

INTERMEDIATE LEVEL SPANISH PASSWORDS

For Spanish 3 and 4 Students

Here is a year's worth of weekly passwords for your intermediate level students. Some are easy to memorize; some are more difficult. They include historical expressions, rejoinders, idioms, wise sayings from the deep culture, tongue twisters, and some opportunities to express their opinions using typical upper-level grammar and vocabulary. For additional authentic cultural sayings at a higher level see these [Refranes](#).

Knowing authentic, cultural expressions can help immensely on high stakes upper-level tests because students can tie their thoughts to authentic cultural expressions. They won't have to make up everything they want or need to say on the fly. They will have a bank of expressions that can apply to many different situations at their disposal and insert them into their essays or speaking.

To reinforce and prepare students I require them to use at least two cultural expressions like these in every essay, book report, or story they write.

*For more password ideas, plus cultural/historical context and explanations as to WHY passwords work and HOW to use them effectively, see my book, **What's the Password?***

AUTHENTIC CULTURAL AND HISTORIC EXPRESSIONS

1. **Poco a poco se va lejos.**

Little by little one goes far.

This is the moral in Spanish to the Aesop fable The Tortoise and the Hare. We want students to work slowly and steadily and not give up, so this saying is valuable to instill in them at the beginning of the school year. A scaffolded version of the fable is available here:

<https://www.brycehedstrom.com/product/ebook-the-tortoise-and-the-hare>)

- *Similar in English: Slow and steady wins the race.*

2. **No se ganó Zamora en una hora.**

Zamora was not won in an hour.

A short lesson on Spanish history and a 10-question quiz can accompany this one. This saying can help to show that history and culture are often embedded in common cultural expressions that we take for granted.

- *Similar in English: "Rome wasn't built in a day."*

This authentic proverb expresses the idea that worthwhile things take time in a short, elegant, historical and rhyming ditty. You can say something like this to students to explain the historical context of the proverb:

En el año mil setenta y dos el rey Sancho II de Castilla (Sancho el Bravo) trató de conquistar la ciudad de Zamora en el noroeste de España. Había muchas batallas cerca de la ciudad durante siete meses, pero al final, Castilla conquistó Zamora. En esta época, Sancho era el rey del reino de Castilla. No era el rey de España porque el país de España ya no existía hasta el año mil cuatrocientos noventa y dos. El ejército de Sancho se ganó Zamora, pero trágicamente el rey se murió antes de la victoria final.

In the year 1072 king Sancho the second of Castile (Sancho the Brave) tried to conquer the city of Zamora in the northwest of Spain. There were many battles near the city for seven months, but in the end, Castilla conquered Zamora. In this time, Sancho was the king of the kingdom of Castile. He was not the king of Spain because the

country of Spain did not exist until the year 1492. Sancho's army won Zamora, but tragically the king died before the final victory.

Afterwards, give a short oral comprehension check by asking all ten questions below orally. The next day post these questions for the daily warm-up (bell ringer, do now, repasito, campanada):

1. ¿Qué es Zamora?
2. ¿Dónde está Zamora?
3. ¿Cuánto tiempo se necesitaba para ganarla?
4. ¿Cómo se llamaba el rey de Castilla?
5. ¿Qué era el apodo/sobrenombre del rey?

Ask these questions for the warm-up the day after that:

6. ¿En qué año se ganó Zamora?
 7. ¿Era Sancho el rey de España?
 8. ¿Por qué era imposible que él fuera el rey de España después de ganar Zamora?
 9. ¿Por qué no fue una victoria completa cuando por fin se la ganó?
 10. ¿En cuál año se formó el país moderno de España?
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3. **A quien madruga, Dios le ayuda.** *Whoever gets up early, God helps.*
 - Similar in English: The early bird gets the worm.
 4. **Del dicho al hecho, hay mucho trecho.** *From the said to the done, there is a great distance.*
 - Similar in English: Easier said than done.
 5. **Hablando del Rey de Roma, y por la puerta asoma.** *Speaking of the king of Rome, and through the door he appears / shows up / peeps.*

The Iberian Peninsula was part of the Roman Empire. Four Roman emperors came from Spain (Trajan, Hadrian, Theodosius and Arcadius), as did the famous Stoic philosopher, Seneca.

 - Similar in English: Speak of the devil...
 6. **Poderoso caballero es Don Dinero.** *A powerful gentleman is Sir Money.*

This line comes from the poem by the same name by prominent 17th century Spanish poet Francisco de Quevedo. This insightful and impactful poem, Don Dinero, talks about the power of money. Each stanza ends with this line. This is a good set up before studying the poem in class the following week.

 - Similar expression in English: Money talks.
 7. **Cuando yo tenía dinero me llamaban Don Tomás.** *When I had money, they called me Don Thomas.*
Ahora que no lo tengo, me llaman Tomás, no más. *Now that I don't have it, they just call me Thomas.*

Similar theme to the previous password which dealt with the power of money in the poem that students were studying that week.
 8. **Los ordenadores son inútiles. Solo nos dan respuestas.** *Computers are useless. They can only give us answers.*

This is a good one for our era. Asking good questions beats pat answers. This is a quote from the famed Spanish artist Pablo Picasso (1881-1973), who lived before desktop computers, Google and A.I., and yet predicted the irony of the Age of Big Tech. You need to understand a topic well in order to ask deep and

insightful questions. We can get answers instantly now, and can think we understand without comprehending at a deep enough level to ask more and better questions about it.

