Spanish is one of the major Romance languages that evolved from the Indo-European family of languages. It is the language of 300 million people in 21 countries and the fourth most widely spoken language in the world. Although these Spanish-speaking countries share a common language, they are different from one another: each has its own form of government, economic system, monetary currency, customs, and traditions particular to its people and history.
Spanish is the official language of Spain, including the Canary and the Baleares Islands.

Spain, slightly smaller than the state of Texas, has 40 million inhabitants. Situated at the western edge of the European continent, Spain borders on France to the north-east and Portugal to the west. Three of its sides border on water: the Mediterranean Sea, the Cantabrian Sea, and the Atlantic Ocean.

Most Spanish words derive from Latin, but many words are of Arabic origin as a consequence of the Moorish occupation of Spain from the eighth to the fifteenth centuries. This period, lasting seven centuries and sometimes called the Reconquest, was marked by conflict and wars between the Moors and the Christians of the Spanish Kingdoms. The Reconquest proved to be such a long struggle because the various Spanish Kingdoms were not united and each fought for its own interests and territory. Finally, in 1492, King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella completed the reconquest of the Spanish Kingdoms, expelled the Moors, and for the first time united Christian Spain as a country. 1492 was also the year the King and Queen sponsored Christopher Columbus's expedition to the Americas.
By the end of the fifteenth century, Spain had become a major world power. With its mighty fleet, Spain began her great exploration and colonization of Central and South America. Spanish became the dominant language of the territories settled by the Spaniards. Today, Spanish is the official language of more than 240 million people living in what may be called Spanish America. Spanish America includes Mexico and eighteen countries located in Central America, South America, and the Caribbean.

There are also 20 million Spanish-speaking people in the United States, giving the U.S. the fourth largest Spanish-speaking population in the world. In some American cities in Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, California, New York, and Florida, the concentration of Spanish speakers is so high that Hispanics represent more than half the population. Most Americans of Hispanic origin came from Mexico, Cuba, and Puerto Rico, although there are also large numbers of immigrants from the Dominican Republic, Colombia, and Nicaragua.
Many civilizations flourished in Spanish America before the arrival of the Spaniards in the fifteenth century, primarily the Mayas, Aztecs, and Incas. Ruins in Mexico, Guatemala, and Peru attest to the greatness and ingenuity of these peoples, who left a rich testament of their artistic accomplishments in architecture, sculpture, murals, and jewelry.

In the fifteenth century, the region of Castilla was the most powerful of the Spanish Kingdoms: its language, Castilian, became the official language of the country. Although Castilian Spanish is still the official language of Spain, Spaniards of certain regions of Spain also speak different regional languages or dialects, such as catalán, gallego, and vascuense, an ancient language unrelated to any other on earth.

The Spaniards who settled in Spanish America came mostly from a region in southern Spain called Andalucía. They brought to the lands they settled what may be called Andalusian Spanish. The main difference between Castilian and Andalusian Spanish is the pronunciation of c (before e or i) and the z sound. In Castilian, the c of cero and the z of zebra are both pronounced like th. In Andalusian, the letters c and z are both pronounced with the s sound.

There are 28 letters in the Spanish alphabet. The letters k and w do not exist in Spanish, although they may be found in words borrowed from other languages. The Spanish alphabet contains the additional letters ch, ñ, ll, and rr.
In the same way that American English words and expressions have changed from British English (lift = elevator, flat = apartment), so the Spanish spoken in different parts of the world has differing vocabulary. For example, a Puerto Rican ordering a china (orange) in Spain would not be understood by a Spaniard, who calls an orange a naranja. A papa (potato) in Mexico is called a patata in Spain.

Food also varies from country to country in the Spanish-speaking world. You are probably most familiar with dishes from Mexico. Tacos, tamales, enchiladas, and burritos all originated in Mexico. They are all rich in beans and corn, crops grown by those who inhabited Mexico before Columbus. From Hispanic countries in the Caribbean come tostones (fried green plantains) and empanadillas (meat-filled turnovers). Pork and seafood, beans, corn, and potatoes are important ingredients of Hispanic cooking (in the Andes there are more than thirty varieties of potatoes). A favorite Spanish dish is paella, a combination of rice, seafood, chicken, and sausages served with vegetables and spices.

The great tradition of Spanish literature continues to influence contemporary writers. Perhaps you have seen pictures of a tall, skinny knight battling windmills. He is Don Quijote, a creation of the writer Miguel de Cervantes, who lived in sixteenth-century Spain. Don Quijote rode Rocinante, a broken-down horse, and traveled with his short, fat friend, Sancho Panza, as they searched for adventure.
In the twentieth century, many Hispanic novelists have reached international acclaim, among them Octavio Paz, Gabriel García Márquez, Pablo Neruda, and Carlos Fuentes. Also of the twentieth century, three outstanding Spanish painters are Pablo Picasso, Salvador Dalí, and Joan Miró. Many of their paintings hang in the Prado, a beautiful art museum in Madrid, Spain.

Spanish-speaking countries also have many popular art forms. Music, for example, is a rich component of everyday life in Spain and Spanish America. Much of the popular music is based on traditional and folkloristic themes. Perhaps you have heard some of the exciting rhythms from the Spanish-speaking world: mariachi music from Mexico, the rumba, merengue, and mambo from the Caribbean, the tango from Argentina, and flamenco from Spain and Spanish America.

Fiestas or popular festivals are also a Spanish tradition very much alive in Spain and Hispanic countries. Each region, no matter how small, has its own festival, celebrated in honor of a saint for whom the town feels a particular devotion. These festivals include parades, lively music, and dancing in the streets, where tempting food specialties of the region may be sampled at every corner. Another type of festival, also considered a sport, is the bullfight. It is popular not only in Spain but also in other Hispanic countries. The tradition of bullfighting can be traced back to very ancient times.

Now — on to the study of this beautiful and influential language. Have fun and enjoy it!
1. Who sponsored Christopher Columbus's expedition to the Americas?

2. Why is Spanish spoken in Central and South America?

3. Look at the map on page 4 and name the Spanish-speaking countries of Central America and the Caribbean.

4. Which continent has the greatest number of Spanish-speaking countries?

5. Which country has the fourth largest Spanish-speaking population?

6. Name three civilizations that flourished in Spanish America before the fifteenth century.

7. Name three regional languages or dialects spoken in Spain.

8. How do you pronounce the letters c and z in Castilian Spanish?

9. How many letters does the Spanish alphabet contain?

10. What is paella?

11. Who is Don Quijote?

12. Name three twentieth-century Spanish painters.