

# Writing Systems and Sounds



## Introducing Yourself to a Script

**If your language has a non-Roman script (i.e. different from the one we use in English), then you will want to begin associating the individual sounds you have learned with the new letters or symbols that represent them.** By following the process outlined below, you can start making this association both visually and aurally. This process is also useful for learning characters that are based in the Roman script, but differ in pronunciation and/or appearance from the version of the script you are used to.

(NOTE: **It is best to follow this process with just a few letters or symbols at a time**, as your book introduces them, so you can focus on learning just a few letters very well, instead of having to handle many new letters or symbols all at once.)

### Acquaint Yourself with the Forms of the Letters

- Find a list of all the letters or symbols you want to start learning in your textbook. Write them down in a notebook. **Write them a few times to get used to the shape of the letters.** Your book will have instructions on how to write them by hand, so you should follow those recommendations instead of just improvising to create the printed shapes you see.
  - **The handwritten form of a script is often somewhat different from the printed one**, and the instructions on writing the letters in your book will probably be based on the easier-to-write, handwritten form.
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- **Now write the sounds that these letters or symbols represent next to them, using**

**the Roman script used in English.** This information will be available in the parts of your textbook that introduce the script to you. If you are learning symbols that represent whole syllables or words, write the full syllable or word they represent in Roman script.

## **Familiarize Yourself with the Sounds of the Letters**

- **Now listen to a recording of the pronunciation of the language's sounds several times, and as you hear each sound, put a checkmark by the letter that represents it.** Listen until you have heard the sounds of all the letters you are trying to learn. If you need to, pause the recording or repeat parts of it. **It never hurts to listen again** and make sure you are making the correct connection between sounds and letters.
- **If your language uses single symbols to write entire syllables or words,** then put a checkmark by the symbol(s) that *contain* the individual sounds you hear, and do this until you have identified all the sounds expressed by the symbols.
- Now, take out a totally blank piece of paper and listen to the recording of sounds again. **When you hear a sound from the recording which you are learning the letter for, pause and write down the letter associated with it.** Do this until you can write down the letters you are working with fairly quickly when you hear the sounds. Take time to pause the recording and repeat individual sounds as necessary. Look at your book as only the last resort when you absolutely can't remember the shape of a letter you are working on.
- **If you are working with symbols representing syllables or whole words,** instead of starting with a blank page, write down the specific symbols you are working on, but without a Roman transcription. When you hear sounds in the recording, write them in Roman transcription next to the symbols that they belong to. Do this until you have identified all the sounds in the symbols you are working with in the correct order.
- **NOTE: Some languages may have multiple letters or symbols that make the same sound, or different sounds expressed by a single letter or symbol** depending on certain rules in the writing system, so do not be surprised if there is not always a one-to-one correspondence.

**EXPLORE FURTHER: Go online to YouTube, search for videos about the alphabet for your language (for example, search “Bangla Alphabet” or “Malay Alphabet”).** For almost any language, numerous videos will come up. Beware that they will vary in quality and perhaps in accuracy. Avoid videos that are clearly done by new learners of the language showing off what they have learned.

Look for videos by native speakers or highly skilled speakers. These may well display regional or dialectal differences. Take your textbook as your standard, but it is also good to become aware of regional differences.

**EXPLORE FURTHER: Many scripts have an associated “alphabet song”. Ask your conversation partner if such a song exists. You can also search on Google or YouTube to see if you can find one. Learning a song to remember the letters and their names can be easier than just learning them in their dictionary order by rote.** You will want to learn them in order at some point, since knowing the order of letters is necessary to look up words in dictionaries.

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# Introducing Yourself to Sounds

In the beginning of the course, you should listen to audio recordings of the sounds of the language you are learning. There should be a section on sounds at the beginning of the audio that goes with your textbook.

