

Names in Spanish

The differences in the way names are done in English-speaking countries versus Spanish-speaking countries are the cause of much confusion and headaches for Hispanics living in the US, and for the Americans who deal with them and their records. Please read carefully so you understand what's going on and how to better deal with the situation.

In Spanish-speaking countries people are required to use **both parents' last names**, with the father's last name *first* and the mother's last name *last*. For example, if you see someone listed as **Juan José Pérez González**, this is what it means:

<i>Juan José</i>	<i>Pérez</i>	<i>González</i>
Given names	Father's last name	Mother's last name

To an English-speaking person, this is backwards. The situation causes many Hispanics' records to be mislabeled and misfiled. Many well-meaning people try to "fix it" by switching the person's last names to conform to the English way. However, that's equivalent to changing the person's legal name. In the US, only a judge can authorize a change of name, so it is **illegal** to change the order of anyone's last names to conform to the English way.

So, what's a safe way of dealing with this dilemma? There are two simple "fixes" you can use without requiring the intervention of a judge.

The first is to simply **hyphenate the two last names**. That way the records will be filed under the correct last name, and the names will be in the same order as in the person's birth certificate. Like this:

Juan José Pérez-González

The second option is to ask the person if it is OK to **ignore** the *second last name* (which is in reality his/her *mother's* last name) and use only the *first last name* (which is his/her *father's* last name, the one **you** are actually interested in). This way the records will be filed under the correct last name, the *father's* last name. Like this:

Juan José Pérez

If the person has a Permanent Resident card ("green card") or any other document issued by US immigration, then you have to write the name as it appears on those documents. If the person argues that the name on the document itself is wrong, then it is up to that person himself/herself to contact the immigration office to make the necessary corrections to his/her documents.

Be aware that, traditionally, in Spanish-speaking countries **married women do not** need to change their names after marriage, and most choose not to. If they do, they may add their *husband's father's last name* after their own last name, with the word "de" ("of") in between. For example, *Juan José Pérez González* married *María Guadalupe Castillo Velázquez* and she now writes her name as *María Guadalupe Castillo de Pérez*.

Children inherit both his/her **parents' father's** last names. For example, if *Juan José Pérez González* has a baby girl named Verónica with his wife *María Guadalupe Castillo Velázquez*, the girl's legal name will be

<i>Verónica</i>	<i>Pérez</i>	<i>Castillo</i>
Given name	Father's last name	Mother's last name

When helping a family fill out documents for a child's birth certificate and/or Social Security card, make sure to check that the last names are in the order the parents want them to be (usually the "correct" way for them, which is the Spanish way). If necessary, show them how to **use a hyphen between the last names** so the child's records will always be correctly filed from the beginning, avoiding future confusions and problems. For example, in the previous example, teach them to write the baby's name this way: *Verónica Pérez-Castillo*.