When to use the subjunctive and how to form its four tenses

The study of the subjunctive involves understanding four things. The first is what the subjunctive is. Second, it is essential to know how to form the four tenses of the mood known as the subjunctive. Third, by examining the specific clause types in which the subjunctive is often required, one will know when—and when not—to use it. Last of all, if the subjunctive must be used, one has to know how to select the correct one of this mood's four tenses.

Definition

The best overarching and practical definition of the subjunctive is that it is *a set of verb forms required in clauses of certain types.* It is important to absorb this as a mental framework on which to place the corresponding sets of rules for deciding whether the subjunctive is needed or not. The rules that work in one set of circumstances will not apply in another.

Many students of Spanish have been led to believe that the subjunctive is all about doubt and uncertainty on the part of the speaker, but this is only *one* aspect of *one* clause type. To depend on such a definition does more harm than good to one's learning. If uncertainty or doubt were the whole explanation of the subjunctive and were predictive of when it needs to be used, then it would be correct to say **Juan sea médico**, which is not a grammatically correct sentence, no matter what the speaker believes, suspects, wishes, or doubts. What is *is*, regardless of one's attitudes about reality, right? This is why the need to use or not use the subjunctive is not determined by what is thought, or even what one knows or believes is true, but rather by the types of clauses involved.

Clauses

It is essential to be able to identify the clause type, apply the corresponding rule, and then, if the subjunctive is needed, choose the correct one of the four tenses of the subjunctive mood.

Because it may be necessary to review what a clause is, that will be one of the first items addressed before we can deal more specifically with the types of clauses in which the subjunctive may be required. A clause is a group of words with a grammatical subject, understood or expressed, and a conjugated verb. That sounds like what a sentence is, doesn't it? In fact, that is correct. Some clauses are stand-alone sentences:

> *The boy is tall.*
> *The computers work.*
> *There are four birds on the roof.*

The clauses that concern learners of the Spanish subjunctive are *not* the stand-alone or *independent* types but the *dependent* ones. Dependent clauses are said to be *subordinated* to the main idea of an introductory clause. They tell the listener *what* is asserted by the speaker.

The independent clauses above can become subordinated, or dependent ones, too:

> *Jane hopes that the boy is tall.*
> *We prefer that the computers work.*
> *We know that there are four birds on the roof.*

In these three longer sentences, the assertions *Jane hopes*, *We prefer*, and *We know* are used to introduce, or set up, the clauses that previously were stand-alone sentences. Everything in these sentences from the word *that* to the end makes up what is known as a *subordinated* or *subordinate clause*. The introductory clauses, simple as they are, *can* stand alone as grammatical sentences. Granted, it isn't clear *what* is hoped, preferred, or known. The answer to that question is what the dependent or subordinate clause supplies. Precisely *what* it is that Jane hopes, *what* we prefer, and *what* we know is found in the subordinated clauses. Stated as they now are in our second set of sentences, these subordinated clauses cannot stand alone: *that the boy is tall*, *that the computers work*, and *that there are four birds on the roof*—stated just like that—simply are not grammatically correct sentences.

The next important thing to notice is that they are introduced by the word *that*, a conjunction, or joining word. Think of it as mortar between bricks, if you like building metaphors, or couplings connecting railroad cars if you need another analogy.

English-speaking learners of Spanish need to keep in mind that the word *that* can be omitted in English without harming the message or being ungrammatical. In Spanish, if an assertion is placed in a subordinated position, the corresponding conjunction, or word linking the two parts of the sentence, the connective word—**que**—must be used. Although it is true that in business correspondence it often is omitted, it is best to learn to use it before learning when it can be omitted in such specialized modes of communication.

The four types of clauses in which the subjunctive may be necessary are:

◆ Subordinated noun clauses
◆ Subordinated adjective clauses
◆ Adverbial clauses
◆ Hypothetical or contrary-to-fact statements

Once the forms of the subjunctive are mastered, the decision-making process is reduced to identifying *the type of clause* involved and then applying the corresponding set of rules to determine whether the subjunctive is needed. Last of all, the rules about sequence of tense will determine which of the four subjunctive forms to use—if, in fact, the subjunctive is needed.

The four tenses of the subjunctive

Your first goal is to know how to form the four tenses of the subjunctive.

Let's start with some basic definitions. The *tense* of a verb refers to the *time* in which the action it expresses occurs. Infinitives have no tense. Their possibilities might be seen as being limitless, as opposed to the conjugated forms, which are *finite*, precisely because they have been fixed in a time frame and assigned person and number—that is, a subject (or doer) of the action. The endings of conjugated verbs are what show person and number. This correspondence between subject and verb ending is called *agreement*.

