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Spanish

How to get a H1 in the Leaving Cert
Spanish Exam



by **Natasha**

Natasha got a H1 in her higher Leaving Cert Spanish paper. She's now doing Psychology in Maastricht University in the Netherlands. Here, she shares what she learned.

Spanish is a little different to other Leaving Cert subjects, it can't be crammed! A language is more like a skill rather than a "subject", it has to be practised as well as memorising grammar and vocabulary. Treat it like a sport or instrument, practise! Hopefully, you will pick up some tips and tricks in this guide that will help you to succeed in Spanish.

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The Oral Exam

The oral exam makes up 25% (100 marks) of your grade at higher level. The exam lasts around 15 minutes. At first, the oral exam can seem daunting and vague. As there is no set list of questions, it is much harder to predict than written papers and you must think on your feet. I found that once I created a breakdown of the exam, I felt less intimidated and more confident.

The oral examination consists of 2 parts: the general conversation, which is worth 70 marks, and 1 of the 5 role plays on the course (30 marks).

General Conversation (70 marks)

- ▶ **Introduction:** The personal questions will begin as a general conversation would in English, **you introduce yourself, say your name, age** etc. First impressions are crucial, and a nice way to make you stand out amongst the crowd is to say, “*Buenos días y bienvenido/a señor/señorita*”.
- ▶ **Topics:** Once you have answered some easier questions to help you settle in, the examiner may proceed to ask questions on various topics. Here are some popular topics:
 - Myself, my friends and family
 - My house and town
 - My daily routine
 - My pastimes e.g. sport, music etc.
 - My school
 - Housework
 - Pocket money/work
 - Current affairs/News
 - Technology
 - Spanish culture
 - Fashion/Shopping
 - Food
 - Holidays
 - Your future plans e.g. university, ideal job, dreams etc.

Note: It is important to know that there is no definite list of subjects, and the examiner may choose to go outside of the box. If you are aiming for a H1, you might be asked about advanced topics such as **drugs, terrorism, politics** etc. If this happens and you do not have it prepared, don't panic! Take a deep breath and give it your all.

- ▶ **Before the Exam**, dedicate an A4 page to “*Phrases useful for the oral exam*”. Keep it nearby

when you're in class or doing homework. Jot down useful phrases. Speak as much Spanish as possible before the exam to gain confidence. This might just be getting a sibling to ask you questions and you reply in Spanish. Practice makes perfect!

Grammar Tips:

- ▶ Try to use every tense you can, especially if you're aiming high. The more tenses you use, the better grammar you show. (I'm sure many of you would agree that grammar is possibly the hardest aspect!)
- ▶ The wider range of verbs you demonstrate, the better. Try not to repeat verbs e.g. "me gusta" instead use synonyms such as "*me encanta*" or "*me fascina*".
- ▶ Make sure you know the necessary vocabulary for popular topics and vocabulary specific to you. Try keeping a vocab notebook throughout the year and study the words you've learned anytime you study Spanish to keep them fresh in your mind.
- ▶ Learn the question words such as what, where, who as they'll be repeated throughout the exam.

Creating a Natural Flow: It is important to vary sentences to create a casual conversation. If you make a mistake, correct it (you won't get marked down as we make mistakes in English as well!)

- ▶ Use "filler phrases", such as "por desgracia" or "pues". These can be used when you are thinking of a reply.
- ▶ To show confidence in speaking Spanish, introduce topics (that you know very well). It's an exam on general conversation, not a strict interview. This also lets you control the conversation and steers it away from any surprise topics you might not be prepared for.
- ▶ Never reply with just sí or no. If you do, make sure to develop the rest of the answer, as it is not enough to gain marks.
- ▶ Address the examiner in the "usted" form.

Don't Panic! - If you don't have an opinion on a topic in English, you do not need to pretend you have one for another language! If you do not know a lot about something, give

at least two sentences showing off verbs and a little vocab, and be honest - tell them it doesn't interest you - tell them what does interest you instead!

- ▶ Although it's hard when you're nervous, try not to sit stiff, anxious and recite the page you wrote up. Try to be spontaneous and natural. If you don't feel confident, fake it till you make it. Smile, relax your shoulders and even crack a small joke if it's going well!
- ▶ If you don't understand a question, ask politely for it to be repeated. We often ask people to repeat in English so it's perfectly fine. Try avoid saying you don't understand the vocabulary or verbs, just say, "¿Puede repetir la pregunta por favor?" and they will most likely reword it.

