

# The Personal "a"

The direct object is the noun or pronoun that receives the action of the verb. In the following sentences, the direct objects are underlined.

Mike hit the ball.

George calls Mary.

He calls her.

In Spanish, when the direct object is a person, it is preceded by the preposition "a." This word has no English translation.

Jorge llama a María ..... Jorge calls María.

From the perspective of the English speaker, the personal "a" appears to be an extra word. From the perspective of the Spanish speaker, the personal "a" is required, and to not use it is a serious error.

Jorge llama a María.

The personal "a" may also be used if the direct object is a domesticated animal, especially a pet, provided that the speaker attaches some sort of personal feelings towards the animal.

La mujer acaricia a su perro. (acariciar) ..... The woman pets her dog.

El perro persigue a la gata. (perseguir)..... The dog chases the cat.

The personal "a" is not used when the direct object is not a person or is an animal for which no personal feelings are felt.

Bebo la leche. (beber)..... I drink the milk.—milk is neither a person nor an animal

Miro la jirafa. (mirar) ..... I look at the giraffe.—no personal feelings are felt towards the giraffe

The personal "a" is not used after the verb tener, or the verb form hay. This is true even if the direct object is a person.

Tengo dos hermanos. (tener)..... I have two brothers.

Hay cinco chicas..... There are five girls.

If the direct object is an indefinite person, the personal "a" is not used. The result is that the person becomes "depersonalized."

Necesito médico..... I need (any) doctor.

(or)..... I need medical assistance.

Necesito jardinero ..... I need (any) gardener.

(or)..... I need someone to tend my garden.

Because this Spanish grammatical structure has no equivalent in English, it is normal to expect that the student will forget to use it until a pattern of use has been established. Remember, to not use the personal "a" is a serious error, and the student should try to remember to use it when appropriate.