

Se for unplanned occurrences

The Spanish language has many unique grammatical structures, as you have no doubt noticed. From how we say I like to how we say *how long we've been doing something*, there are specific "formulae" for creating the proper sentence syntax. Now we're going to learn about one of my very favorite structures. I can still remember the day that I learned of it, and how neat I thought Spanish was because of it. I know that you'll think it's really **cool!...swell!...neat-o-keen!...boss!...groovy!...aces!...far out!...s-w-e-e-t!...outta sight!** (or how ever you describe it) when you see it. It's called

SE *for unplanned occurrences*

or

"It ain't my fault!!"

In Spanish, when we're describing actions that occur due to "accidents" or "forgetfulness" or "just sheer stupidity" on our part, we avoid taking the blame for it by using the following formula:

Se + IO + Verb

Yep! Using this formula absolves you of any blame, fault, criticism, culpability, liability, responsibility, onus, burden or accountability for dropping and breaking the plate while washing dishes. . .for forgetting your car keys at the counter of your local gas station. . .for not shutting the gate and letting all the cows out to run wild through the neighborhood. . . I told you that it was too cool, didn't I? It works not only for yourself, but you can give absolution to those around you too! If your friends run out of gas, it's the gasoline's fault that it used itself up, not your buds'. Likewise, if your Mom burns a pan of chocolate chip cookies, it's not her fault – it was the cookies that burned themselves, she was only there as an innocent bystander!

I LOVE THIS LANGUAGE!!

Let's talk about a little bit more about " **se** " and the role it plays in this important grammar point. You will note that the VERY FIRST word in these **not-my-fault** situations is the word " **se** ." You then must pick the indirect object pronoun that corresponds to the person/thing(s) who is/who are involved, but (supposedly!) not doing the action.

The next component of the formula is the selection a verb that best describes the "action" taking place. After selecting the verb, you will conjugate it according to **subject** or **subjects** and **tense** (present, preterit, imperfect, etc.). The cool thing about the verb is the fact that we are only going to conjugate it just like we do the verbs *gustar/fascinar/importar/molestar/doler/etc.* -- when we want to say "I like. . . ." or "It's important to us. . . ." or "It bothers him/her/it. . . ." -- that is: we will only be using the third-person singular (*él/ella/usted*) or the third-person plural (*ellos/ellas/ustedes*) conjugations of the verb. **NOTE:** when you try to translate the formula from Spanish to English using the word-for-word, drop-down-method (which is a big, big, big sin in my book!), it really comes out sounding stupid! So, forgive the "weird" sound of the translation of some of the common verbs we use in this formula:

olvidó or olvidaron

it forgot itself on. . . . they forgot themselves on. . . .

acabó or acabaron

it ran itself out of on. . . . they ran themselves out of on. . . .

perdió or perdieron

it lost itself from. . . . they lost themselves from. . . .

rompió or rompieron

it broke itself on. . . . they broke themselves on. . . .

cayó or cayeron

it fell itself from. . . . they fell themselves from. . . .

escapó or escaparon

it escaped itself from. . . . they fell themselves from. . . .

descompuso or descompusieron

it broke itself down on. . . . they broke themselves down on. . . .

These can be in any *tense*: if it's something that always happens to you, you use the present tense. If it's something that happened just one time in the past, you use the preterit tense. If it's something that happened often, habitually, or always in the past, then you use the imperfect tense, and so on. . . .

If the situation is something you yourself are involved in, then you would use the indirect object pronoun *ME* :

Say you go to class and, lo and behold, you find out that you forget to bring your homework with you. What you would say to your Spanish professor is: "*Se **me** olvidó la tarea en casa.*" A literal-type translation would sound something like this in English: **The homework forgot itself on me at my home**, meaning that the homework forgot to jump into your backpack and come to school with you. You were there, but you weren't directly involved in the "forgetting" action; it didn't come from you, it was the homework that "forgot" to come with you.

If the situation involves your good friend, buddy or pal, and you're talking with him or her about what happened, then you would select the indirect object pronoun *TE* .

Let's say you're eating a big, sloppy pizza with your sister at Pizza Hut. You ordered it with extra sauce, extra toppings -- including a healthy portion of anchovies of course! -- and outta the blue. . .WHOOPS!. . .she spills some on her white shirt. YUK! Well, your sister didn't notice what happened and you think you should mention it to her. In English we would say, "Hey Sis, **you** stained your shirt!" (emphasis added). Yep, in English, it's your sister's fault. . .she did the "staining" of the shirt by spilling the pizza toppings on it. In Spanish, we would say to our sister: *¡Oye maja! Se te manchó la camisa!*" A real lousy, word-for-word translation would sound something like this: **Your shirt stained itself on you!** It is your shirt that has to take the responsibility for getting itself stained, not you.

HOW CAN YOU NOT LOVE THIS LANGUAGE?