When you listen to these sounds, you should do a few exercises to really familiarize yourself with them:

## Associating the Sounds with their Transcriptions

- **First, just listen to the individual sounds being recited a couple of times** to get familiar with them.
- After the first couple of times of just listening, look at the way they are written in your textbook. Your textbook may show both the letter as it is written in the language and an English transcription of the sound of the letter.
- **NOTE: If the letters are similar to English letters or in an alphabet that is easy to learn quickly**, you may not make extensive use of the transcriptions for the sounds. **If the language you are learning has a complex script**, your textbook may use English transcription along with the actual letters during the early part of your course.
- As you listen to the audio and look at how it is written in your textbook, **note whether your audio is giving you just the sound of the letter** (for example, the sound of the letter “b” in English), **the name of the letter** (such as how you say the name of the letter “b” in English), **or a combination of both sound and name** (which may be the same in some languages).
- **Now listen to the recording of the sounds (or letter names) while looking at the letters as they are written.** If you feel ready, try pronouncing some of the sounds as you go along. You can pause the recording to give yourself time to try each letter. You will come back to pronunciation practice later, right now just try it once or twice. See which sounds seem easy to you and which are challenging.
- Depending upon the language, your initial audio samples may also have examples of tones. Listen to those examples and see if you can produce them.

A NOTE OF ENCOURAGEMENT: You may find some sounds simply impossible to distinguish by listening practice at first. **This is perfectly natural.** It takes time to completely acquire an ear for distinctions between another language’s sounds, especially sounds that do not exist in your native language. So don’t despair, just keep practicing. Over time the more difficult sounds will come to you.

EXPLORE FURTHER: **Jump ahead in your textbook audio to a section that has dialogue or whole sentences. Listen to get a sense of how the language sounds when spoken.** Listen to the intonation of the speakers, the speed, pauses in sound or breaks between words or sentences, and see if you can recognize any individual sounds based on your initial encounter with the sound system. Don’t worry if you cannot pick out many individual sounds with certainty. That will come in time.

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## Starting to Pronounce the Sounds

After you have gotten used to hearing the sounds of your language, you should start practicing them yourself:

- **Go through the list of sounds now and try to pronounce them individually along with the recording.** Do this a few times, and note which ones are more difficult for you to reproduce. Take the time to pronounce them individually, pausing the recording if you need to. Go back through the recording a few times just to pronounce those sounds that you found difficult.
- **Now try to go through the list one time without the recording.** If you can't remember some sounds, listen to them again, then go through the list until you at least approximate most of the sounds.

**Now it's time to start putting sounds together and seeing how they work within words.** It is best to do the following activities with just a few sounds at a time then go back and do a few more, so you do not get bogged down practicing too many of them at once.

- Write down a list of the sounds you are learning in a notebook, or type them in a computer. **Now look at the dialogues or vocabulary in your textbook's first chapter, and try to find one word for each sound that contains that it.** Write it down or type it next to the sound that it contains. You should have audio recordings of the vocabulary and dialogues for the first chapter in your book. Listen to the recordings, paying attention to each sound in context when you hear each word you have selected.
- **Now listen to the words again and try to say them along with the recordings.** Do this only a few times with the ones that are easier for you to say, and spend more time trying to repeat the words that are more difficult for you. It is good to pause and repeat as many times as you need.
- **When you say the words, enunciate the sounds slowly and very clearly.** Try to exaggerate the sounds and distinctions that are new to you. It can seem a bit silly to enunciate so dramatically, but it is very important to train your mouth to make the right motions and shapes at this early stage of learning.

## Using a Place of Articulation Chart to Practice Sounds

If you are still unsure how to produce some of the sounds or having a difficult time at this point, you can print out and make use of the diagram linked to below in your conversation sessions to help determine how you should be making the sounds:

- [Place of Articulation Chart](#) <sup>(1)</sup>
  - When discussing a specific sound, have your conversation partner identify the number(s) on this diagram that correspond to the places where the sound is articulated so you can try to imitate them. (For example, to describe the sound of "t" in "Tom", you could say that positions 16 or 17 on the tongue touch against 4 or 5 right behind the front teeth).
  - NOTE: Your conversation partner may not have thought about the sounds of their language in this way before, so it may take them some time and thought to pin down exactly what they do when they make the sounds, but nevertheless with the chart they should be able to help you with most sounds.
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NOTE OF ENCOURAGEMENT: **As with listening, you may find that it is almost impossible for you to accurately produce some more difficult sounds when you start out.** The activities listed above can help you approximate them more closely, but what will really make you proficient with pronouncing the sounds will simply be time spent studying, speaking, and being exposed to the language. Just *do your best* from the start to produce the sounds correctly, and with time and effort you will find that they will get easier for you.

