

# Esperanto's alphabet and pronunciation

Each letter of the Esperanto alphabet has just one sound (or *phoneme*). There are no silent letters. Words are pronounced like they're spelled, and spelled like they're pronounced. (As you can imagine, there are no spelling bees in Esperanto; They'd be way too easy!)

## Vowels

The five vowels of Esperanto are **a, e, i, o** and **u**, pronounced much like the sounds in the English words *pa*, *bet*, *machine*, *glory*, and *rude*.

The sounds of these letters are so-called "pure" vowels (*monophthongs*). A common mistake for English speakers is to pronounce them as sounds that "glide" together two vowels in a single syllable (*diphthongs*). Compare the sounds of the *o* in the English word *or* (one vowel sound) with *owe* (two vowel sounds). The Esperanto vowels have one sound only.

A handy mnemonic for remembering these sounds is the phrase: **Are there three or two?**

Esperanto does have vowel glides (see below), but they are always explicitly marked.

## Consonants

Some of the consonants in Esperanto have the same sounds as their English counterparts typically have — namely: **b, d, f, h, k, l, m, n, p, s, t, v**, and **z**. As to the others:

- **c** sounds like the *ts* sound in *hats*. Try pronouncing these examples: **facila**, **palaco**, **celo**
- **ĉ** sounds like the *ch* in *chess*. **ĉu**, **eĉ**, **maĉo**
- **g** always has a "hard" sound, like the *g* in *good*. **ge**, **legas**, **pagi**
- **ĝ** sounds like the "soft" *g* in *gem*. **ĝis**, **manĝas**, **ĝirafo**
- **ĥ** is a sound that doesn't occur in English, except in a few loan words. It's the guttural *ch* in Scottish *loch* and Yiddish *chutzpah*. Very few Esperanto words use it. **eĥo**, **ĥoro**, **aĥ!**
- **j** sounds like *y* in *yes*. **juna**, **jako**, **sinjoro**

- **ĵ** sounds like *s* in *pleasure*. **ĵeti**, **ĵaluza**, **aĵo**
- **r** is slightly "tapped" or rolled, as in Scottish. **patro**, **por**, **tri**
- **ŝ** sounds like *sh* in *shell*. **ŝelo**, **ŝi**, **freŝa**
- **ŭ** sounds like *u* in *persuade* or *w* in *we*. **ŭato**

## About the tapped "r" sound

The Esperanto **r** can be difficult for some students because it has no equivalent in American English. If you have trouble with the **r**, don't worry about it: while the sound of an English *r* isn't ideal, it's perfectly understandable.

## The "kn" and "sc" consonant groupings

Words like **knabo** and **scias** are sometimes difficult for Americans, because each letter is pronounced separately. If it helps, remember that we actually *do* have these sounds in English: think of the *cn* in *McNeill*, for example, or the *sts* in *nests* or *posts*.

Since we're not used to these sounds occurring at the beginning of a word, here's a simple trick you can use: pretend to attach the initial **k** or **s** sound to the *previous* word. For **la knabo**, try saying "lak nabo". The sound is virtually the same.

A common phrase in Esperanto is **Mi ne scias** (= "I don't know"). To pronounce **ne scias** properly, try saying the following English phrase:

*The birds in the **nests see us**.*

## Vowel glides

These sounds are formed by combining a vowel with the consonants **j** or **ŭ**. The letters still keep their original sounds, but they are allowed to "glide" together in a single syllable.

- aj** sounds like *ai* in *aisle*. **pajlo**, **bluaj**
- ej** sounds like *ei* in *vein*. **kafejo**, **vejno**
- oj** sounds like *oy* in *boy*. **arboj**, **fojno**
- uj** sounds like *uj* in *hallelujah*. **abelujo**, **tuj**
- aŭ** sounds like *ow* in *how*. **laŭta**, **Aŭstralio**
- eŭ** is a tough one for Americans. It begins with the sound of *e* in *bet* and glides into the sound of *oo* in *boat*. **neŭtrala**, **Eŭropo**

## Accent / stress

Stress is always placed on the second-to-last syllable in a word. For some people it helps to imagine speaking with an exaggerated stereotype of an “Italian” accent. (e.g., “MA-ma MI-a!”) Try these for practice:

**domo** (DO-mo)

**rapida** (ra-PI-da)

**Esperanto** (es-pe-RAN-to)

**inteligenta** (in-te-li-GEN-ta)

## Letter names and the *aboco-kanto*

The names of vowels are simply the sounds those vowels make. Consonants are named by adding **-o**. So the letter **b** is named “**bo**”, **c** is “**co**”, and so on. Here’s an Esperanto version of the “Alphabet Song” using all the names:

*A, bo, co, ĉo, do, e, fo*

*go, ĝo, ho, ĥo, i, jo, ĵo.*

*Ko, lo, mo, no, o, po, ro*

*so, ŝo, to, u, ŭo, vo, zo.*

*Jen la alfabeto, do, kantu kun mi: aboco!*

## Typing the accented characters

While modern computers display Esperanto’s accented characters without any trouble, it isn’t always obvious how to type those characters. The configuration instructions for each operating system are different.

In a pinch, there’s a simple low-tech workaround dating from the early days of the Internet. It’s known as the “x method”: just put an **x** after any character that would take an accent.

Thus **ĉ** becomes **cx**, **ŝ** becomes **sx**, **ŭ** becomes **ux**, and so on. The word **ĉirkaŭ** (=“around”) becomes **cxirkaux**. It’s a bit ugly, but it works.

You may also come across other solutions online — like the traditional “h method” that uses **ch**, **gh**, **jh** etc., with a simple **u** instead of **ŭ**. Our example word **ĉirkaŭ** becomes **chirkau**. The “x method” is more popular, however — and less ambiguous, since there’s no **x** character in the Esperanto alphabet to cause confusion.

## Pronunciation practice

Try pronouncing the following words; some are easy, some are tricky. When letters are grouped together, make sure to pronounce each one distinctly, e.g. **boato** (“bo-AH-toh”), **aero** (“ah-EH-roh”), **knabo**, (k-NAH-boh), **scii** (sts-EE-ee). Always place the stress on the second-to-last syllable, e.g. **familio** (“fah-mee-LEE-o”).

*amas kaj amuza ataki bone dankon estas fakto  
naŭ granda imiti kato kio loka muziko nun  
Parizo por tablo uzi vin venas aero birdo boato  
blua dentisto devas familio honoro instruisto  
ĵaluza ideo laboro lerni letero lia lingvoj longa  
mia ĵus memoras multa patro rapidi saluton tie  
tre ankaŭ certe ĉirkaŭ ĉu decidis esperantisto  
Eŭropo ĝuste hejme hodiaŭ ĥoro internacia jes  
ĵurnalo kiel knabo paco poŝto kuracas neŭtrala  
kvin scii*

## “False friends”

Here’s an especially devious list of “false friends”: Esperanto words that just happen to look like English! Try sounding them out using Esperanto pronunciation only:

*al bane bare blue brake dance divide do fame  
fido glue gusto hare have idea image invite jam  
jen june lace lame lite literature male mane  
mare minus minute mole move note nun nature  
opinion ore pace page pane para penis per pike  
plane plume plus police pro pete pure radio  
range religion ride rule sale same sane sate  
save science side simile simple sole solve spice  
stare strange sub table time tire trove vera vice  
vine vole*