

# The Sixteen Rules of Esperanto Grammar

commented by Don Harlow

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[Edits noted in [square brackets], as well as other headings and formatting by Doug Bigham, 2005, for LIN 312.]

[NOTE: The Swadesh vocabulary list (above) contains an Esperanto column.]

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## **The Rules**

1. Articles
2. Nouns
3. Adjectives
4. Numerals
5. Pronouns
6. Verbs
7. Adverbs
8. Prepositions
9. Pronunciation
10. Accent
11. Compound Words
12. Negatives
13. Direction
14. The Multipurpose Preposition
15. Borrowing Words
16. Elision

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In the following, [(parenthesized)] expressions are [Harlow's] interpolations. Indented notes are commentary by [Harlow]. EXAMPLES are introduced by [Harlow], and are as shown.

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## 1. ARTICLES

There is no indefinite ARTICLE (English a, an); there is only a definite article **la**, alike for all genders, cases and numbers (English the).

Author's note: The use of the article is as in other languages. People for whom use of the article offers difficulties (e.g. speakers of Russian, Chinese, etc.) may at first elect not to use it at all.

### EXAMPLE

**libro** = book, a book

**la libro** = the book

The main difference between the use of the definite article in Esperanto and in English is that in Esperanto the article, with a singular noun, may be used to indicate an entire class.

### EXAMPLE

**la leono estas danĝera besto**

= lions are dangerous animals

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## 2. NOUNS

[Nouns] have the ending **-o**. To form the plural, add the ending **-j**. There are only two cases: nominative and accusative; the latter can be obtained from the nominative by adding the ending **-n**. The other cases are expressed with the aid of prepositions (genitive by *de* (English of), dative by *al* (English to), ablative by *per* (English by means of) or other prepositions, according to meaning).

### EXAMPLE

**La hundo persekutis la katojn de la knaboj al la domo per bojado**

= The dog chased the boys' cats to the house by barking.

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## 3. ADJECTIVES

[Adjectives] end in **-a**. Cases and numbers are as for nouns. The comparative is made with the word **pli** (English more), the superlative with **plej** (English most); for the comparative the conjunction **ol** (English than) is used.

### EXAMPLES

**La bruna hundo persekutas la nigrajn katojn**

= The brown dog is chasing the black cats.

**La bruna hundo estas pli granda ol la nigraj katoj**

= The brown dog is larger than the black cats.

**Sed la homo estas la plej granda el ĉiuj**

= But the human being is the largest of all.

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#### **4. NUMERALS**

The basic NUMERALS (not declined) are: **unu, du, tri, kvar, kvin, ses, sep, ok, naŭ, dek, cent**, (English one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten, hundred, thousand). Tens and hundreds are formed by simple juxtaposition of the numerals. To show ordinal numbers we add the adjective ending; for multiples, the suffix **-obl**; for fractions (actually, reciprocals), **-on**; for collectives, **-op**; for divisionals, the word (particle) **po**. Noun and adverb numerals can also be used.

#### EXAMPLES

**Mil naŭcent naŭdek kvin** = 1995.

**La kvina trono** = The fifth throne.

**Duobla eraro** = A double error.

**Tri kvaronoj** = Three quarters.

**Duopo** = A pair.

**Mi donis al ili po tri pomojn** = I gave them three apples each.

The particle **po** causes many problems for beginning speakers of Esperanto, particularly those whose native language is English. First, there is a tendency to put it in the wrong place:

#### EXAMPLE

**\*Mi rapidis cent kilometrojn po horo**

= I was speeding along at a hundred kilometers an hour.

is wrong. **po** means *at the rate of* and, like the '@' sign in English, should be placed as follows:

#### EXAMPLE

**Mi rapidis po cent kilometrojn en horo**

= I was speeding along at a hundred kilometers an hour.

Second, since the objects of prepositions generally don't take the **-n** ending in Esperanto, there's a tendency to assume that in a sentence like the example above the **-n** on the object shouldn't be there:

#### EXAMPLE

**\*Mi donis al ili po tri pomoj**

= I gave them three apples each.