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[1] Created by User:ish shwar (original .png deleted), .svg by Rohieb [GFDL (<http://www.gnu.org/copyleft/fdl.html>)], CC-BY-SA-3.0 (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/>) or CC BY-SA 2.5 (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.5>)], via Wikimedia Commons from Wikimedia Commons

## Flashcards for Learning Single Letters

These activities, making use of flashcards ([Why Use Flashcards?](#)) will help you establish and remember the connection between the individual sounds and letters. **After the first time you work through the cards successfully, you should go back periodically to review them.** First review every few days, then every week or two. Even if you forget some of them each time, the act of remembering will strengthen your ability to recall them.

If you are using a Spaced Repetition System (SRS) flashcard program (for more on SRS, see: [Resources for Making Flashcards](#)), it will take care of the scheduling for you.

### Activity 1: Assembling Sounds and Symbols

- First create a flashcard for each new letter or symbol you encounter.
- On the front write the letter (this is an excellent opportunity to find out and practice how to type individual letters in the script you are learning, if you use online flashcards).
- On the back, write the transcription in Roman script.
- Practice the flashcards until you can look at the letter and pronounce it without having to flip it over to look at the transcription. When you look at each letter or symbol, pronounce it out loud, not just in your head.
- Once you can do that, flip the cards around. Practice the cards until you can identify letters by their transcribed pronunciation. Pronounce the transcription out loud and only then guess the letter, trying to visualize it in your mind. If you can't recall the way it looks, keep reviewing the card until you can. If there are multiple letters that make the same sound, when you look at the Roman script you should try to think of every letter that

### Activity 2: Creating Stories for Sounds

- This flashcard activity will require just a bit of creativity. First write the letter you want to learn on the front of a flashcard, like in the last activity.
- On the backside, put a picture of something that the sound of the letter reminds you of, or a familiar word or name from English but with a letter replaced by the new one you are learning.

The more personal and interesting the association is, the better! For example: A letter with a “k” sound, like क in the language Hindi, could be substituted for the “c” in “cat” that has the same sound, so the back of the card could have “My कat, Billy”. A letter with an “s” sound could have a picture of a snake on the back, to remind you of the similar hissing sound a snake makes.

- Practice remembering this association by looking at the letter on the front and trying to recall what you associate it with. Then reverse the cards once you can do this for all the letters or symbols you are working on, and try to remember the letter from the association on the back. As in the last activity, when you see the association you should try to visualize the letter.
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## Flashcards for Learning Single Letters - Video

# Flashcards for Learning Combinations of Letters

Once you can associate a new set of letters or symbols with the sounds of your language ([Flashcards for Learning Single Letters](#)), you will want to come to grips with how to put the letters together into larger units such as words. These activities will help you get used to seeing letters and symbols and pronouncing them in context.

Do these activities **with a few letters at a time to focus your work** instead of getting bogged down working through too many letters at once. After the first time you work through the cards successfully, you should go back periodically to review them. First review every few days, then every week or two. **Even if you forget some of the cards each time, the act of remembering each time will strengthen your ability to recall them later.**

If you are using a Spaced Repetition Software (SRS) flashcard program ([Resources for Making Flashcards](#)), it will take care of the scheduling for you.

