

When to use what subjunctive in Spanish

(The sequence of tenses / la concordancia de tiempos)

Before starting, you should be familiar with the following terms:

- “**Governing verb**” refers to the verb which causes the subjunctive to be used (for noun clauses, e.g., **Quiero que vengas**) or the verb which determines the time of the action (present, past, future) in the accompanying subordinate clause.
- “**Present time**” tenses include the present (indicative [**hablo**] and subjunctive [**hable**]), present perfect (indicative [**he hablado**] and subjunctive [**haya hablado**]) and future perfect [**habré hablado**], as well as commands [**¡Habla! ¡Hable!**, etc.].
- “**Past time**” tenses include all others: the imperfect (indicative [**hablaba**] and subjunctive [**hablara**]), preterit [**hablé**], past perfect (indicative [**había hablado**] and subjunctive [**hubiera hablado** or **hubiese hablado**]), conditional [**hablaría**], and conditional perfect [**habría hablado**].
- “**Simple tenses**” are the one-word forms. The simple tenses of the indicative are the present [**hablo**], future [**hablaré**], imperfect [**hablaba**], and preterit [**hablé**]; the simple tenses of the subjunctive are the present [**hable**] and imperfect [**hablara**] tenses. The conditional* [**hablaría**] is also a simple tense.
- “**Compound tenses**” or “**perfect tenses**” are the forms composed of the helping verb **haber** plus the past participle. The compound tenses in the indicative are the present perfect [**he hablado**], the past perfect [**había hablado**], and the future perfect [**habré hablado**]; the compound tenses in the subjunctive are the present perfect (**haya hablado**) and the past perfect [**hubiera hablado** or **hubiese hablado**]. The conditional perfect* [**habría hablado**] is also a compound tense.

*The conditional tenses are considered by some to be the two tenses of a special mood, the conditional mood. Others treat them as part of the indicative mood.

When do you use which subjunctive tense? Assuming you know that the subjunctive is required, a simplified rule for determining which subjunctive tense to use is as follows:

With a governing verb in a “present time” tense use only a “present time” tense of the subjunctive; with a governing verb in a “past time” tense, use only a “past time” subjunctive. In either case the simple subjunctive tense is used to express a simultaneous or future action, and the perfect tense is used to indicate a previous activity. [[Expanded version](#) given below.]

Situation 1	
When the governing verb in a “present time” tense	
If the governing verb is in one of these tenses:	use one of these tenses when the subjunctive is required:
present indicative	present subjunctive [<i>for a simultaneous or future state or future action</i>]
future indicative	
imperative (command)	
present perfect indicative	OR
future perfect indicative	present perfect subjunctive [<i>for a prior state or action</i> {or the imperfect subjunctive where the imperfect indicative would otherwise be used}]
present subjunctive	
present perfect subjunctive	

Examples:

<u>Dudo que vengan.</u>	I doubt that they are coming [right now].	Governing verb: Dudo (present indicative)
	I doubt that they will come [in the future].	Subordinate verb: vengan (present subjunctive to indicate a simultaneous or future event)
<u>Dudo que hayan venido.</u>	I doubt that they came [in the past].	Governing verb: Dudo (present indicative)
	I doubt that they have come.	Subordinate verb: hayan venido (present perfect subjunctive to indicate a previous event)

Situation 2

When the governing verb in a “past time” tense

If the governing verb is in one of these tenses:		use one of these tenses when the subjunctive is required:
imperfect indicative		imperfect subjunctive [<i>for a simultaneous or future state or action</i>]
preterit indicative		
conditional		OR
conditional perfect		past perfect subjunctive [<i>for a prior state or action</i>]
imperfect subjunctive		
past perfect subjunctive		

Examples:

<u>Dudaba que vinieran.</u>	I doubted that they were coming [right then].	Governing verb: Dudaba (imperfect indicative)
	I doubted that they would come [in the future].	Subordinate verb: vinieran (past subjunctive to indicate a simultaneous or future event)
<u>Dudaba que hubieran venido.</u>	I doubted that they had come [earlier].	Governing verb: Dudaba (imperfect indicative)
		Subordinate verb: hubieran venido (past perfect subjunctive to indicate a previous event)

Expanded version of the above [simplified rule](#):

When a governing verb in the present, future, or future perfect tense and the subjunctive is required in a subordinate clause, use the present or present perfect subjunctive; with a governing verb in a “past time” tense —imperfect, preterit, past perfect, conditional, or conditional perfect—, use only a “past time” subjunctive: imperfect or past perfect. In either case the simple subjunctive tense (present for “present time”, or imperfect for “past time”) is used to express a simultaneous or future action, and the perfect tense (present perfect for “present time”, or past perfect for “past time”) is used to indicate a previous activity.

REMINDER: When the governing verb is in a past tense and the subjunctive is required, a past subjunctive is almost always used. The conditional is considered a past tense..

Special situations involving the past subjunctives.

1. **Como si** (“as if”) MUST be followed by a past subjunctive:

El habla como si fuera rico. He talks as if he were rich.

Ella habla como si hubiera vivido en México. She talks as if she has (had) lived in Mexico.

2. **Ojalá** and the subjunctive. **Ojalá** plus the present subjunctive is used in the sense of “I hope”; with a past subjunctive, it means “I wish”, and implies that something is hypothetical or contrary-to-fact:

Ojalá que esté aquí. I hope she's here. [She might be here.]

Ojalá que haya estado aquí. I hope she's been here. [She may have been here.]

Ojalá que estuviera aquí. I wish she were here. [She's not here.]

Ojalá que hubiera estado aquí. I wish she had been here. [She has not been here.]

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