Remember that **po** always takes as its object a numeral; any associated noun takes whatever it would have if the **po** weren't there at all.

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## 5. PRONOUNS

Personal PRONOUNS: **mi, vi, li, ŝi, ĝi** (for an object or animal), **si, ni, vi, ili, oni** (English I, you, he, she, it, oneself, we, you, they, they-one-people); the possessive pronouns are formed by addition of the adjective ending. Declension is as for nouns.

### EXAMPLES

**Mi amas vin** = I love you.

**Mia hundo amas vian katon** = My dog loves your cat.

**Mi razas min kaj vi razas vin** = I shave myself and you shave yourself.

**Sed la hispana barbisto razas sin** = But the Spanish barber shaves himself.

**Oni diras, ke li amas ŝin** = It is said (people say) that he loves her.

Zamenhof also proposed a second-person-singular pronoun **ci** (English thou). It is occasionally used in poetry for effect, and in the word **cidiri** -- to speak to someone in an intimate fashion.

Some Esperanto speakers feel the need for a non-gender-specific singular pronoun to refer in the third person to human beings. Zamenhof recommended that the word **ĝi** simply be used for this. A few Esperanto speakers, however, primarily native speakers of English, feel uncomfortable with this usage and have come up with a new pronoun **ri** ("he/she"). It is rarely used and you are not likely to encounter it. **liŝi, ŝili** and **ŝli** have also been used experimentally in this way. You won't encounter them, either.

Some other Esperanto speakers would prefer to have a specifically female third-person plural pronoun. The word **iŝi** has been used for this. Again, you very likely will never encounter it.

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## 6. VERBS

The VERB does not change for person or number. Forms of the verb: present time takes the ending **-as**; past time, **-is**; future time, **-os**; conditional mood, **-us**; command mood, **-u**; infinitive mood, **-i**. Participles (with adjectival or adverbial meaning): present active, **-ant**; past active, **-int**; future active, **-ont**; present passive, **-at**; past passive, **-it**; future passive, **-ot**. All forms of the passive are formed with the aid of the corresponding form of the verb **esti** (English *to be*) and the passive participle of the required verb; the preposition with the passive is **de** (English *by*).

### EXAMPLES

**Mi amas vin**

= I love you.

**Mi amis vin**

= I loved you (but don't any longer, or it's irrelevant to what's happening now).

**Mi amos vin**

= I shall love you (but haven't started yet, or it's irrelevant to what's happening now).

**Se vi gajnus la loterion, mi amus vin**

= If you were to win the lottery, I would love you (but that's not likely).

**Mi deziras, ke vi amu min; do amu min!**

= I want you to love me; so love me!

**Koni lin estas ami lin**

= To know him is to love him.

It's probably worth noting that the Esperanto time-sense is slightly different from that of English. If something is shown in the present tense (**-as**), it is assumed to be happening, and of interest, at the moment the sentence is expressed; if it is shown in the past tense (**-is**), it is assumed to be either completed or no longer of interest. If it is shown in the future (**-os**), it is assumed to be either not yet begun or not yet of interest. (This view of time and completion carries over into the participles as well.) So in a few cases when in English something might be expressed as having happened in the past, in Esperanto it would be shown in the present, assuming that it is still going on and still of interest.

EXAMPLE

**Mi loĝas ĉi-tie jam kvin jarojn**

= I have been living here for five years already.

For examples of how participles are formed, see the affixes page. Participles are more accurately adjectives formed from action roots than parts of the verb -- a situation somewhat different from that in English.

I use the term "command mood" instead of the more common "imperative mood" to translate Zamenhof's modo ordona, since **-u** covers a much wider range of uses than the traditional Western imperative; in fact, it takes on many of the jobs ordinarily done by the subjunctive (which does not exist as a separate entity in Esperanto -- for which generations of Latin students may give thanks!). Kalocsay and Waringhien refer to this form, in the *Plena Analiza Gramatiko*, as the "volitive mood."

