

The prepositions *por* and *para*

Although the prepositions *por* and *para* can both have similar translations in English (i.e., both can be translated with the English word *for*), they are not at all interchangeable. Each has a variety of different meanings which depend on the context. As a general rule of thumb, *por* refers to the reason or source of an action and *para* refers to the destination or purpose of the action.

The uses of the preposition *para*

Para is used:

1. to indicate the particular use for which something is intended:

Esa caja es para los juguetes.

That box is for the toys.

La mente es para pensar.

The mind is to think with. (for thinking)

2. to indicate the destination for which someone is headed or something is intended:

Salgo para la casa de campo a las tres.

I am leaving for the country house at three.

Los guantes son para mi abuela.

The gloves are for my grandmother.

3. with an infinitive to express purpose (in which case it is translated as *to*, *in order to*):

Para barrer, necesito una escoba.

In order to sweep, I need a broom.

4. to indicate a point of time in the future, at or by which time something will be fulfilled (i.e., a deadline):

Tendré los libros organizados para las diez.

I will have the books organized by ten o'clock.

Las entradas son para el concierto del sábado.

The tickets are for Saturday's concert. [at that time they must be used]

5. to indicate a comparison of inequality (in which one element is different from what is expected):

Para verano hace demasiado frío.

For summer it is too cold.

The uses of the preposition *por*

Por is used:

1. to indicate the length of time during which an action takes place or continues (*for, during*):

Me prestó el coche por dos días. (por la mañana, etc.)

He lent me the car for two days. (in (during) the morning, etc.)

2. to indicate the place through or along which movement takes place:

El gato salió de la casa por la ventana.

The cat left the house through the window.

¡Pasa por el mercado y compra una docena de huevos!

Go by the market and buy a dozen eggs!

3. to indicate the manner or means by which something is done:

La señora Pérez siempre paga las cuentas por correo.

Mrs. Pérez always pays the bills by mail.

Todos escuchamos la noticia por televisión.

We all heard the news on (by way of) TV.

4. to indicate the reason or motive for an action:

No he ido a ver la película por miedo.

I haven't gone to see the film out of (because of) fear.

Estudí medicina por mis padres.

I studied medicine for my parents (for their sake).

5. to indicate a substitution (*instead of*):

Como Juan tiene la pierna rota, yo corrí por él.

Since Juan has a broken leg, I ran for him. (in his place)

- 6 to indicate an exchange of one thing for another:

Pedro pagó mil dólares por la computadora.

Pedro paid a thousand dollars for the computer.

Le di las gracias por el regalo.

I thanked her for the gift.

7. to indicate a unit of measure or number (*per, by the*):

Los claveles se venden por docena.

The carnations are sold by the dozen.

Jacinta corre cinco millas por hora.

Jacinta runs five miles per hour.

8. to indicate the agent by whom something is done:

La novela *Como agua para chocolate* fue escrita por Laura Esquivel.
The novel *Like Water for Chocolate* was written by Laura Esquivel.

For a more thorough review of this usage, see Unit 4, Lesson 2, pp. 151–152.

9. after verbs such as *ir, venir, mandar, enviar, volver, regresar, preguntar*, etc., to indicate the object of an errand or a search:

Fue por el médico (el correo, la leche, etc....).
He went for the doctor (the mail, the milk, etc....).

Siempre me preguntan por ti.
They always ask me about you.

10. before an infinitive to indicate what remains to be done:

Nos quedan seis capítulos por terminar.
We have six chapters to finish.

11. to form certain idiomatic expressions:

por aquí *around here*

por casualidad *accidentally*

por desgracia *unfortunately*

¡por Dios! *Good heavens!*

por ejemplo *for example*

por eso (por consiguiente) *therefore*

por favor *please*

por fin *finally*

por la (mañana / tarde / noche) *in the (morning/afternoon/evening)*

por lo general (común) *generally*

por lo visto *apparently*

por nada (= de nada) *you are welcome*

por (primera, última, etc.) vez *for the (first, last, etc.) time*

¡por supuesto! *of course!*

por todas partes *everywhere*

Note that neither *por* nor *para* is used with the following verbs:

buscar *to look for, (search for), seek*

esperar *to wait for, await*

pedir *to ask for, request*