

Real Fast Spanish

Saber vs Conocer

*How to Get to Know These
Useful Spanish Verbs*



If you ever find yourself caught trying to decide between *saber* vs *conocer*, this post will help.

Saber and *conocer* are commonly introduced together because they both translate to ‘to know’ in English. This can make them confusing.

That said, these two verbs aren’t as demanding as other Spanish challenges such as *ser* vs *estar* or *por* vs *para*. This is because *saber* and *conocer* have fairly well-defined roles in the Spanish language.

But, there is one situation where you can use them interchangeably. More on that later.

To start off, in this post, you’ll get a quick overview of when you should use *saber* and when you should use *conocer*. Then, we’ll take a look at the present and past conjugations for these verbs. Pay close attention to the conjugations of *saber* since they are quite irregular in the past simple tense.

Then, you’ll find an explanation of an important grammar rule to be aware of with *conocer*. And, of course, you’ll get a bunch of examples for each of the separate uses of *saber* and *conocer*.

Also, if you would prefer, you can listen to the podcast episode on *saber* vs *conocer* [here](#).

If not, let’s dive into the quick side-by-side comparison.

Saber vs Conocer: A quick overview

As I mentioned earlier, ‘to know’ can translate to both *saber* and *conocer*. So, how do you know which verb to choose?

Well, it depends entirely on what it is that you ‘know’.

Here is a quick summary of how to decide between *saber* and *conocer*:

Saber: facts, information, how to do something.

Conocer: people, places, things.

So for example, if you ‘know’ a person (a friend or someone famous), you always have to use *conocer*.

If, on the other hand, you ‘know’ about something that someone did (such as a speech or an invention), you have to use *saber* since it is now a piece of information.

A simple way to avoid confusion with *saber* and *conocer* is to change the way you think about the translation of these verbs. This means, it helps to think about *saber* and *conocer* as follows:

English: To know.

Español: Saber.

English: To meet, have been to, to be familiar with.

Español: Conocer.

So, a key question to ask yourself is: can you replace the word ‘know’ in an English sentence with ‘to meet’, ‘have been to’, or ‘to be familiar with’? If you can, you probably need to use *conocer* in Spanish.

Saber vs Conocer: Present conjugations

In the present tense, both *saber* and *conocer* are regular in all conjugations except for the first person.

Here are the conjugations of *saber* and *conocer* in the present tense:

Person	Saber	Conocer
Yo	Sé	Conozco
Tú	Sabes	Conoces
Él / Ella	Sabe	Conoce
Nosotros	Sabemos	Conocemos
Vosotros	Sabéis	Conocéis
Ellos	Saben	Conocen

Notice the irregular conjugations *sé* and *conozco*.

Saber vs Conocer: Past conjugations

In the *pretérito indefinido* (past simple tense), *saber* is very irregular.

Here are the conjugations of *saber* in the two past tenses:

Saber	Pretérito	Imperfecto
Yo	Supe	Sabía
Tú	Supiste	Sabías
Él / Ella	Supo	Sabía
Nosotros	Supimos	Sabíamos
Vosotros	Supisteis	Sabíais
Ellos	Supieron	Sabían

Take note of the prefix 'sup', this makes *saber* in the past simple one of the more stranger verb conjugations in Spanish. I suggest practicing it more than other conjugations to help it stick in your mind.

In contrast, and despite having an irregular first person present conjugation, *conocer* is completely regular in the past.

Here are the conjugations of *conocer* in the two past tenses:

Conocer	Pretérito	Imperfecto
Yo	Conocí	Conocía
Tú	Conociste	Conocías
Él / Ella	Conoció	Conocía
Nosotros	Conocimos	Conocíamos
Vosotros	Conocíais	Conocíais
Ellos	Conocieron	Conocían

Conocer is definitely a simpler verb to conjugate when compared to *saber*. But, that doesn't mean *conocer* is without its own challenges.

So, let's look at one important grammar rule you need to keep in mind with *conocer*.

Conocer and the preposition ‘a’

As noted above, when you are using *conocer*, you will be talking about people, places, or things that you are familiar with.

Here is the main grammar rule with *conocer* you need to know:

If you are referring to people, you have to use the preposition ‘a’.

For example:

English: I’m familiar with your friend.

Español: Yo conozco a tu amigo.

If you are not talking about people, you have to drop the ‘a’:

English: I’m familiar with your country.

Español: Yo conozco tu país.

This use of ‘a’ with *conocer* and people takes a little getting used to. This is probably the thing you need to practice most with this post!

If you want to learn more about the preposition ‘a’ in general, check out this podcast episode.