Role Play (30 Marks)

- ▶ Finally, you will complete a **role play**, which you will have prepared in class. If you are willing to memorise the lines it will be the **easiest 30 marks you'll get**. It is the last part of the exam.

How to Learn the Role Plays: There are **5** you must learn. I would recommend **practising one every weekday for 5 minutes** so you are constantly revising.

- ▶ If you are a **visual learner**, colour code your roleplays on different coloured paper or with different coloured pens. If you are an **aural learner** record yourself saying them and listen to them when you have a spare minute or pop headphones in and go for a walk! If you **kinaesthetic learner** keep repeating them aloud or make them into a song. If you prefer to read and write keep on writing!
- ▶ **Pronunciation:** Make sure your pronunciation is correct. To do this, you could practice with your teacher, a Spanish speaker or you could use an online dictionary for specific words such as Spanishdict.com.
- ▶ Record yourself saying the lines and listen back to your pronunciation.
- ▶ **During the exam:** Make sure you know whether you begin the roleplay or whether the examiner has the first line. Although I know you might be nervous, try not to speak too fast, as it's easy to trip over pronunciation.
- ▶ Make eye contact with the examiner during the roleplay and add a slight change of tone so that it isn't perceived as learnt off.

The Written Exam

The written exam makes up the majority of your grade at 55% (220 marks). It lasts 2 hours and 30 minutes (the aural exam takes place after). It is composed of 3 sections: A, B, and C.

Section A:

Prescribed Literature **OR** *Journalistic Text and 2 Short Comprehensions* (70 marks)

Section A tests your ability to read and understand Spanish. Most classes choose to take on journalistic text (50 marks) and 2 short comprehensions (20 marks).

For me, this was the most challenging part of the exam, as it's impossible to learn every single word and verb in Spanish! At first it threw me off but to improve my mark in this section, I used the following tips:

- **Vocabulary:** I followed Spanish newspapers on social media such as “El Mundo” where I picked up on vocabulary from recent events and things that were topical.
- I changed all my social media to Spanish to learn even more vocabulary.
- I had an A4 page where I jotted down useful vocabulary and verbs as I'd be doing the comprehensions.
- **Timing:** The journalistic text should take no more than 30 minutes.
- I practised the comprehensions from 2017 to 2007 and some mock papers. I also timed myself to improve my speed for the exam.
- The short comprehensions should take no more than 15 minutes.
- If you go over time, leave it and move on to the next part of the exam. If you have extra time at the end you can go back and finish it off.

Part 1. of Journalistic Text contains sections (a) to (e). You will be asked questions on the comprehension to see if you understand it. Each question is related to a particular paragraph so read the question, read the paragraph, *highlight the answer, and write your answer in English*. You will need to carefully translate part of the text to answer the question: Look at the verb first, then the vocabulary that follows. If it asks for full details, you must give all possible answers. You may be

asked for one reason, three points, etc. If there is no part (i) to (iii), make every point its own sentence for clarity.

Part 2. of Journalistic Text gives 3 Spanish phrases or words, for which you need to find a phrase or a word with the same meaning. My advice would be to *write the English above* them, *scan through the paragraph* they are related to, and *highlight all possible answers* in a highlighter different to the one you used in part 1. If you are stuck, *brainstorm alternative ways of saying the phrase/word given and see if it's in the paragraph*. If it's a tricky one, see if the word is plural or singular. If its singular pick a word from the singular words you've highlighted. A way of **practising this before the exam** is to use a *Spanish thesaurus*. Also, jot down synonyms of words on an A4 page to make links. This can be kept beside you in class or when doing homework.

Part 3. of Journalistic Text asks you to translate the sections of the text given to you. Read the sentence before and then the section to grasp the concept. Break it down into verbs and vocabulary. Translate the verbs first, then the vocabulary. Re-read the sentence in English to ensure it translates correctly.

Part 4. of Journalistic Text contains 2 Spanish phrases or words. You must give an alternative way of saying it or a synonym. Practise is key for this part. If you don't understand it, read part of the paragraph it belongs to see if you can make sense of it. If you can, translate both sentences in the exam.

2 Short Comprehensions: The short comprehensions are similar to part 1 of the journalistic text. You are not told what paragraph the answer is in, but it is usually split into 3 paragraphs and questions (this is not always the case, so be careful).

