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The alphabet and pronunciation

Italian is read exactly as it is written, with very few exceptions: learn four pronunciation rules and you can read any word. The real work is in *c*, *g* and double consonants.

C and G: soft or hard

Sound	When	Examples
soft c (ci)	c + e, i	cena, cappuccino, ciao
hard c (k)	c + a, o, u, h	caffè, cornetto, chianti, bruschetta
soft g (gi)	g + e, i	gelato, formaggio, Genova
hard g (gh)	g + a, o, u, h	gatto, ragù, spaghetti, funghi

The letter *h* is never pronounced: it only hardens *c* and *g* (*chianti*, *spaghetti*) or distinguishes *ho* (verb) from *o* (conjunction).

Three special clusters

Cluster	Sound	Examples
gn	like the Spanish ñ, close to the ny in canyon	gnocchi, lasagne, bagno
gli	a soft l, tongue flat on the palate: close to the lli in million	famiglia, aglio, bottiglia
sc + e, i	like the sh in shoe	pesce, prosciutto, uscita

Double consonants change the word

Double consonants are truly heard, longer and stronger: *pala* and *palla* are not the same word, nor are *caro* and *carro*, *sete* and *sette*, *pena* and *penna*.

Stress almost always falls on the second-to-last syllable (*ra-GAZ-zo*). When it falls on the last, it is written: *città*, *caffè*, *perché*.

The most common mistakes

Wrong	Right
un capucino	un cappuccino (the double c is written and heard)
i spagetti	gli spaghetti (the h keeps the g hard)
la ciesa	la chiesa (c + h + ie: hard sound)



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What else you need to know

What the Italian sheet does not have: Italian next to English, the words of the page and a story about the language.

Italian and English side by side

English spelling and sound drifted apart centuries ago; Italian never did. Every letter is pronounced, always the same way, so once you know how *c* and *g* behave you can read any Italian word aloud, even one you have never seen. The trap is the opposite of English: don't swallow final vowels, and don't reduce unstressed ones to a schwa. *Telefono* has four clear vowels, not two and a mumble.

More sounds worth a check

Four spellings that do not behave the way an English reader expects:

Spelling	Sound	Examples
qu	kw, with a clear u	quando, quadro, questo
gu + vowel	gw	lingua, guerra, guanto
z	ts or dz	pizza, grazie · zero, zanzara
s	z-like between vowels in the North, and before b, d, g, l, m, n, r, v	casa, rosa · sbaglio, sveglia

No rule sorts the *z* words, and regions disagree on some of them. Say *pizza* and *grazie* with ts, *zero* and *zanzara* with dz, and copy what you hear for the rest.

Did you know?

Italian spelling is so faithful to pronunciation partly because the standard was modelled on the literary Florentine of Dante, Petrarca and Boccaccio, and settled early: the spelling froze around a pronunciation it still matches. English and French kept evolving away from their written forms; Italian, by historical luck, did not.

The words on this page

Italian	What it is
il cappuccino	morning coffee topped with frothy milk
gli spaghetti	long thin strands you eat with a fork
il formaggio	food made from milk, sliced or grated
la bottiglia	glass container for water or wine
il pesce	it swims in the sea, often served grilled
gli gnocchi	soft little potato dumplings



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The alphabet and pronunciation · exercises

First the chapter check, then five exercises in order of difficulty. No answers here: they are all together on the answers page.

00 · Try it now

Choose the correctly spelled word:

1. Al bar ordino un _____ e un cornetto.
2. Stasera mangiamo _____ fatti in casa.
3. Mi piace il _____ stagionato.
4. Vorrei una _____ d'acqua.
5. Il _____ oggi è freschissimo.

01 · Dura o dolce?

Write D (for *duro*) if the sound is hard (as in *casa*, *gatto*), M (for *morbido*) if it is soft (as in *cena*, *gelato*).

1. cucina → _____
2. cinema → _____
3. gonna → _____
4. giorno → _____
5. chiave → _____
6. gelato → _____
7. spaghetti → _____
8. arancia → _____

02 · I gruppi difficili

Complete with **gn**, **gli** or **sc**.

1. la fami _____ a
2. il ba _____ o
3. il pe _____ e
4. la mon _____ a
5. il fi _____ o
6. lo _____ iatore
7. gli _____ occhi

03 · Dove cade l'accento

Split into syllables and mark the stressed one in capitals. Example: *telefono* → te-LE-fo-no.

1. cucina → _____
2. macchina → _____
3. caffè → _____
4. difficile → _____
5. università → _____
6. sabato → _____
7. perché → _____

04 · Una consonante o due?

Double consonants change the word. Choose the form that matches the meaning given.

