

Saber and Conocer: What is there *to know*?

The real differences between the two words

Saber and conocer both mean “to know”

You may be asking yourself, “Why would a language have two words for one thing?” After all, having a one-to-one correlation between word and the thing it represents is more efficient and straightforward.

But language often doesn’t work like that.

In fact, sometimes when English has two or more words for a certain concept, Spanish might only have one. Think, for example, of the Spanish word *Ya*, which can be any of these three translations: “(no) longer”, “anymore”, and “already”. In any case, *Ya* communicates some sort of ending or beginning that is sharp. Spanish has two words for “to know”, and that just means Spanish speakers get to be a bit more specific with their language than English speakers in these certain instances.

Conocer: Knowing (or being familiar) with people or places

Conocer is associated with how we use “to know” to talk about **people**, like this:

“I know David; he’s my brother.”

In Spanish, then, the sentence would have to use the first person singular of *conocer*, which is *Conozco*, rather than the first person singular of *saber*, which is *Sé*, like this:

“Yo conozco a David; es mi hermano.”

We also use *conocer* to talk about being familiar with a **topic, place, or person**. If you wanted to ask if someone was familiar with the Tallahassee area, you would use *conocer*, not *saber*. It would look like this:

“¿Tú conoces Tallahassee muy bien?”

Here’s a helpful summary of what to use *conocer* for:

CONOCER
1-Things
¿Conoces algún sitio en internet para aprender español?-
2-People
El otro día conocí a la nueva novia de Julio-
3-places
¿Conoces México?-"Do you know Mexico?"

Conocer is special: a stative verb

Lastly, conocer is special because it’s a stative verb, which means that it describes a state that someone is in. When we say, “I know David,” I’m talking about the state of knowing David.

This is important because, when we want to talk about the beginning of that state, we can just conjugate conocer for the preterit (which describes a definitive ending or starting point), like this:

“Yo conocí a mi novia en Junio.”

Or, in English, this sentence would be:

“I met my girlfriend in June.”

Notice how we have to use a separate word in English to describe the beginning of *knowing* someone, whereas in Spanish, you use the same word, *conocer*, for both knowing someone presently and the moment when you met them.

Saber: Knowing skills, facts, and information

On the other hand, we use saber to talk about knowing skills, facts, and information. For instance, if you wanted to say that you know the **skill** of “how to play the guitar”, you would say:

Yo sé tocar la guitarra.

We also use it for talking about facts that we know, like when the WWII ended:

*El profesor **sabe** que la segunda guerra mundial terminó en 1945.*

Lastly, saber is used for talking about information, which is very similar to a fact:

Tú no sabes nada.

Here’s a helpful summary of how saber works:

SABER	SABER
1-	2-A fact
a) A skill, something we have learnt, por ejemplo	No sabemos cuando se acabará el petróleo-
Mi hermana y yo sabemos tocar el piano-	3-Information
b) How to do something,	Yo no lo sé, pero Marta sabe cuando es la fecha del examen
Ellos saben cocinar	

What the two words have in common: Special conjugations

Saber and conocer are similar to each other only in their meaning. When you look at the two words, you can't really see any similarities in how they **sound** or how they're **spelled**.

What is important to note, though, is that both of these words have special (or irregular) conjugations for the first-person singular *Yo*. The table below illustrates how these *Yo* forms are special:

	saber <i>to know</i>	conocer <i>to know</i>
singular forms		
yo	sé	conozco
tú	sabes	conoces
Ud./él/ella	sabe	conoce
plural forms		
nosotros/as	sabemos	conocemos
vosotros/as	sabéis	conocéis

Summary

Here's a summary of the two words, side-by-side, and which one we use in a given context.

Saber (knowing information)	Conocer (knowing/being familiar with people and places)
An address	A person
A phone number	A place
A name	An object
The lyrics to a song	
A skill	

According to language scientist Robert DeKeyser, practice can help a lot when we're trying to learn another language. [This quiz¹](#) directly asks you to figure out (based on context) whether you should use Saber or Conocer in a given sentence. This will be very similar to what you might encounter in a test or in your homework, so it should give you some practice of what it'll really be like in your test or homework.

¹ If you're using this as a printed resource, feel free to navigate to any of the Learning Commons' computers and Google "Saber Vs. Conocer SpanishDict quiz", and you'll find the quiz we're talking about here!