Section B:

Opinion Text (100 marks)

Section B is similar to Journalistic Text but has a relevant opinion piece topic at the end.

Timing

You should spend at least 35 minutes on the opinion:

- 5 minutes planning the opinion.
- Then 30 minutes writing the opinion.

Part 1 of Opinion Text (15 marks)

- See Part 2 of Journalistic Text

Part 3 of Opinion Text (15 marks)

- See Part 2 of Journalistic Text

Part 2 of Opinion Text (15 marks)

- See Part 3 of Journalistic Text

Part 4 of Opinion Text (50 marks)

- See Part 1 of Journalistic Text

Part 5 of Opinion Text (15 marks)

- **Planning:** A plan helps focus the opinion piece and stops you from ranting aimlessly - it helps you stick to the timing of the exam. When you are planning, you should ask yourself questions such as what points am I going to discuss? What points will I put into each paragraph? I would write 5 short paragraphs:

Paragraph 1: introduce the piece (state the topics you will discuss and refer to the title at the beginning and end)

Paragraph 2, 3, and 4: discuss your points separately. Make sure you relate them to the title of the piece throughout.

Paragraph 5: try to tie all the points together and relate them to the title coming up with a solution, conclusion, etc.

The above plan is vague so that it will provoke you to think about the opinion piece title. I used it for all my opinion pieces to try to create a flow and to limit writing too much (you must write 80 - 150 words). **Note:** you will not be penalised for writing too much.

- **Writing the Piece:** Try to start the opinion by stating whether you agree or disagree e.g. “De primero, me gustaría empezar diciendo que estoy totalmente de acuerdo con esta afirmación”. Make sure to keep referring the title to show your point is relevant. It will also help you stop babbling and give clarity to the examiner.
- **Useful Phrases:** If you make a phrases sheet as mentioned above, use it every time you practise an opinion piece to help you remember them. Phrases such as “¡Que pena!” and “hay que” can be impressive but do not overdo or repeat them as they’ll lose their value. If you feel you need to use it again try to use a synonym such as por desgracia/desafortunadamente.
- **VERBS!:** Like in all written pieces, the more verb tenses you use, the better. Tick a spare piece of paper each time you use a different tense to see if you used enough.
- **Topics:** Your teacher will cover a list of topics in class they feel are topical or likely to appear. It’s worth looking back on previous year’s topics and brainstorming vocabulary, verbs etc. for them so that if they were to reappear, you’d be prepared. It’s also worth following news in Spanish speaking countries as sometimes they can appear in the opinion piece text. Opinion piece titles are vague so they may not be specific to a news story but you may get the chance to show off your knowledge.

Hot topics from years gone-by include:

The Environment	School Bullying	Inequality
The World of Work and Education	Friendship	Health
Alcohol	Poverty	Languages and Travel
	Terrorism/Violence	Technology

Section C: *Dialogue Construction* **OR** *Letter Writing* (50 marks)

There is a choice between constructing a dialogue and writing a letter. It’s a matter of personal preference. I chose the dialogue as it saved me time. I had a problem of writing too much and I found I finished the dialogue quicker and could dedicate more time to my opinion piece.

Timing

The dialogue should take a maximum of 20 minutes.

- It is divided into 5 small paragraphs you must translate, dedicate no more than 4 minutes to each one.

Completing the Dialogue

You must translate one side of the dialogue. Read the context of the dialogue i.e. “you are working as an au pair...” Also - read the other side of the dialogue i.e. the person you are speaking to (sometimes the words or verbs you need are mentioned there) Take one sentence at a time:

1. Underline the verb and write above it the tense that suits.
2. Write the verb and then finish the sentence (verbs make up most of the marks so it's important to get them right!)
3. Read the sentence twice to make sure it makes sense altogether and then move on to the next.

Note: If a word pops up that you don't know try to think of a synonym or a way of describing it. *It is better to attempt it then leave it blank*, e.g., a puppy is “un cachorro”, if you didn't know that try saying “un perro pequeño”. Verbs like gustar e.g., chiflar, encantar etc. are tested in every dialogue so make sure you know them very well in all their tenses and pronouns.

Section D: Diary Entry OR Note (20 marks)

You should write no more than a page for either the diary entry or note. You must choose one. I would recommend the diary entry as the note can be very specific however you should try both to see which one suits your style of writing better.