1. Prendo la (pala / palla) per giocare a calcio. → _____
2. Metto i soldi in (casa / cassa). → _____
3. Il (nono / nonno) di Marco ha ottant'anni. → _____
4. Ho comprato una (copia / coppia) del giornale. → _____
5. Vado in Italia a (sete / sette) agosto. → _____
6. Bevo un (cafè / caffè). → _____



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05 · Scrivi come si dice

Say the word in your head and write it. Watch the silent **h** and the groups **ch**/**gh**.

1. _____ (io, verbo avere)
2. gli amici / le ami _____ e
3. il _____ iesa → luogo dove si prega
4. lun _____ i (plurale di lungo)
5. _____ anno tre figli
6. il _____ ilo (pasta lunga e sottile)



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Read and understand

This chapter's grammar. Example: a chat with the barista.



1. Come fanno lo spelling gli italiani?
- ○ Con i numeri
- ○ Con i nomi di città
- ○ Con i colori
- ○ Con l'alfabeto inglese

2. L'acca in «Chianti» serve per…
- ○ il suono duro «k»
- ○ il suono dolce «ci»
- ○ dividere le sillabe
- ○ l'accento

3. Quale di queste parole ha il suono duro «k»?
- ○ cena
- ○ ciao
- ○ chiave
- ○ cinema

Read and understand

This chapter's grammar. Example: a café sign.



1. Che cosa si può bere al Bar Centrale?
- ○ un Chianti
- ○ una birra
- ○ un tè freddo
- ○ un'aranciata

2. In «cappuccino» ci sono…
- ○ nessuna lettera doppia
- ○ una lettera doppia
- ○ due lettere doppie
- ○ tre lettere doppie

3. «Pala» e «palla» sono…
- ○ la stessa parola
- ○ due parole diverse
- ○ due modi di scrivere palla
- ○ un errore di stampa

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One more go

More sounds and double letters, one step up: in each sentence, choose the word that is spelled correctly.

1. Domenica andiamo in (*chiesa / ciesa*) con i nonni.
2. Vorrei un etto di (*prosciuto / prosciutto*) crudo.
3. Gli (*spagetti / spaghetti*) sono pronti!
4. Mia figlia studia a (*Peruggia / Perugia*).
5. Il (*cuoco / quoco*) prepara il ragù.
6. Metto lo (*zucchero / zuchero*) nel caffè.
7. Che buoni questi (*funghi / fungi*) trifolati!
8. Ho (*sete / sette*): un bicchiere d'acqua, per favore.
9. La (*famiglia / familia*) di Anna abita a Genova.
10. Compro una (*penna / pena*) nuova per scrivere.

Frequently asked questions

How many letters does the Italian alphabet have?
Twenty-one. The letters *j, k, w, x, y* are not part of the native alphabet: you meet them only in loanwords and foreign names (*jeans, karaoke, weekend, yogurt*), which keep their original spelling.

Is it perché or perchè?
With the acute accent: *perché*. The acute (é) marks a closed e, as in *perché, poiché, né, sé*; the grave (è) marks an open e, as in *è, caffè, cioè*. Many Italians type the wrong one because of keyboard habits, but dictionaries and careful writing keep the distinction.

Do Italians really hear the difference between single and double consonants?
Yes, instantly: the double is held longer, and it changes the word. *Pala* is a shovel, *palla* is a ball; *casa* is a house, *cassa* is a till. If doubles do not exist in your language, practise by exaggerating the pause: *pal-la*.

How do I spell my name over the phone?
Italians spell with city names, not with words: *A come Ancona, B come Bologna, C come Como, D come Domodossola*, then Empoli, Firenze, Genova, Hotel for the *h*, Imola, Livorno, Milano, Napoli, Otranto, Palermo, Quarto, Roma, Savona, Torino, Udine, Venezia, Zara. The foreign letters keep their own names: *j* is *i lunga*, *k* is *cappa*, *w* is *doppia vu*, *y* is *ipsilon*.

Why is telefono stressed on the first syllable?
Because “second to last” is a tendency, not a law. A good many everyday words stress the third from the end: *telefono, macchina, domenica, camera, medico*. Nothing in the spelling warns you, so learn the stress together with the word. It can even change the meaning: *àncora* is an anchor, *ancóra* means “still”.

Why do some tiny words carry an accent: dà, sì, là?
One-syllable words get an accent only to tell apart two words that would look the same: *da* (from) and *dà* (gives), *e* (and) and *è* (is), *si* (oneself) and *sì* (yes), *la* (the) and *là* (there), *te* (you) and *tè* (tea). Leave the accent out and you have written a different word.

Do I have to roll the r?
It helps, but nobody will refuse to serve you. The single *r* is a quick tap of the tongue tip behind the upper teeth, the same movement as the middle of “butter” in American English. The double *rr* is the real roll: *caro* (dear) against *carro* (cart). Some northern Italians say a soft *r* from the back of the throat, the *erre moscia*, and are understood perfectly.

Why is ciao written with an i that I do not hear?
The *i* is only a spelling helper: *c* before *a*, *o*, *u* would be hard, so an *i* softens it. The same silent helper sits in *ciao, cioccolato, giorno, arancia*. You hear it as a real vowel only when the stress falls on it, as in *farmacìa* and *bugìa*.