It may come as a pleasant surprise to learn that the grammatical term *mood* refers to the *attitude* of the speaker regarding the action, as in the *imperative*, *potential*, *infinitive*, or *participial* moods. In English, moods are expressed by *modal* verbs that introduce infinitives—for example, by auxiliary or helping verbs such as *can*, *could*, *should*, *would*, *must*, *might*, *may*, *will*, and *shall*. In Spanish, these ideas are expressed by verbs such as **poder**, **deber**, and others, as well as by the use of the *subjunctive* and *conditional* moods, and therefore the verbs are fully inflected, with a set of six endings, one for each person and number. So, logically, the four tenses of the subjunctive mood appear in all persons and numbers of any and all verbs.

Unfortunately, there is no set of one-to-one rules to show how Spanish handles the English modal verbs. This is partly because there is not a neat, one-to-one correspondence between the number of modals in English and the number of solutions these may have in Spanish. There are no dependable sets of rules for which verb forms, or even which Spanish helping verbs, to use when going from English to Spanish. Therefore, it is important, first, to be aware of this fact and, second, to internalize the logic of the Spanish verb system by becoming attuned to its own logic.

In modern Spanish, there are four *tenses* of the subjunctive. This book will not deal with the future subjunctive or the future perfect subjunctive, which nowadays are mainly relegated to proverbial usage and legal documents. For those interested in them, their forms are not difficult to learn.

As stated in the introduction, the *present indicative* and the *preterite* are the two tenses that must be thoroughly known before tackling the subjunctive forms. All the irregularities found in all four tenses of the subjunctive will be easily recognized and probably remembered once these two tenses are committed to memory.

The present subjunctive

To form the *present subjunctive* use the **yo** form of the present indicative and, for -**ar** verbs, change the -**o** to an -**e** and, for -**er** and -**ir** verbs, change the -**o** to an -**a** and then proceed to conjugate the resulting form, adding the personal endings as in the indicative. Notice that this procedure can make it appear that **hablar**, for instance, has become an -**er** verb, while **comer** and **vivir** have become -**ar** verbs. *That is not the case*, of course, so the lesson here is to reference all forms, recognizable by their stem (e.g., **habl**-), to their proper infinitive ending:

habl**e**	habl**emos**	com**a**	com**amos**	viv**a**	viv**amos**
habl**es**	habl**éis**	com**as**	com**áis**	viv**as**	viv**áis**
habl**e**	habl**en**	com**a**	com**an**	viv**a**	viv**an**

For verbs that are irregular in the present indicative: if the irregularity is a *consonant change* that shows up in the **yo** form of the present indicative, this change is found in *all three persons*, *singular and plural*, in the present subjunctive:

teng**a**	teng**amos**	conozc**a**	conozc**amos**
teng**as**	teng**áis**	conozc**as**	conozc**áis**
teng**a**	teng**an**	conozc**a**	conozc**an**

Likewise, if the irregularity is a *single-vowel-to-single-vowel* one, then this irregularity is found in *all persons and numbers*:

sirv**a**	sirv**amos**	pid**a**	pid**amos**
sirv**as**	sirv**áis**	pid**as**	pid**áis**
sirv**a**	sirv**an**	pid**a**	pid**an**

If *both* are present in the **yo** form, then, once again, *both show up all the way through* the present subjunctive:

dig**a**	dig**amos**
dig**as**	dig**áis**
dig**a**	dig**an**

For verbs that have a single vowel to diphthong (double vowel) change in the present indicative, this change continues to follow the shoe or boot pattern:

piens**e**	pens**emos**		pued**a**	pod**amos**
piens**es**	pens**éis**		pued**as**	pod**áis**
piens**e**	piens**en**		pued**a**	pued**an**

Finally, there are a handful of verbs whose present subjunctive forms are best learned by memorizing. Even these can be organized into rhyming pairs: **ir** and **haber**, **vaya** and **haya**, respectively; and **ser** and **ver**, **sea** and **vea**, respectively; and, of course, **saber**, whose present subjunctive forms begin with **sepa**, which rhymes with the somewhat rare verb **caber** (*to fit*), whose present subjunctive forms begin with **quepa**!

The imperfect subjunctive

To form the *imperfect subjunctive* begin with the *third-person plural of the preterite* (the **ellos**, **ellas**, **ustedes** form). For *all* verbs, simply remove -**on** and replace it with -**a** and begin conjugating again, using it as a new **yo** form, and adding the personal endings.