The Bulgarian Esperantologist Atanas Atanasov denies the existence of passive verb forms in Esperanto -- and I find myself agreeing with him. Use of the participial suffixes may be better understood if you consider them as means of transforming verbs into adjectives, not as parts of speech in themselves. The Western passive voice is shown, as Zamenhof says, by coupling the verb **esti** = *to be* with the "passive participles"; but these are not really compound verb forms, merely the copula linked with an adjective.

## EXAMPLES

### **La sandviĉo estis manĝata**

= The sandwich was (in a state of being) eaten.

### **La sandviĉo estas manĝita**

= The sandwich is (in a state of having been) eaten.

### **La sandviĉo estis manĝita**

= The sandwich was (in a state of having been) eaten.

### **La sandviĉo estos manĝota**

= The sandwich will be (in a state of) going to be eaten.

Use of such forms is rare in Esperanto -- even rarer than it is in English, where Strunk & White advise against them. Ordinary passives can easily be converted into ordinary active sentences in Esperanto, sometimes with the inversion that the **-n** ending permits, and the pronoun **oni** makes translation of even agentless passives as active very easy. William Auld, in his 100-page epic poem *La Infana Raso*, doesn't use the passive once. Bureaucratese is rare in Esperanto.

## EXAMPLES

### **La katon persekutis la hundo**

= The cat was chased by the dog.

### **Oni pafis la hundon**

= The dog was shot.

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## 7. ADVERBS

[Adverbs] end in **-e**; comparison is as for adjectives.

## EXAMPLES

### **La kato rapide kuris**

= The cat ran fast.

### **La hundo pli rapide kuris ol la kato**

= The dog ran faster than the cat.

### **Sed la gepardo plej rapide kuris el ĉiuj**

= But the cheetah ran fastest of all.

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## **8. PREPOSITIONS**

All PREPOSITIONS take the nominative.

### EXAMPLES

**La libroj de la knabo**

= The boy's books (the books of the boy).

**Mi faris tion por vi**

= I did that for you.

**Floroj kreskas ĉirkaŭ mia domo**

= Flowers grow around my house.

Prepositions of location may also take objects with the **-n** ending to show motion to that location; this follows from rule 13.

### EXAMPLES

**La muso kuris sub la tablo**

= The mouse ran (around) under the table.

**La muso kuris sub la tablon**

= The mouse ran (to) under the table.

While the particles **anstataŭ** (*instead of*) and **krom** (*besides, in addition to*) are generally classified (by analogy with their equivalents in Western languages) as prepositions, their behavior is more like that of coordinating conjunctions such as **kiel**. So many Esperanto speakers will add the **-n** ending to the objects of these "prepositions" when they coordinate with another word that has an **-n** ending.

### EXAMPLES

**Mi amis ŝin anstataŭ li** = It was I, not he, who loved her.

**Mi amis ŝin anstataŭ lin** = I loved her, not him.

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## **9. PRONUNCIATION**

Every word is read as it is written. This should make immediate sense. [edit]

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## **10. ACCENT**

The ACCENT always falls on the next-to-last syllable (vowel). When accenting a noun with an elided **-o**, the accent always falls where it would if the **-o** were still there. For elision, see rule 16.

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## **11. COMPOUND WORDS**

[Compounds] are formed by simple juxtaposition of words (the main word stands at the end); the grammatical endings are also viewed as independent words. Depending upon the sound produced when the two words are put together, the speaker may wish to insert a vowel between the two. If this is done, the vowel should be an **o** if the leading word is an object, or an **i** if the leading word is an action. Purists might also wish to put in an **n** if the trailing word is an action acting on the leading word, but this is not mandatory.

### EXAMPLES

**ŝipo** (*ship*) + **veturi** (*travel*)  
= **ŝip(o)veturo** (*a journey by ship*)  
**ami** (*to love*) + **plena** (*full*)  
= **am(o)plena** (*full of love*)  
**pagi** (*to pay*) + **povi** (*to be able*)  
= **pag(i)pova** (*able to pay*)  
**nenio** (*nothing*) + **fari** (*to do*)  
= **neni(o(n))fara** (*doing nothing*)

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## **12. [NEGATION]**

When another NEGATIVE word is present, the word **NE** (English no, not) is omitted.

