

Italian pronunciation

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Grammar A1

Italian is almost always read the way it is written: a handful of rules is enough to read any word aloud. Here you learn them by listening: the five vowels, C and G, the special sounds, double consonants (casa or cassa?), word stress, the traps waiting for English speakers and four tongue twisters to practise with.

How this lesson works

Press ► to hear a word and to hear it more slowly. In the listening exercises the page picks a word at random: listen and choose the one you heard. With Record yourself you can record your voice and compare it with the model: the recording stays in your browser and goes nowhere.

The secret of Italian: every letter (almost) always has the same sound. No surprise silent letters, except one: h. Once you know the rules on this page, you can read words you have never seen before. Goodbye, “though, through, tough”!

The five vowels: always clean, always whole

Italian has five vowels and always pronounces them clearly, without sliding into another sound. Look at the faces: your mouth does half the work.

Mouth wide open, like at the doctor's: “Say aaah”.

amica · casa · banana

Mouth half open, a little wide: “Eh? What?”

bene · sera · mele

The photo smile: your lips spread, as in “cheese”.

vino · libri · bici

Round lips, like a surprised “Oh!”

sole · oro · molto

Lips pushed forward, like an owl: “Ooo”.

uva · luna · tu

The last vowel is heard too

In Italian the vowel at the end of a word is never swallowed: pizza, Roma, gelato, notte. It is often the vowel that tells you whether there is one thing or many (la pizza, le pizze) or whether a word is masculine or feminine. Not “pizzuh”: pizz-A!

pizza · pasta · Roma · gelato · notte

Bonus for the curious: E and O have two voices

E and o can be open or closed. A famous example: la pèsca (the peach) and la pèsca (fishing) are spelt the same. Relax: in Milan, Rome and Naples even Italians don't agree, and everyone will understand you anyway.

la pèsca: the peach

la péscia: fishing

C and G: hard or soft?

C and g have two sounds. The next letter decides: before a, o, u they are hard, before e and i they become soft.

Spelling	Sound	Examples
ca · co · cu	hard, like k in “kite”	casa · cosa · cuore
che · chi	hard, like k in “kite”	perché · chiave
ce · ci	soft, like ch in “cheese”	cena · dieci
cia · cio · ciu	soft, like ch in “cheese”	ciao · cioccolato · ciuffo
ga · go · gu	hard, like g in “go”	gatto · gonna · gusto
ghe · ghi	hard, like g in “go”	spaghetti · ghiaccio
ge · gi	soft, like j in “jam”	gelato · girasole
gia · gio · giu	soft, like j in “jam”	giallo · giorno · giugno

H is a wall: placed between c and e or i, it stops the softness. That is why chiave and spaghetti stay hard. So ch in Italian is always a k: Chianti is “kee-anti”, never “chee-anti”.

I is a silent bridge: in ciao, giallo and giorno the i is only there to make the consonant soft. You don’t say “chee-ao” but ciao, one single syllable.

The special sounds

Seven groups of letters to know. Listen to the words and repeat them aloud.

gn as in gnocchi

One single sound, like ny in “canyon” or “onion”. The g is not heard: not “g-nocchi” and not “nocky”, but “nyocki”.

gnocchi · bagno · lasagne · Spagna

gli as in aglio

A soft l, close to lli in “million”, but as one sound: the middle of your tongue presses on the roof of your mouth. The g is silent.

aglio · figlio · famiglia · moglie

sc as in sciarpa

Before e and i it is sh as in “shoe”: scena, pesce. Before a, o, u, and with h, it is sk: scuola, schiena.

sciarpa · pesce · scena · scuola · schiena

z as in pizza and zebra

Two sounds: ts as in “cats” (pizza, grazie) and dz as in “kids” (zebra, zero). Never the English “z” of “zoo”. If you mix up the two, nobody will notice: it changes from region to region.

pizza · grazie · zebra · zero

s as in sole and rosa

At the start of a word it hisses like a snake, as in “sun”: sole, sale. Between two vowels, in the north, it buzzes like the s in “rose”: rosa, casa.

sole · sale · rosa · casa

r as in rana

The tip of your tongue taps once behind your upper teeth: a single r is one tap (caro), a double rr is a little drum roll (carro). Your lips stay still: it is not the English “r”.

rana · Roma · caro · carro

h: the shy letter

It has no sound at all, as in “hour”. Ho, hai, ha, hanno are read “o”, “ai”, “a”, “anno”. It only exists to tell written words apart and to make c and g hard.

ho · hai · ha · hanno

Double consonants: the cat's jump

A double consonant isn't just written twice: it is pronounced longer. Think of a cat about to jump: it stops for a moment, gets ready... and jumps. In cassa your voice rests on the s before moving on; in casa it doesn't.

