The Russian alphabet is easy to learn! Learning the alphabet is the first step to learning the Russian language. Even if you don't plan to learn the language, knowing the alphabet is great for travelling because you can read all the street and shop signs. It may seem daunting to learn a new alphabet, but it is relatively easy. In fact, the great thing about Russian is that almost all words can be sounded out as they are written. Unlike English where the pronunciation of a word may not be clear from its written form. Russian also has one letter to one sound, unlike English where two letters often make one sound. (Example “sh”).

Either before or after this lesson we recommend you print the alphabet table, and stick it up next to the computer (or around the house), to help you with the following lessons.

The Russian alphabet is also known as the Cyrillic alphabet. There are 33 letters in the Russian alphabet. 11 vowels, 20 consonants, and 2 pronunciation signs. Here is what the Russian alphabet looks like (in dictionary order).

А, Б, В, Г, Д, Е, Ё, Ж, З, И, Й, К, Л, М, Н, О, П, Р, С, Т, У, Ф, Х, Ц, Ч, Ш, Щ, Ъ, Ы, Ь, Э, Ю, Я

Now let's have a look at these letters in detail. For your reference we will make some notes about unusual hand-written forms, however this will be covered in another lesson so don't worry too much yet.

**Russian letters that are (almost) the same.**

**А а** - Pronounced like the "a" in the word "father" or "car". It is not the 'flat' "a" sound you sometimes hear in words like "cat" or "flat".

**К к** - Pronounced like the "k" in "kitten" or "kangaroo". This letter replaces the english "c" sound in words like "cat".

**М м** - Pronounced like the "m" in man. (Note: Unlike english, the hand-written "*м*" should always start from the bottom)

**O o** - When stressed, it is pronounced like the "o" in "bore". When un-stressed it is pronounced more like the letter "a". (See later notes.)

**Т т** - Pronounced like the "t" in "tap". (Note: The hand-written (and italic) form is "*т*". It should always start from the top, as it looks quite similar to the letter "*м*")

**Russian letters that look like english letters but sound different.**

(These are the most important to learn so you don't get them mixed up.)

**В в** - Pronounced like the "v" in "vet". (Equivalent to the english letter "v").

**Е е** - Pronounced like the "ye" in "yes".

**Н н** - Pronounced like the "n" in "no". (Equivalent to the english letter "n").

**Р р** - Pronounced like the "r" in "run", but it is rolled. (Equivalent to the english letter "r").

**С с** - Pronounced like the "s" in "see". (Equivalent to the english letter "s"). (It might help to remember that it's used like the "s" sound in the english words "centre" and "cent".)

**У у** - Pronounced like the "oo" in "boot" or "root".

**Х х** - Pronounced like the "h" in "hello". However, this is often pronounced more like the "ch" in the Scottish "Loch" or German "Bach", or the mexican pronunciation of "x" in "Mexico".

**Russian letters that look unusual, but have familiar sounds**

**Б б** - Pronounced like the "b" in "bat". (Equivalent to the english letter "b").

**Г г** - Pronounced like the "g" in "go". (Equivalent to the english letter "g").

**Д д** - Pronounced like the "d" in "dog". (Equivalent to the english letter "d").

**З з** - Pronounced like the "z" in "zoo". (Equivalent to the english letter "z").

**И и** - Pronounced like the "i" in "taxi". (Sometimes equivalent to the english letter "i", the short 'ee' sound.). (Note: The hand-written form for "*и*" looks a little like the english "u").

**Л л** - Pronounced like the "l" in "love". (Equivalent to the english letter "l").

**П п** - Pronounced like the "p" in "pot". (Equivalent to the english letter "p").

**Ф ф** - Pronounced like the "f" in "fat". (Equivalent to the english letter "f").

**Э э** - Pronounced like the "e" in "fed".

**New Russian letters and sounds**

(The sounds will be familiar, but they don't have their own letter in English).