Timing

You should spend a maximum of 15 minutes on this section, try to be mindful of the marks each section of the exam is worth and the time you spend on them.

Approaching the Diary Entry

1. State the day and date on the top right-hand corner, e.g. “lunes, el diecinueve de marzo”.

2. Skip a line and on the left-hand side begin by saying “Querido diario”.
3. You will be given 4 bulleted points, treat each one as its own paragraph, ensure they are equal in length taking it that they are worth about 5 marks each.
4. Sign off at the end by saying “no puedo escribir más porque tengo mucho sueño” and “hasta mañana, buenas noches” with your name on the final line.

Notes: Use as many verb tenses as possible, make a little tick on a rough sheet every time you use a different one. Emotion is important in a diary entry as it’s supposed to be personal so use phrases such as “estoy agotada” or “vaya pesadilla” to express them. If you must describe something, share your opinion for a personal touch e.g., “la casa era verde y no me gustó”.

The Listening Exam

The Listening Comprehension makes up 20% (80 marks) of your grade at higher level. It takes place about 5 minutes after the written paper so you might be a bit tired. Try to leave the written paper behind you, drink water, go to the bathroom and stretch a little.

Timing

The exam lasts 40 minutes in total.

Breakdown

There are 7 sections to the exam:

1. Anuncio
2. Diálogo 1
3. Diálogo 2
4. Descriptivo 1
5. Descriptivo 2
6. El Tiempo
7. Una Noticia

Each section will be played 3 times.

Preparing for the Exam

- **Practice:** The listening exam is impossible to cram the night before, it's a skill that has to be practised. There are listening practise books and listening exercises in some textbooks. You can practise past exam listening sections on Studyclix using the aural tool.
- **Listening to Music?** You can listen to Spanish music (Spotify has some great playlists!). I found it hard to understand the entire song because they sing quite fast but I found myself picking up words here and there. There are also Spanish podcasts such as the app "News in Slow Spanish".
- **Listen in class:** Listen attentively to your Spanish teacher in class when she/he is speaking Spanish.
- **Speak up!** Take every opportunity to talk to a native speaker.

- **In your downtime...** You can watch Spanish TV shows such as *Las Chicas Del Cable*, *Gran Hotel* and *Jane the Virgin* (only Jane's grandmother speaks Spanish but if you're not a fan of subtitles it's a good option)
- **Vocabulary:** Some groups of words come up every year and it's important to know them well:
 - Numbers (be careful of similar sounding numbers like 60 and 70).
Numbers 0 to 1000 are necessary
 - Years and larger numbers e.g. nineteen seventy-one (1971)
 - Dates e.g. the 10th of May
 - Time e.g. it is 10 o'clock at night.
 - Ordinal Numbers e.g. 1st, 2nd, 3rd.
 - Weather
 - Describing the weather e.g. cold, foggy, cloudy etc.
 - Types of weather e.g. wind, temperature, storms etc.
 - Days, Months, Seasons e.g. Monday, May, Autumn
 - Time frames e.g. a while ago, last night, next month etc.
 - News items e.g. a robbery, a prisoner etc.
 - Countries and nationalities e.g. Dutch and The Netherlands.

In the Exam

1. Before each section begins, quickly underline keywords of the question e.g. underline the question words such as "where", you now know you must state a place.
2. Read the questions before the section begins.
3. Aim to fill in all your answers the first 2 times. On the 3rd listening, check to see if they're correct and you have filled in all the information required to gain full marks.
4. Before handing up your paper, scan over your answers to make sure you dotted the l's crossed the t's and there are no blanks.

Notes:

1. Do not leave blanks, try to make an educated guess if the listening section is over. Make sure you have fully read the question as sometimes there can be 2 parts. You will only hear each section 3 times so make sure to stay concentrated.

2. Be specific, e.g. if they ask you to state items of clothing and in the listening it says a “long red coat”, make sure to include “long” and “red”. Pay attention to words such as “full details” and “2 details” to maximise marks.
3. Use an erasable pen, pencil is not permitted.
4. Avoid translating literally as sometimes they do not translate the same. Answer in English!

A Final Note

You will feel a wave of relief once it's over. Make sure you don't spend all your time dissecting all the questions with your friends afterwards. Take a deep breath and be proud of all the work you've done. As you walk out of the room close the door and leave it all behind you. If it's your last exam, make sure to go celebrate!



Finally, I would like wish you the best of luck in the exam! You will be fine.