Por y para

"Por" and "para" have a variety of meanings, and they are often confused because they can each be translated as "for."

Gracias por la información Thanks for the information.
Este regalo es para Juan This gift is for Juan.

To learn to use "por" and "para" correctly, you need to do two things:

1. Learn the rules for how por and para are used.
2. Memorize model sentences.

"Por" has many uses, and so it is the more problematic of the two.

Rule: to express gratitude or apology
Model: Gracias por la ayuda.
(Thanks for the help.)

Rule: for multiplication and division
Model: Dos por dos son cuatro.
(Two times two equals four.)

Rule: for velocity, frequency and proportion
Model: Voy al restaurante cinco veces por semana.
(I go to the restaurant five times per week.)

Rule: meaning "through," "along," "by" or "in the area of"
Model: Andamos por el parque.
(We walk through the park.)

Rule: when talking about exchange, including sales
Model: Él me dio diez dólares por el libro.
(He gave me ten dollars for the book.)

Rule: to mean "on behalf of," or "in favor of,"
Model: No voté por nadie.
(I didn't vote for anyone.)

Rule: to express a length of time
Model: Yo estudié por dos horas.
(I studied for two hours.)

Rule: to express an undetermined, or general time, meaning "during"
Model: Se puede ver las estrellas por la noche.
(One can see the stars during the night.)

Rule: for means of communication or transportation
Model: Prefiero viajar por tren y hablar por teléfono.
(I prefer to travel by train and speak by phone.)

Rule: in cases of mistaken identity, or meaning "to be seen as"
Model: Me tienen por loco.
(They take me for crazy.)

Rule: to show the reason for an errand (with ir, venir, pasar, mandar, volver, and preguntar)
Model: Paso por ti a las ocho.
(I'll come by for you at eight o'clock.)

Rule: when followed by an infinitive, to express an action that remains to be completed, use por + infinitive
Model: La cena está por cocinar.
(Dinner has yet to be cooked.)

Rule: to express cause or reason
Model: El hombre murió por falta de agua.
The man died for lack of water.

Rule: "estar por" means to be in the mood, or inclined to do something
Model: Estoy por tomar café.
(I'm in the mood for drinking coffee.)

Rule: in passive constructions
Model: El libro fue escrito por Octavio Paz.
(The book was written by Octavio Paz.)

"Por" also appears in many idiomatic expressions:

por adelantado	in advance
por lo visto	apparently
por ahora	for now
por medio de	by means of
por allí	around there; that way
por lo menos	at least
por amor de Dios	for the love of God
por lo tanto	consequently
por aquí	around here; this way ..
por mi parte	as for me
por casualidad	by chance
por ningún lado	nowhere
por ciento	percent
por otra parte	on the other hand
por cierto	certainly
palabra por palabra	word for word
por completo	completely
por primera vez	for the first time
por dentro	inside
por separado	separately
por desgracia	unfortunately
por supuesto	of course
por ejemplo	for example
por suerte	fortunately

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por eso ............................................................ therefore
por todas partes............................................... everywhere
por favor........................................................... please
por todos lados ................................................. on all sides
por fin............................................................... finally
por último.......................................................... finally
por lo general ................................................... generally
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"Para" — in contrast, has relatively fewer uses.

Rule: to indicate destination
Model: El hombre salió para Madrid.
(The man left for Madrid.)

Rule: to show the use or purpose of a thing
Model: El vaso es para agua.
(The glass is for water.)

Rule: to mean "in order to" or "for the purpose of"
Model: Para hacer una paella, primero dore las carnes.
To make a paella, first sauté the meats.

Rule: to indicate a recipient
Model: Este regalo es para ti.
(This gift is for you.)

Rule: to express a deadline or specific time
Model: Necesito el vestido para el lunes.
(I need the dress by Monday.)

Rule: to express a contrast from what is expected
Model: Para un niño lee muy bien.
(For a child, he reads very well.)

Rule: "estar para" to express an action that will soon be completed
Model: El tren está para salir.
(The train is about to leave.)

It is quite important to learn to use these two prepositions correctly, because if you inadvertantly substitute one for the other, you might end up saying something altogether different from what you had intended. Study the two examples:

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Juan compró el regalo para María ...................... Juan bought the gift for Maria.
                                                        (he bought it to give to her)
Juan compró el regalo por María ....................... Juan bought the gift for Maria.
                                                        (he bought it because she could not)
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"Por" and "para" can also be used in questions. "¿Por qué?" means "Why?" (for what reason) while "¿Para qué?" means "Why?" (for what purpose).

¿Por qué estudias español? .... For what reason do you study Spanish?

Possible answer:
Porque es un requisito....................................... Because it's required.

¿Para qué estudias español?.............................. For what purpose do you study Spanish?

Possible answer:
Para ser profesor de español .... In order to become a Spanish teacher.