### EXAMPLES

**Mi ne faris tion** = I didn't do that.  
**Mi neniam faris tion** = I never did that.

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## **13. [DIRECTION]**

To show DIRECTION, words take the accusative ending. The **n** ending is used to show the destination of a motion or the direct recipient of an action. To show the accusative (direct object) case is only one of its uses.

### EXAMPLES

**La reĝino iris Londonon** = The queen went to London.  
**La kato saltis sur la tablon** = The cat jumped onto the table.

When an action and a movement occur in the same expression and confusion is otherwise unavoidable, the **n** ending is used only for the action, while the preposition **al** is used for the movement.

### EXAMPLES

**Mi jetis la katon sur la tablon** = I threw the cat onto the table.  
(preposition does away with any confusion)  
**Mi sendis al li la leteron** = I sent him the letter.  
(**Mi sendis lin la leteron** would be confusing)



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#### **14. The MULTIPURPOSE PREPOSITION**

Every preposition has a definite and permanent meaning, but if we have to use a preposition and the direct meaning doesn't tell us what preposition we should take, then we use the preposition **JE**, which has no independent meaning. Instead of **je** the accusative without a preposition may be used.

#### EXAMPLES

**Li vetas je la ĉevaloj** = He bets on the horses.

**Mi alvenos je la oka horo** = I'll arrive at eight o'clock (the eighth hour).

**Li vizitos nin je lundo** = He'll visit us on Monday.

**Li lundon vizitos nin** = He'll visit us on Monday.

Since this rule gives us permission to use the **-n** ending instead of the preposition **je**, some Esperanto speakers also assume that it permits us to use the preposition **je** instead of the **-n** ending. This is a convenience when we encounter a word (such as a proper name) which doesn't lend itself well to taking a regular Esperanto ending.

#### EXAMPLES

**Mi ja konas Glazunovski-on** = I do know Glazunovski.

**Mi ja konas je Glazunovski** = I do know Glazunovski.

An honorific can also be used to get around this problem.

#### EXAMPLE

**Mi ja konas sinjoron Glazunovski** = I do know Mr. Glazunovski.

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## 15. [BORROWING WORDS]

The so-called FOREIGN WORDS, i.e. those taken by the majority of languages from one source, are used in Esperanto without change, taking on only the orthography of this language; but for different words from a single root it is better to use without change only the basic word, and form the rest from this latter according to the rules of Esperanto.

### EXAMPLES

**lakso** = diarrhoea

**konstipo** = constipation <-- borrowed

**mallakso** = constipation <-- internally created

**bona** = good

**mava** = bad <-- borrowed

**malbona** = bad <-- internally created

**komputi** = to compute

**komputero** = computer <-- borrowed

**komputilo** = computer <-- internally created

**arbo** = tree

**forsto** = forest <-- borrowed

**arbaro** = forest <-- internally created

**ami** = to love

**hati** = to hate <-- borrowed

**malami** = to hate <-- internally created

**dis** = in various directions (prefix)

**separi** = to separate <-- borrowed

**disigi** = to separate <-- internally created

There has been much dialectic about this topic during the history of Esperanto. For two good polemical accounts (from opposite sides) see Claude Piron's *La Bona Lingvo (The Good Language)* and Fernando de Diego's *Pri Esperanta Tradukarto (On the Art of Translation in Esperanto)*. What Zamenhof means by "the majority of languages" is no longer as clear as it was a hundred years ago.

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## **16. ELISION**

The FINAL VOWEL of the noun and the article may be dropped and replaced by an apostrophe (without effect on stress).

### EXAMPLES

**L' espero, l' obstino kaj la pacienco...**

= Hope, stubbornness and patience...

**Ho, mia kor', ne batu maltrankvile...**

= Oh, my heart, do not beat nervously...

N.B. The noun ending may be elided only if it does not have a plural or accusative ending attached to it!

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