

In English, there's no difference in the way the following two sentences are structured: I saw the tree. I saw Teresa. But in the Spanish equivalent, there's an obvious difference: *Vi el árbol.* *Vi a Teresa.*

The difference is only a one-letter word —

*a*

— but it's an essential one that's important to learn. Known as the personal

*a*

, the short preposition is used to precede direct objects when those objects are people.

Although

*a*

is usually translated as "to," the personal

*a*

normally isn't translated into English. The basic rule is a simple one: the

*a*

precedes the mention of a specific person or persons used as a direct object, and (except in some rare cases where it's used for clarification) it is not used in other cases.

*Levantó la taza*

, he lifted the cup.

*Levantó a la muchacha*

, he lifted the girl.

*Oigo la orquesta*

, I hear the orchestra.

*Oigo a los músicos*

, I hear the musicians.

*Recuerdo el libro*

, I remember the book.

*Recuerdo a mi abuela*

, I remember my grandmother. The

*a*

is not used if the object doesn't refer to anyone specific.

*Conozco a dos carpinteros*

, I know two carpenters. But,

*necesito dos carpinteros*

, I need two carpenters. Although the basic rule is quite simple, there are a few exceptions

(aren't there always?), and even an exception to an exception. The exceptions With certain

pronouns: This is really more of a clarification rather than an exception. When used as direct objects, the pronouns

*alguien*

(somebody),

*nadie*

(nobody) and

*quién*

(whom) require the personal

*a*

. So do

*alguno*

(some) and

*ninguno*

(none) when referring to people.

*No veo a nadie*

, I don't see anyone.

*Quiero golpear la pared*

, I want to hit the wall.

*Quiero golpear a alguien*

, I want to hit somebody.

*¿A quién pertenece esta silla?*

Whose chair is this?

*¿Taxis? No vi ningunos.*

Taxis? I didn't see any.

*¿Taxistas? No vi a ningunos.*

Taxi drivers? I didn't see any. Pets: Many pet owners think of their animals as people, and so does Spanish grammar, so the personal

*a*

is used. But the

*a*

isn't used with ordinary animals.

*Veo a mi perro, Ruff*

, I see my dog, Ruff.

*Veo tres elefantes*

, I see three elephants. Personification: A country or object can be personified — treated as if it were a person. Use of the personal

*a*

often implies some sort of a personal relationship, such as an emotional attachment, with the noun personified.

*Yo extraño mucho a los Estados Unidos*

, I very much miss the United States.

*Abracé a la muñeca a causa de era mi amiga*

, I hugged the doll, for she was my friend. With

*tener*

: Generally, the

*a*

is not used after

*tener*

.

*Tengo tres hijos y una hija*

, I have three sons and a daughter.

*No tengo jardinero*

, I don't have a gardener. Exceptions to an exception After *tener*: The personal

*a*

is used after

*tener*

when it is used in the sense to hold someone or to have someone somewhere.

*Tengo a mi hijo en los brazos*

, I have my son in my arms.

*Tengo a mi hija en el pesebre*

, I have my daughter in the crib. The personal

*a*

can also be used after

*tener*

when its usage suggests a particularly close or emotional relationship.

*Cuando estoy triste y necesito hablar, tengo a mis amigos*

, when I am sad and need to talk, I have my friends. But

*tengo amigos*

, I have friends. A final note Keep in mind, of course, that

*a*

is a very common preposition with a variety of translations. The rules are above pertain to its use preceding a direct object, not in numerous other cases where a preposition is called for.