkeepers and people

twice your age. *Usted* is the formal one, kept for very old people, officials, and the moment you want to sound distant. In the plural, Spain says *vosotros*. Latin America says *ustedes* for everyone. This course teaches the Spain version, so *vosotros* stays.

6 Spanish against English

English says “an old house” and “old houses” with the same word. Spanish changes the adjective twice over, once for gender and once for number, so one English word can hide four Spanish ones: *viejo*, *vieja*, *viejos*, *viejas*.

TYPICAL MISTAKE

English speakers say ✗ *Las armas son antiguos*. The right form is ✓ *Las armas son antiguas*. *Armas* is feminine plural, so the adjective has to be too. Same trap here: ✗ *La casa es viejo* → ✓ *La casa es vieja*.

7 Vocabulary

Grouped by family, not alphabetically: words are easier to keep when they arrive with their neighbours.

PEOPLE

el hidalgo	the gentleman (minor nobleman)
el hombre	the man
el señor	the lord, the gentleman, Mr
el nombre	the name

WHAT A PERSON IS LIKE

alto / alta	tall
delgado / delgada	thin
fuerte	strong
joven	young
tranquilo / tranquila	calm
serio / seria	serious
amable	kind
feliz	happy
extraño / extraña	odd, strange

HIS POSSESSIONS

la casa	the house
las armas	the weapons, the armour
el caballo	the horse
el perro	the dog
el libro	the book

WORDS THAT JUDGE

pobre	poor
rico / rica	rich
viejo / vieja	old
antiguo / antigua	ancient, from long ago
flaco / flaca	skinny
peligroso / peligrosa	dangerous

8 What a hidalgo actually was

A *hidalgo* was a nobleman, and in 1605 that meant two things above all: he was exempt from certain taxes, and he could not work with his hands without losing his rank. A magnificent combination for starving with dignity.

The word comes from *hijo de algo*, “son of something”: son of somebody who once had something. Alonso Quijano has a surname, an old house, a skinny horse and his great-grandfathers’ rusting armour. What he does not have is money.

Spain was full of *hidalgos* like him, especially in the north, and the whole class was a running joke of the period: the man too grand to work and too broke to eat. Cervantes knew the territory first-hand. He was a soldier, lost the use of his left hand at Lepanto, spent five years as a captive in Algiers, and then worked as a tax collector, the least loved job available. He also did time in prison. The man who invented the penniless gentleman knew exactly what he was writing about.

CERVANTES, IN THE ORIGINAL

Frisaba la edad de nuestro hidalgo con los cincuenta años; era de complexión recia, seco de carnes, enjuto de rostro, gran madrugador y amigo de la caza.

Our gentleman was getting on for fifty. He was of a tough constitution, spare of flesh, lean of face, a great early riser and a lover of hunting.

Cervantes describes his man with short, physical adjectives: *recia* (tough), *seco* (lean), *enjuto* (spare). That is exactly what you did in this lesson with *ser* + adjective. Note *recia* and not *recio*: even in 1605, the adjective agrees with *complexión*, a feminine noun.

9 Exercises

Exercise 1 · Multiple choice

Circle the right answer.

1. ¿Cómo es Alonso Quijano?
What is Alonso Quijano like?
a) Bajo y gordo b) Alto y delgado c) Joven y rico
2. ¿Cuántos años tiene, más o menos?
Roughly how old is he?
a) Unos veinte b) Unos treinta c) Unos cincuenta
3. La casa _____ vieja.
a) es b) son c) eres
4. ¿Cuál es correcta?
Which one is correct?
a) Sus armas son antiguas. b) Sus armas son antiguas. c) Sus armas es antigua.

Exercise 2 · Fill the gap

One word from the bank in each gap. Every word is used once.

El · es · flaco · la · son

1. Alonso Quijano _____ un hidalgo pobre.
2. Sus armas _____ antiguas.
3. _____ perro es bueno para la caza.

4. Su cara es seca y _____ casa es vieja.
5. El caballo del hidalgo es _____.

Exercise 3 · Match

Write the letter of the item on the right that goes with each one on the left.

- | | | |
|---------------|-------|---------------|
| 1. la casa | _____ | a) antiguas |
| 2. las armas | _____ | b) flaco |
| 3. el caballo | _____ | c) peligrosos |
| 4. los libros | _____ | d) vieja |
-

Exercise 4 · Write it in Spanish

Say each sentence out loud first, then write it. On the website these are a dictation. On paper they are a translation, and they check the same thing.

1. The gentleman is tall and thin.

2. His house is old and his horse is skinny.

3. But his books are dangerous.

10 I can do this now

- ☐ Say what a person is like: tall, calm, poor.
- ☐ Use all six forms of *ser*.
- ☐ Put *el, la, los* or *las* in front of a noun.
- ☐ Make an adjective agree with its noun.