> You may have learned or seen that there is an alternative form of the imperfect subjunctive that ends in -**se** (e.g., **tuviese** instead of **tuviera**). It is not used in this book, being somewhat more used in literary settings than in speaking, in most regions. In any event, the rules for using this alternative form are, stylistic matters aside, the same.

Generally, the irregular verbs in the preterite cause more problems than the irregular verbs in the present, because so many verbs have a new stem in the preterite that can't be derived by any logical rules. However, once the new stems are known, the formation of the

imperfect subjunctive is uniformly achieved in the following way: from **tuvieron-** > **tuvier-**, one begins by adding **-a** and proceeding like this:

tuvier**a**	tuviér**amos**
tuvier**as**	tuviér**ais**
tuvier**a**	tuvier**an**

It should come as truly good news that this rule works perfectly for all three families of verbs (-**ar**, -**er**, and -**ir**), both regular and irregular, so that the imperfect subjunctive forms of **hablar**, **comer**, and **vivir** are all derived from the third-person plural of the preterite, in just the same way as the imperfect subjunctive of **tener**.

The present perfect subjunctive

The *present perfect subjunctive* corresponds to its indicative form just as the present indicative relates to the present subjunctive. There are two chief obstacles for mastering this form. The first is to learn the six forms of the present subjunctive of the helping verb **haber**, which is quite irregular; that is, you cannot predict its form based on the indicative. As shown on page 5, it rhymes with the present subjunctive of **ir** (**vaya**...):

INDICATIVE		SUBJUNCTIVE	
he	hemos	haya	hayamos
has	habéis	hayas	hayáis
ha	han	haya	hayan

The second obstacle is knowing how to form the past participle. For **-ar** verbs whose past participle is regular, remove the **-ar** and change it to **-ado** (**hablar** > **hablado**). For **-er** and **-ir** verbs whose past participle is regular, remove the **-er** or **-ir** and change them to **-ido** (**comer** > **comido**; **vivir** > **vivido**). This second obstacle contains another small challenge. There are only a baker's dozen of irregular past participles, if one does not count compounds built with them, such as **resolver**, based on **solver**:

abrir	abierto	morir	muerto
cubrir	cubierto	poner	puesto
decir	dicho	romper	roto
escribir	escrito	solver	suelto
hacer	hecho	ver	visto
imprimir	impreso	volver	vuelto

To form this tense of the subjunctive, use the present subjunctive of **haber** and combine it with the past participles. It is easy to see that the present perfect subjunctive form **hayas comido** corresponds to the indicative form **has comido**. Both translate into English as *you have eaten*, but the subjunctive one must be used in certain types of clauses.

The pluperfect subjunctive

As one might suspect, this subjunctive form corresponds to the pluperfect indicative. The same observations regarding irregular past participles used to form the present perfect indicative and subjunctive are in force in the formation of this tense of the subjunctive. The imperfect subjunctive of the helping verb **haber** combined with the participles form this tense. Just as the present perfect subjunctive corresponds to the present perfect indicative, this subjunctive form corresponds to the pluperfect indicative. Thus **había comido** and **hubiera comido** both translate as *had eaten*, but the subjunctive one is used in certain types of clauses. Observe the following contrasting examples:

Pluperfect indicative

Cuando **llegamos a casa** vimos que el perro **había salido** del garaje.	*When we **got home**, we saw that the dog **had gotten out** of the garage.*
Juan **supo** que su novia no le **había sido** fiel.	*John **found out** that his girlfriend **had cheated** on him.*

Pluperfect subjunctive

Dudábamos que el perro **hubiera salido** del garaje.	*We **doubted** that the dog **had gotten out** of the garage.*
Juan **no pudo creer** que su novia le **hubiera sido** infiel.	*John **couldn't believe** that his girlfriend **had cheated** on him.*

The indicative examples rarely cause English speakers any problem. What learners need to remember is that both **había** and **hubiera** translate into English as *had*. The only difference is in the need for the subjunctive.

It is important to remember that in the subjunctive examples it does not matter whether the speaker, in the moment of uttering these sentences, knows whether or not the dog had gotten out of the garage or whether it turned out or not that John's girlfriend had been faithful. In the case of the dog, the main clause is introduced by a statement of doubt, in the past. The dog may or may not have gotten out prior to the speaker's arrival. In the second case, the main clause contains a statement of disbelief. By the time John arrived at his moment of incredulity, his girlfriend either had or had not cheated on him. Grammatically, whether she did or did not, the subjunctive is required.