**Ю ю** - Pronounced like the "u" in "universe". (Pronounced much like the english word "you").

**Я я** - Pronounced like the "ya" in "yard".

**Ё ё** - Pronounced like "yo" in "yonder". (Note: In modern Russian you may find this letter simply written as Е е.)

**Ж ж** - Like "s" in "measure", "pleasure" or "fusion" or like "g" in colour "beige". (As there is no english symbol for this sound, it is usually represented as "zh")

**Ц ц** - Similar to the "ts" sound in "sits" or "its".

**Ч ч** - Pronounced like the "ch" in "chips" or "church" .

**Ш ш** - Pronounced like the "sh" in shut.

**Щ щ** - Pronounced like "sh" but with your tongue on the roof of your mouth. Try putting your tongue in the same position as you would to say "ch" but say "sh" instead. English speakers may find it hard to define the difference between "ш" and "щ".

**Ы ы** - Pronounced like the "i" in "bit" or "ill". (Said with your tongue slightly back in your mouth.)

**Й й** - This letter is used to form diphthongs. So "oй" is like the "oy" sound in "boy" or "aй" is like the "igh" in "sigh".

**Pronunciation Symbols**

(These letters have no sound on their own, but are still considered letters.).

**Ъ ъ** - The 'Hard Sign' is rarely used. It indicates a slight pause between sylables.

**Ь ь** - The 'Soft Sign' makes the previous letter 'soft'. Think of the "p" sound in the word "pew". (Try inflecting a very slight "y" sound onto letter before it.)

**A note about vowels**

You may have noticed that there are often two forms of a vowel, hard and soft. It may help to note the corresponding vowels.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| А ("a") | Я ("ya") |
| Э ("e") | Е ("ye") |
| У ("oo") | Ю ("yoo") |
| О ("o") | Ё ("yo") |

Ы and И are corresponding vowels but don't really follow this pattern.  
Й is also considered a vowel

The "y" sound is always pronounced. It may take some time to get used to pronouncing it with consonants. Try the following:

Play**Нет** (No) - Pronounced "nyet". This is one syllable.  
Play**Семь** (Seven) - Pronounced "syem".  
Play**Пять** (Five) - Pronounced "pyat"  
**Метрo** (Metro, underground railway) - Pronounced "mye-tro".

Click the green play icon to listen to the word pronounced in Russian.

**Spelling Rule 1.**

There is a rule for spelling in russian you should keep in mind: "Never write Ы, Ю, or Я after the letters 'Г, К, Ж, Х, Ч, Ш, Щ' instead use И, У, А".

It is not important to worry about this yet, but it will help you understand how things are spelt in later lessons.

**A note about stress.**

In most languages, including English, some syllables are emphasised more than others. A good example would be the word “photograph”, where the first syllable is stressed. Compare this to “Photography” where the second symbol is stressed. Phonetically the sound of the vowel changes.

Russian works in much the same way. However in some words it’s important to know which syllable is stressed, this is because the letter “o” is pronounced very differently depending on whether it’s stressed or not. Other stressed vowels are important, but if you only remember the “o” rule, then you will still be able to speak well. Once you start to hear Russians speak, you will be able to copy the way they are pronouncing words. (On this site we will indicate a stressed vowel by underlining it. However, we will only do this to the first occurrences of a word. One syllable words are assumed to be stressed.)

Take notice of the following examples:

Play**До свидания** (good-bye) - Pronounced "da-svee-da-nee-ye". (The до is pronounced as if it is part of the next word).

Play**Спасибо** (thank-you) - Pronounced "spa-see-ba".

Play**Да**(yes) - Pronounced "da".

Play**Нет**(no) - Pronounced "nyet".

Play**сто**(100) - Pronounced "sto".

Play**Пока**(Bye)

Play**Плохо**(Bad)

Play**Хорошо**(Good)

**Some Listening Practice**

There are many more examples in the following lessons that also have Russian audio that you can listen to. It is important you learn the sounds by listening to the Russian audio in the following lessons. If you learn by listening, your speach will be much clearer.

There are hours of audio on this site. Here are some example sentences to get you started. Don't worry about learning the words, just try to learn the sounds of the letters.

Play**Моя мама любит музыку** - (My mother loves music)

Play**шесть книг** - (six books)

Play**семь газет** - (seven newspapers)

Play**восемь зданий** - (eight buildings)

Play**девять собак** - (nine dogs)

Play**десять студентов** - (ten students)

Play**сто рублей** - (one hundred roubles)

Play**сто долларов** - (one hundred dollars)