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APPENDIX · THE EXPLANATION IN ITALIAN

Alfabeto e pronuncia

L'italiano si legge come si scrive, con pochissime eccezioni: imparate quattro regole di pronuncia, saprete leggere qualsiasi parola. Il lavoro vero sta tutto in c, g, e nelle doppie.

C e G: dolci o dure

Suono	Quando	Esempi
c dolce (ci)	c + e, i	cena, cappuccino, ciao
c dura (k)	c + a, o, u, h	caffè, cornetto, chianti, bruschetta
g dolce (gi)	g + e, i	gelato, formaggio, Genova
g dura (gh)	g + a, o, u, h	gatto, ragù, spaghetti, funghi

La h non si pronuncia mai: serve solo a indurire c e g (chianti, spaghetti) o a distinguere ho (verbo) da o (congiunzione).

Tre gruppi speciali

Gruppo	Suono	Esempi
gn	come la ñ spagnola	gnocchi, lasagne, bagno
gli	l morbida, tutta sul palato	famiglia, aglio, bottiglia
sc + e, i	come sh	pesce, prosciutto, uscita

Le doppie cambiano la parola

Le consonanti doppie si sentono davvero, più lunghe e più forti: pala e palla non sono la stessa parola, e nemmeno caro e carro, sete e sette, pena e penna.

L'accento cade quasi sempre sulla penultima sillaba (ra-GAZ-zo). Quando cade sull'ultima, si scrive: città, caffè, perché.

Da sapere

· **sc** ha due suoni: dolce davanti a *e* e *i* (*scena, sciare, pesce*), duro altrove (*scala, scuola, scherzo*). Stessa logica di *c* e *g*, con la *h* che indurisce.

· L'accento tonico non si scrive quasi mai, ma sposta il senso: *ancora* (di nuovo) contro *àncora* (della nave), *princìpi* contro *prìncipi*. Di norma si scrive solo sull'ultima sillaba (*città, perché, così*); negli altri casi si segna solo per sciogliere un dubbio.

· **gli** si legge come un suono unico (*famiglia, moglie*), ma resta *g+l* in poche parole colte: *glicine, negligente, anglicano*.

Gli errori più comuni

Sbagliato	Giusto
un capucino	un cappuccino (la doppia c si scrive e si sente)
i spagetti	gli spaghetti (serve la h per la g dura)
la ciesa	la chiesa (c + h + ie: suono duro)



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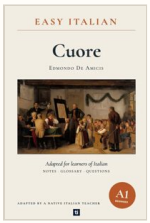
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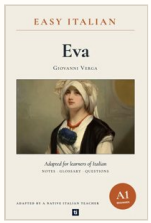
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Read Italian at your level

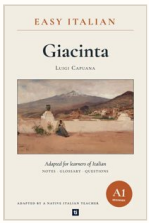
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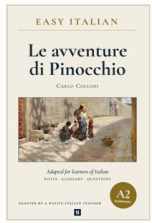
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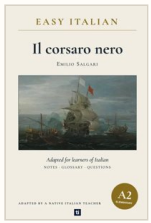
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Answers

All together in one place: check your work here, and leave this page out if you print for a class.

00 · Try it now
1. cappuccino · 2. gli gnocchi · 3. formaggio · 4. bottiglia · 5. pesce

01 · Dura o dolce?
1. D *(la c di cu è dura)* · 2. M · 3. D · 4. M · 5. D *(il gruppo ch indurisce)* · 6. M · 7. D *(il gruppo gh indurisce)* · 8. M

02 · I gruppi difficili
1. gli *(famiglia)* · 2. gn *(bagno)* · 3. sc *(pesce)* · 4. gn *(montagna (mon-ta-gna))* · 5. gli *(figlio)* · 6. sc *(sciatore)* · 7. gn *(gnocchi)*

03 · Dove cade l'accento
1. cu-CI-na · 2. MAC-chi-na · 3. caf-FÈ · 4. dif-FI-ci-le · 5. u-ni-ver-si-TÀ · 6. SA-ba-to · 7. per-CHÉ

04 · Una consonante o due?
1. palla · 2. cassa · 3. nonno · 4. copia · 5. sette · 6. caffè

05 · Scrivi come si dice
1. ho · 2. amiche · 3. la chiesa · 4. lunghi · 5. hanno · 6. lo spaghetto

Read and understand 1
1. b) Con i nomi di città · 2. a) il suono duro «k» · 3. c) chiave

Read and understand 2
1. a) un Chianti · 2. c) due lettere doppie · 3. b) due parole diverse

One more go
1 chiesa · 2 prosciutto · 3 spaghetti · 4 Perugia · 5 cuoco · 6 zucchero · 7 funghi · 8 sete · 9 famiglia · 10 penna



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