Syllabification

Syllables consist of three parts:

(i) Onset

(ii) Nucleus

(iii) Coda

The nucleus will consist of a vowel or a vowel plus glide(s) (a diphthong or a triphthong). You can always tell how many syllables a word has by counting the number of vowels. The onset is a consonant or consonant cluster that precedes the nucleus and the coda is a consonant or consonant cluster that follows the nucleus. Examples (at period, '.' marks a syllable boundary):

(1) a. /so.plar/ 'blow' two syllables

1st syllable: /s/ – onset, /o/ – nucleus, no coda

2nd syllable: /pl/ – onset, /a/ nucleus, /r/ – coda

b. /péy.nes/ 'combs' two syllables

1st syllable: /p/ – onset, /ey/ – nucleus, no coda

2nd syllable: /n/ – onset, /e/ nucleus, /s/ – coda

Note, although semivowels are considered consonants, they are put in the nucleus with the vowel because they form part of a diphthong (you occasionally find triphthongs, as in /bweys/ 'oxen' – this is a mono-syllabic word).

There is an important principle that determines how to divide a word into syllables:

(2) The Onset Principle: Maximize onsets

This principle means that as much material goes into the onset as possible. Hence, in (1a), the onset of the second syllable is /pl/, this prevents the illegal syllabifications in (3) ('*' means 'illegal'):

(3) a. * /sop.lar/

b. * /sopl.ar/

How do we know how much to put into the onset? Note that sometimes not all preceding consonants go into the onset:

(4) /es.pe.xo/ (not * /e.spe.xo/) 'mirror'

This is because different languages allow different types of onsets. For example /sp/ is a legal onset in English, but not in Spanish (which is why Spanish speakers, when they speak English, sometimes say things like [espík] for *speak*).

Therefore, in order to know how to apply the Onset Principle, we need an inventory of possible onsets in Spanish. One way to find this is to go through the dictionary and find out what kinds of consonant clusters can begin a word – these will all be possible onsets. Doing this, we come up with the inventory of possible Spanish onsets in (5). It turns out that any single consonant phoneme can be an onset (including semivowels, but we'll deal with that later); complex onsets (more than one consonant) are limited to stops+/l/, stops+/r/, /fl/, and /fr/, with a few gaps (/dl/ is impossible and /tl/ is possible in some Nahuatl borrowings). In addition, the cluster /xr/ is found in some Russian names, such as /xruchef/ ' Khrushchev':

(5) Possible Onsets

/p/	/pato/	'duck'	/pl/	/plata/	'silver'	/pr/	/prado/	'field'
/t/	/tomar/	'take'	/tl/	(?)		/tr/	/trato/	'deal'
/k/	/kama/	'bed'	/kl/	/klaro/	'clear'	/kr/	/kredo/	'creed'
/b/	/bata/	'robe'	/bl/	/blanko/	'white'	/br/	/braso/	'arm'
/d/	/dato/	'datum'	/dl/	*		/dr/	/drama/	'drama'
/g/	/gato/	'cat'	/gl/	/globo/	'baloon'	/gr/	/gris/	'grey'
/f/	/fama/	'fame'	/fl/	/flor/	'flower'	/fr/	/frio/	'cold'
/s/	/saber/	'know'				/xr/	(?)	
/x/	/xawla/	'cage'						
/č/	/čiste/	'joke'						
/m/	/mano/	'hand'						
/n/	/nada/	'nothing'						
/ñ/	/ñapa/	'extra'						
/l/	/ley/	'law'						
/r/	/rama/	'branch'						
/w/	/weso/	'bone'						
/y/	/yamar/	'call'						

Given (5) as the inventory of possible onsets, we can syllabify Spanish words as follows:

(6) a. Construct syllables from right to left.

b. Put as much as you can in the nucleus – a vowel, a diphthong, or a triphthong.

c. Any consonants to the right of the nucleus goes in the coda.

d. Put as many of the consonants to the left of the nucleus in the onset as you can, as long as the result is a possible onset.

e. Move on to the left and repeat b-d to construct the next syllable, until you reach the end of the word.