How to do it: English already has double consonants, but only between two words: “book case”, “mid day”, “unnamed”. Italian does the same thing inside one word. With tt, pp, cc your mouth closes and waits an instant (tutto, pappa). With ss, ll, nn, mm, rr the sound gets longer (cassa, palla, nonno). And the vowel before a double becomes shorter.

One letter changes everything

casa – house

cassa – checkout

nono – ninth

nonno – grandfather

pala – shovel

palla – ball

sete – thirst

sette – seven

caro – expensive

carro – cart

capello – a (single) hair

cappello – hat

pena – pity

penna – pen

sono – I am

sonno – sleepiness

Careful with your New Year's wishes: on 31 December Italians say Buon anno! (Happy New Year), with two n's. With a single n you are wishing good luck... to a part of the body nobody mentions at the dinner table. Italians will laugh, but you: stretch that n!

Stress: where your voice lands

In every word one syllable is stronger than the others. It is usually the second to last, but not always. The accent is written only when it falls on the last vowel. And unlike English, the other vowels don't shrink: banana has three equal, clear a's.

On the second-to-last syllable: almost every word

casa · amico · ragazza · parlare

On the last: the accent is written

città · caffè · perché · papà

On the third-to-last: few words, but common ones

telefono · macchina · sabato · zucchero

One accent, two words

Same letters, different stress: l'ancora is the anchor that holds a ship, ancóra means "again, more". And don't call your dad, papà, "il papà": that's the Pope!

l'ancora: the anchor

ancóra: more, again

il papà: dad

The champion: càpito (I happen to be somewhere), capìto (understood: hai capito?) and capitò (it happened). Three words, the same letters.

The traps for English speakers

Every language stumbles in a different place. These are the six habits that give away an English accent in Italian, and how to fix them.

The good news: you already have most Italian sounds. The ch of "cheese" (ciao), the j of "jam" (gelato), the sh of "shoe" (pesce) and the ts of "cats" (pizza) are all in English.

Vowels that slide

In English "no" becomes "noh-oo" and "say" becomes "seh-ee". In Italian the vowel stays still from start to finish: no, sole, Roma. Keep your mouth frozen in the same position.

no · sole · Roma

Vowels that shrink

English turns unstressed vowels into "uh": "banana" = "buh-NA-nuh". Italian never does: every vowel is full, stressed or not.

banana · pasta · telefono

The r you already know

Say "butter" or "water" the American way, quickly: the tap in the middle is the Italian single r! Now put it in caro and ora. For rr and the r at the start of a word, tap several times.

caro · ora · Roma · carro

Ch is always k

English reads ch as in “church”, Italian as k. Bruschetta is “brus-KET-ta”, not “brushetta”; chiesa (church) starts with a k.

bruschetta · Chianti · chiesa

P and t without a puff of air

Put your hand in front of your mouth and say “pin”: you feel a puff of air. Italian p, t and c don’t have it. Say pasta with your hand there: no wind!

pasta · tutto · Pisa

The silent h

Hotel is “otel”, ho fame is “o fame”. As in “hour”, always.

hotel · ho fame · hanno ragione

Tongue twisters: a gym for your mouth

Gli scioglilingua (literally “tongue melters”) are sentences made on purpose to trip you up. Italians say them to children, and everyone laughs. Listen, repeat slowly, then faster and faster. Record yourself and compare!

“Thirty-three people from Trento entered Trento, all thirty-three trotting.” Trains the r and the double t: a burst of tr.

“Apelles, son of Apollo, made a ball out of chicken skin.” Trains double consonants (palla, pelle, pollo) and the gli sound.

“The cook cooks in the kitchen and says the cook lies there quiet because her cousin doesn’t cook.” Trains hard and soft c: cuoco, cuoce, cucina, giace.

“Clear it is, clear it will be; if it isn’t clear, it will clear up.” Trains s and r: sereno, rasserenarà.

The challenge: can you say the first one three times in a row, fast, without a mistake? Most Italians can’t.

1:1 Italian lessons



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