PRONOMINAL VERBS

Essential Guide

What is a pronominal verb?

Pronominal verbs are used with a pronoun that changes with the subject.

Subject	Pronoun	Example
yo	**me**	me voy
tú	**te**	te vas
él / ella / usted	**se**	se va
nosotros/as	**nos**	nos vamos
ellos / ellas / ustedes	**se**	se van

The pronoun is part of the verbal construction, but pronominal verbs do not all work in the same way.

PRONOMINAL ≠ REFLEXIVE

Reflexive verbs are pronominal, but not all pronominal verbs are reflexive.

Me lavo.
→ reflexive: I perform the action on myself.

Me arrepiento.
→ pronominal, but not reflexive.

Me voy.
→ pronominal, but not reflexive.

me / te / se / nos does not automatically mean **myself / yourself / himself / herself / ourselves / themselves.**

1 Reflexive verbs

The subject performs the action on themselves.

Me baño.
I bathe myself.

Ana se peina.
Ana does her own hair.

Carlos se afeita.
Carlos shaves himself.

Action on yourself	Action on someone/something else
Me baño.	Baño al perro.
Me peino.	Peino al niño.
Ana se lava.	Ana lava al bebé.
Carlos se afeita.	Carlos afeita a su padre.
Me visto.	Visto al niño.

action on yourself
→ **reflexive pronoun**

Me peino.

action on someone/something else
→ **no reflexive pronoun**

Peino al niño.

Common reflexive verbs

lavarse · bañarse · ducharse · peinarse · afeitarse · vestirse · secarse · maquillarse

Key takeaway: With reflexive verbs, the action comes back to the person who performs it.

2 Verbs that always need the pronoun

Some verbs are simply learned and used with a pronominal pronoun.

You do not need to search for a special meaning of me / te / se / nos in these verbs.

Verb construction	Example
arrepentirse de	Me arrepiento de haber dicho eso.
quejarse de	Siempre se queja del tráfico.
atreverse a	No me atrevo a preguntarle.
abstenerse de	Me abstengo de tomar alcohol.
adueñarse de	Se adueñó de la empresa.
jactarse de	Siempre se jacta de sus logros.

Also learn the required preposition.

Construction to learn	Example
arrepentirse DE algo	Me arrepiento de mi decisión.
quejarse DE algo	Se queja del ruido.
atreverse A hacer algo	No se atreve a hablar con ella.
abstenerse DE algo / hacer algo	Se abstuvo de comentar el problema.
adueñarse DE algo	Se adueñó de la empresa.
jactarse DE algo	Se jacta de sus logros.

LEARN THE WHOLE CONSTRUCTION

Not only: **arrepentirse**
but: **arrepentirse de algo**

Not only: **atreverse**
but: **atreverse a hacer algo**

Key takeaway: Learn the verb + pronoun + preposition, when a preposition is required.

3 With the pronoun, the meaning changes

Some verbs exist both with and without a pronoun, but the two constructions have different meanings. Learn them as separate constructions rather than search for one universal rule.

Without pronoun	With pronoun
ir — go	irse — leave / go away
dormir — sleep	dormirse — fall asleep
quedar — arrange / agree	quedarse — stay / remain
acordar — agree / decide	acordarse de — remember
parecer — seem	parecerse a — resemble
llevar — take / carry	llevarse — take away / take with you
poner — put	ponerse — put on / become
volver — return	volverse — become / turn
encontrar — find	encontrarse — be / feel / meet
ocupar — occupy	ocuparse de — take care of / deal with

These are practical contrasts for learners, not every possible meaning of these verbs.

IR / IRSE

Voy al supermercado.
I'm going to the supermarket.

Me voy de la fiesta.
I'm leaving the party.

DORMIR / DORMIRSE

Dormí ocho horas.
I slept for eight hours.

Me dormí a las once.
I fell asleep at eleven.

QUEDAR / QUEDARSE

Quedamos a las ocho.
We arranged to meet at eight.

Nos quedamos en casa.
We stayed home.

ACORDAR / ACORDARSE DE

Acordamos cambiar la fecha.
We agreed to change the date.

No me acuerdo de su nombre.
I don't remember his/her name.

PARECER / PARECERSE A

Parece cansado.
He seems tired.

Se parece a su padre.
He resembles his father.

The preposition may change too.

acordar algo	acordarse **DE** algo
parecer + adjective	parecerse **A** alguien
ocupar algo	ocuparse **DE** algo

Key takeaway: If a verb exists with and without a pronoun, check whether the meaning or construction changes.

4 Completing a specific amount or object

With some verbs, the pronoun can emphasize that an action is completed over a specific amount or a clearly delimited object.

This is a frequent pattern with certain verbs, **not a rule that se = completely.**

COMER / COMERSE

Comí pastel.
I ate some cake / I ate cake.

Me comí tres pasteles.
I ate three cakes.

Se comió toda la pizza.
He/She ate the whole pizza.

BEBER / BEBERSE

Bebimos vino.
We drank wine.

Nos bebimos dos botellas de vino.
We drank two bottles of wine.

Se bebió todo el café.
He/She drank all the coffee.

LEER / LEERSE

Leí durante el vuelo.
I read during the flight.

Me leí el libro entero durante el vuelo.
I read the whole book during the flight.

VER / VERSE

Vimos televisión toda la tarde.
We watched TV all afternoon.

Nos vimos toda la serie en un fin de semana.
We watched the whole series in one weekend.

Useful recurring patterns

comerse + specific amount / object
Me comí tres tacos. Se comió todo el pastel.

beberse + specific amount / object
Se bebió dos cafés. Nos bebimos una botella de agua.

leerse / verse + complete work
Me leí el libro entero. Nos vimos toda la serie.

The pronoun is not reflexive here. Me comí tres tacos. does NOT mean “I ate myself.”

Key takeaway: With some verbs, the pronoun can present a specific amount or object as fully consumed, completed, or gone through.

Not every verb allows this pattern. Learn the frequent combinations rather than applying it to every verb.

5 How to learn pronominal verbs

1. Learn the verb with its pronoun

Learn **irse** rather than thinking only of **ir + se**.

2. Learn its meaning

ir → go irse → leave / go away

3. Learn its preposition, if it requires one

acordarse **DE** algo · atreverse **A** hacer algo · ocuparse **DE** algo

4. If a non-pronominal form exists, check its meaning

acordar ≠ acordarse de · parecer ≠ parecerse a · quedar ≠ quedarse

The purpose is not to classify the verb linguistically. The purpose is to know how to use it correctly.

Quick Reference

Pattern	What you need to know	Example
Reflexive	The action is performed on yourself	Me peino.
Always pronominal	Learn the pronoun as part of the verb	Me arrepiento de eso.
Different meaning	Learn both constructions separately	ir ≠ irse
Specific completed amount/object	The pronoun can emphasize a delimited action	Me comí tres tacos.

PRONOMINAL ≠ REFLEXIVE

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Me arrepiento. → pronominal, not reflexive

Me voy. → pronominal, not reflexive

Me comí tres tacos.
→ pronominal, not reflexive

PRONOUN + MEANING + PREPOSITION

And when a non-pronominal form also exists:

DOES THE MEANING CHANGE?

Scope

This guide is about using pronominal verbs.

It is not a general guide to all uses of **se**.