Saber – Use 1 – For facts

When you ‘know’ about things such as scientific facts, events, or general trivia, then use *saber* as follows:

English: Do you know where Gael Garcia Bernal is from?

Español: ¿Sabes de dónde es Gael García Bernal?

English: Does anyone know how many people live in Spain?

Español: ¿Alguien sabe cuántas personas viven en España?

English: I know that there are 21 countries that speak Spanish.

Español: No sabía que hay 21 países en los que se habla español.

Saber – Use 2 – For information

For knowledge of information that may be a particular use such as the time a train departs, you can also use *saber*:

English: Do you know what time the train departs?

Español: ¿Sabes a qué hora sale el tren?

English: Do you know where I can find this statue?

Español: ¿Sabes dónde puedo encontrar esta estatua?

English: Yes, I already know they are separated.

Español: Sí, ya sé que están separados.

Saber – Use 3 – How to do something

For the third use of *saber*, you can talk about your skills or specific areas of expertise.

The rule looks like this:

English: I know how to do...

Español: Yo sé... (+ verb in infinitive form or field of expertise)

You need to remember that for this use, *saber*, replaces all of ‘how to do’ in English. Moreover, a common error is to say:

Español: ‘yo sé como...’ (I know ‘how’).

Here are some examples:

English: I know how to speak Spanish.

Español: Yo sé hablar español.

English: He doesn’t know how to sing.

Español: Él no sabe cantar.

English: I know maths.

Español: Yo sé matemáticas.

To reiterate, you may find it tempting to include *como* when using *saber* this way. I have definitely made this mistake a number of times. Try to force yourself to follow

When you are practicing, try to force yourself to quickly follow *saber* with the infinite verb straight away.

Conocer – Use 1 – People

As noted above, always remember to include the preposition ‘a’ when using *conocer* with people.

English: I'm familiar your cousin. (I've met)

Español: Conozco a tu primo.

English: I have already met your wife.

Español: Ya he conocido a tu esposa.

English: She told me that she doesn't know you. (Isn't familiar with you)

Español: Ella me dijo que no te conoce.

Conocer – Use 2 – Places

Again, if you are familiar with places, you need to remember to drop the preposition ‘a’.

English: I'm not familiar with Spain. (I haven't been to)

Español: No conozco España.

English: I'm familiar with your city because I went there in 2010.

Español: Conozco tu ciudad porque fui allí en 2010.

English: He knows this place very well.

Español: Él conoce muy bien este lugar.

Conocer – Use 3 – Things

The last use of *conocer* is for describing your knowledge of things such as technology.

English: I'm not familiar with the latest iPhone.

Español: No conozco el último iPhone.

English: I'm well familiar that camera, I used it on my last overseas trip.

Español: Conozco bien esa cámara, la usé en mi último viaje al extranjero.

English: I'm familiar with the technology but I haven't tried it.

Español: Conozco la tecnología, pero no la he probado.

Conocer in reciprocal sentences

In Spanish, reciprocal verbs are used to describe two people doing the same action to each other. These verbs are constructed using reflexive pronouns.

Sentences with *conocer* in reciprocal form are quite common since they refer to two people meeting each other. For example:

English: How did you meet each other?

Español: ¿Cómo os conocisteis?

English: When did we meet?

Español: ¿Cuándo nos conocimos?

English: They met each other in 1991 and have been in love ever since.

Español: Se conocieron en 1991 y están enamorados desde entonces.

Reciprocal verbs are often confused with reflexive verbs. Both come under the category of pronominal verbs. If you would like to read more about pronominal verbs, check out this post.

The overlap between saber and conocer

Up to this point, the distinction between *saber* and *conocer* should hopefully have been pretty clear.

There is, however, one area where you might notice overlap between these two verbs in Spanish.

You can see *saber* and *conocer* used interchangeably when talking about abstract ideas.

For example:

English: The scientists want to know the secrets of the universe.

Español: Los científicos quieren saber los secretos del universo.

English: The scientists want to know the secrets of the universe.

Español: Los científicos quieren conocer los secretos del universo.

There is a subtle difference in meaning between these two sentences in Spanish. But, in this context, if you were to translate the idea from English to Spanish it wouldn't really matter whether you choose *saber* or *conocer*, the idea would be clear.

Your turn

How well do you know *saber* vs *conocer*? Hopefully, by now, *lo conoces como la palma de tu mano* (you know it like the palm of your hand).

The key to any challenge with Spanish is to take what you have read and put it into practice. Try to use three examples from this post this week and include a sentence *conocer* and 'a', a past simple conjugation with *saber*, and the third use of *saber* for describing something you know 'how to do'.

How else can you use *saber* vs *conocer* in a Spanish sentence?