

-자 (시간)

the moment that — written style

A literary "as soon as." Identical in shape to the propositive -자 meaning "let's," but a completely different ending.

HOW TO ATTACH IT

Any action verb	-자	끝나다 → 끝나자
ㄹ stems keep the ㄹ	-자	열다 → 열자
Different subjects	allowed	수업이 끝나자 학생들이 나갔다
No commands after	statements only	도착하자 전화하세요 is wrong
Never takes tense	plain stem only	끝났자 is wrong
Spoken version	-자마자	끝나자마자

WHEN TO USE IT

Attach -자 to any action verb stem — no vowel rule, ㄹ stays, no tense in front. The two clauses may have different subjects.

It marks immediate succession, often with a sense that the second event followed naturally from the first: 수업이 끝나자 학생들이 교실을 나갔다.

Two things separate it from -자마자. It belongs to writing — novels, news, reports — and sounds stiff in conversation. And it takes no commands or suggestions after it, where -자마자 accepts them freely.

Telling it apart from the propositive is a matter of position: the time ending sits mid-sentence with a clause after it, while "let's" ends the sentence.

IN USE

- 수업이 끝나자 학생들이 교실을 나갔다.
The moment class ended, the students left the room.
- 문을 열자 찬바람이 들어왔다.
As soon as the door opened, cold air rushed in.
- 그 소식을 듣자 모두 자리에서 일어섰다.
On hearing the news, everyone rose from their seats.
- 해가 지자 거리가 조용해졌다.
Once the sun set, the streets grew quiet.
- 공연이 시작하자 관객들이 조용해졌다.
As the performance began, the audience fell silent.

- 6 비가 그치자 사람들이 밖으로 나왔다.
When the rain stopped, people came outside.

COMPARED WITH

-자마자

Same meaning, different register and different flexibility. -자마자 works in speech and takes commands; -자 belongs to written narrative and does not.

도착하자마자 전화하세요. (call on arrival) / 도착하자 전화가 왔다. (as he arrived, a call came)

-자 (let's)

Identical form, unrelated meaning. Position tells them apart: the propositive closes a sentence, the time ending links two clauses.

같이 가자. (let's go) / 그가 가자 방이 조용해졌다. (once he left, the room fell quiet)

-(으)니까

-(으)니까 can also mark discovery on doing something, but adds a causal or explanatory flavour. -자 reports pure sequence.

문을 여니까 찬바람이 들어왔어요. (I opened it and found) / 문을 열자 찬바람이 들어왔다. (the instant it opened)

WATCH OUT

X 집에 도착하자 전화하세요.

O 집에 도착하자마자 전화하세요.

-자 cannot be followed by a command. For an instruction, -자마자 or -는 대로 is needed.

X 수업이 끝났자 학생들이 나갔다.

O 수업이 끝나자 학생들이 나갔다.

-자 never carries tense. The past is expressed once, on the final verb.

X 야, 비가 그치자 나갔어.

O 야, 비가 그치자마자 나갔어.

-자 is a written form. In casual speech it sounds oddly formal; use -자마자.