## Activity 1: *Filling in the Gaps*

- Find a different word in the first chapter of your book’s vocabulary or dialogues for each letter or symbol from the script. It should be a short word and contain that letter or symbol.
  - Write the word on the front of a new flashcard with an obvious gap where the letter or symbol should be (i.e. if I were trying to learn the English letter “c” from the word “cat”, I would write something like “\_at” on the front).
  - On the back of the flashcard write the full word and its definition. If the word is a concrete item like an animal or object, just draw a picture of what it means (or paste in a picture, if you’re using electronic flashcards). You should use word-based definitions for more abstract things that cannot be pictured, as noted in [Flashcards for Vocabulary](#).
  - If your language has different letter forms for the beginning, end, or middle of a word, find words that contain those forms and make flashcards out of them too, with a gap in the word where the symbol or letter would be.
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- When you practice the flashcards, write down your guess of what the word would be if you filled in the blank, or at least visualize it in your mind. Say out loud what you have written or visualized, then check the back of the card. Do this until you can get all of the cards in the set right.

## Activity 2: *Distinguishing Similar Sounds with Minimal Pairs*

- This is a useful exercise if you are having trouble distinguishing between two sounds. Find a word that *doesn't* contain the particular symbol or letter that you want to practice, but one that you find very similar or that you have a hard time distinguishing from the one you are practicing.
- Write the word and say it out loud, pronouncing it carefully.
- Now replace the similar-sounding character with the symbol or letter you want to learn to distinguish from it. Write this new word down.
- Say the new “word” you have made out loud, then the original one. Try to pronounce them very clearly and to see if you can tell the difference in pronunciation. Focus on the differences that you make in pronouncing them, even if you have a hard time hearing those differences. You could use a recording app, such as voice memos on a phone, to record yourself saying the pair of words and see if you can hear the difference.
- If you are still having trouble distinguishing two sounds, **bring the pair of words you made to your conversation partner** and have them pronounce them for you and explain the difference. It can take a while to hear distinctions that are not made in your native language, but it is still important that you learn to make them yourself.

## Using the IPA to Learn Sounds

The IPA is an alphabet developed by linguists to precisely represent the sounds in all human languages. [Look it up on Wikipedia](#), and go to the sections on consonants and vowels. You will see a huge number of symbols, laid out in a grid-like chart for the consonants and a beaker-shaped chart for the vowels.

- **The words on the left-hand side of the consonant chart refer to *how* the sounds are produced, and those on the top of the chart refer to *where in your mouth* they are produced.** So the symbol “θ”, the sound spelled “th” in the English word “thing”, is a dental (pronounced with the tongue against the back of the teeth) fricative (the air flow is not stopped when you make the sound, but is constricted).
- **The vowel chart is actually a very abstract diagram of your mouth.** The vowels at the top-left, like “i” (pronounced like the vowel sound spelled “ea” in “meat”), are pronounced with the tongue bunched up high in the front of your mouth. Pronounce the words “meat” or “me”, which both contain this vowel, and you be able to notice this.

## Using Wikipedia to Understand the IPA

The terminology associated with the IPA can seem intimidating, almost like learning another language on top of the one you are already working on, but **you can easily understand the distinct ways in which your language’s sounds are pronounced by going to the language’s Wikipedia**

## article.

In the article, instead of the overwhelming full IPA chart, you can find just the set of IPA symbols that describe the sounds in your language. You also don't need to memorize the names for the IPA symbols, since Wikipedia has descriptions of them and recordings of them being pronounced. To find your language's sounds written in IPA:

- Go to the language's page on Wikipedia.
- Go the section titled "Phonology".
- There will be a table that lays out the sounds of the language in an organized chart in the form of IPA symbols. You can click on any of the individual sounds and go to a page which is a description of how they are made in the mouth. The pages for each individual sound also include audio recordings.
- NOTE: **If the individual symbols aren't linked to their Wikipedia pages, you can copy and paste them into the Wikipedia search bar and find them.** Every IPA symbol has its own Wikipedia page.
- NOTE: **The IPA symbols may not correspond exactly with the standard Roman letters used to represent your language's sounds.** Thankfully, the Wikipedia page will usually also have a link to a page that describe how the sounds in the chart match up with the script, or a section of the main article that does the same.