9. **Si al principio no muestras quién eres,
Nunca podrás después cuando quisieres.**
*If at the beginning you do not show who you are,
you will never be able afterwards when you want to.*
This quote comes from a classic story in Spanish culture: El Conde Lucanor, Cuento XXXV: Lo que sucedió a un mancebo que casó con una muchacha muy rebelde (Count Lucanor, Story 35: What Happened to a Young Man that Married a Very Rebellious Girl), by Don Juan Manuel (1282-1348).
10. **Allí donde fueres, haz lo que vieres.**
There where you may go [in the future], do that which you may see [in the future].
• *Similar in English: When in Rome, do as the Romans do.*
11. **Quien se ríe último, se ríe mejor.** *Who laughs last, laughs best.*
12. **No hay mal que por bien no venga.** *There is no bad that through good might not come.*
• *Similar in English: Every dark cloud has a silver lining.*
13. **Solo un idiota puede ser totalmente feliz.** *Only an idiot can be totally happy.*
His is not an historic quote from Spanish-speaking culture, but it's authentic and it's a good one. It comes from Peruvian author Mario Vargas Llosa (1936 - 2025), and I believe it can help students to be reminded that very few of us are happy all the time. Nobody, except an idiot, is always happy.
26. **En boca cerrada, no entran moscas.** *In a closed mouth, flies do not enter.*
28. **Mejor pájaro en la mano que cien volando.** *Better a bird in the hand, than one hundred flying.*
• *Similar in English: Better a bird in the hand than two in the bush.*
29. **Aunque la mona se viste de seda, mona se queda.**
Although the monkey dresses in silk, a monkey it remains.
• *Similar in English: You can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear.*
30. **A mal tiempo, buena cara.** *To bad weather/time, good face.*
• *Similar in English: Keep your chin up / Keep a stiff upper lip.*

TRABALENGUAS

19. **Rápido corren los carros, los carros del ferrocarril.** *Rapidly run the cars, the cars of the railroad.*
This is the last part of a well-known tongue twister in Spanish, shortened here to help students remember it more easily. It can help them learn how to roll their rr's.
23. **Como poco coco como, poco coco compro.** *As little cocoa I eat, little cocoa I buy.*
This is the last part of another well-known tongue twister/song in Spanish, shortened here to help students remember it more easily. Once they get the hang of it, we chant it over and over, speeding up each time.

24. **Tres tristes tigres trillaron trigo en un trigal.** *Three sad tigers, threshed wheat in a wheat field.*
Another tongue twister that can help those who are not yet able to roll their rr's. the tr sound is a step in that direction.

See the full list of Spanish tongue twisters [here](#).

OTRAS EXPRESIONES ÚTILES

31. **No me di cuenta que...** *I didn't realize that...*
Students say a different sentence with this phrase each day when they enter the class during the week to personalize it.
14. **Nací el (#) de (mes) del año ____.** *I was born the (#) of (month) of the year (#).*
This is not exactly a cultural expression, but it's helpful. Some students, even at the intermediate level, are slow with their numbers. This password can be used to remind students of numbers and the date early in the school year. The prompt can be delivered in a flat, monotone of a seasoned and bored customs officer: ¿Fecha de nacimiento? We do not want our students to be confused at border crossings when a relatively easy question like this is asked.
23. **¡Eso sí que es!** *That's exactly right! / Literally: "That, yes, that is it!"*
This is fun to say because it sounds like you are spelling out the English word "socks" and yet it means something in Spanish. A delightful linguistic coincidence!
27. **Me molesta cuando...** *It bothers me when...*
Students say a different sentence with this phrase each day when they enter the class during the week to personalize it.
15. **¡No me molestes!** *Don't bother me! / Quit bugging me!*
This saying is offered as a defense aid to students that will be traveling because they may be confronted by aggressive street vendors. This helped my daughters when they were teenagers.
16. **¡Cuánto me alegro!** *I am so glad! / That makes me so happy!*
This password is in honor of Dr. Lynn Sandstedt, the late college professor and mentor to so many, from my alma mater, the University of Northern Colorado. He was co-founder and president of three professional organizations: CCFLT, SWCOLT and ACTFL, and he used this expression sarcastically with his dry humor frequently. With gratitude and respect, profe.
17. **¡Dicho y hecho!** *Said and done!*
Handy saying, plus a reminder of the irregular past participles of two common verbs.
• *Similar in English: No sooner said than done.*
18. **¡Se me olvidó!** *I forgot! / It forgot me!*
19. **¡Se me fue!** *It left me. / It went away from me. / I forget.*
20. **¡Ojalá que...** *I hope that...*



Students say a different sentence with this phrase each day as they enter the class during the week to personalize it. Each answer requires a subjunctive.

21. **No creo que...**

I don't believe that...

Students say a different sentence with this phrase each day when they enter the class during the week to personalize it. Each answer requires a subjunctive.