## Using IPA with Non-Roman Scripts

**You may be learning a language with a different script from the one we use in English.**

Thankfully, the articles for those scripts will show the IPA symbols that correspond to the individual letters. To find the sounds associated with your language's **script in IPA**:

- Go to the Wikipedia page of the script associated with your language.
- You will find somewhere on the page a table, or sentence-long descriptions of the sounds of the letters with IPA symbols. As with the phonetic chart above, you can click on the symbols and they will take you to pages describing how to make the sound with your mouth and containing audio samples.

EXPLORE FURTHER: Gabriel Wyner has fantastic videos about IPA on his website [Fluent Forever](https://fluent-forever.com/). You can see the multiple videos he made at the following link: <https://fluent-forever.com/chapter3/>. He works through the different IPA charts for vowels and consonants, describes the way the sounds are made, and pronounces most of the sounds on the chart as examples. You might find this especially helpful if you are more of a visual or aural learner.

## Using Non-English Keyboards

**If your language has a script other than the Roman script used for English, you may want to learn to type in it.** Or your language may use a Roman script, but contains accents or other marks that are not used in English.

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Early in the learning process, writing by hand will be enough as you get used to the letter forms, but



once you feel comfortable with identifying characters and the way the script works, **learning to type will allow you to write much more quickly and to use the script online or in other computer-based applications.**

## Finding and Activating a New Keyboard

The following points show you **how to find and activate scripts on your computer:**

- **For Windows 10 users,** refer to [this online guide](#).
- **For Windows 8 users,** refer to [the guide posted by Microsoft on their website](#).
- **For Windows 7 users,** refer to [the guide posted by Microsoft on their website](#).
- **For Macintosh users,** refer to [the guide posted by Apple on their website](#).

## Discover Your Keyboard Layout

Now it's time to **discover the layout of your keyboard:**

- **To find the layout of your keyboard,** do a [Google Images search](#) for “(your language’s name/name of the script) keyboard layout”. Test out typing a few letters to find a picture of the layout that matches with the one you have. (Some scripts have more than one keyboard layout so this is an important step.)
- Now print this out and put it somewhere where you can see it easily while you practice typing. You will use this until you can remember the letters without looking.

## Practice Using the Keyboard

Now you need to **start practicing:**

- **Start a new text document on your computer** (you should probably use your computer’s native program, since it will work better with the built-in keyboards). Go through the vocabulary of any chapter from your textbook, and type out every word. Type each word at least two or three times, since the first time you will probably be focused on figuring out exactly how to type it. The second and third times will be easier and reinforce your motor memory.
- **Repeat this exercise with different vocabularies from different chapters every few days or so,** until you start being able to type without looking at the keyboard layout sheet that you printed out.
- **Now find entire sentences** in a chapter of your book. Pick a manageable number like ten or twelve. Now type the entire sentences, several times each. Like in the exercise with typing single words, repetition will help your motor memory. Keep doing this exercise every few days or when convenient, until you are able to type more fluidly. You can also alternate this with practicing typing single words.

After doing enough of this kind of practice, you will have learned the basics of typing in your language. **All that remains is to keep typing to increase your speed and muscle memory by typing more and more.** Typing short essays or homework assignments or finding online forums to type in the language will help with this.

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**NOTE: Scripts like the Chinese script, which is not alphabetic, usually have different input methods than just having a single letter for each key, since there are thousands of**

**possible characters.** If the script you are learning is of this type (i.e. any script with more than a few dozen characters), you will need to do some research. Use online searches like “Chinese keyboard Windows” to find articles which detail exactly how to use the keyboard. Then, once you are familiar with the input method, you can go ahead and do the typing exercises above.

### **Five College Center for World Languages**

79 South Pleasant St, Suite 100

Amherst College, AC Box 2264

Amherst, MA 01002

USA

[FCCWL website](#)

p: 413-542-5264

e: [fclang@fivecolleges.edu](mailto:fclang@fivecolleges.edu)



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[Staff login](#)

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