

Levin's Guide to the Russian Alphabet

Purpose: The purpose is to help people learn the Cyrillic Alphabet/Russian Version as painlessly as possible. I was motivated to present my systemⁱ for those who are trying to decipher official documents, many handwritten, without knowing the Russian language. Most people doing their genealogies are interested in the names, dates, and places mentioned in the documents. Much of this information can be gleaned without knowing the Russian language, **provided** one can decipher the handwriting. Eventually this **Guide** will develop into a handwriting decipherment guide. It is also experimental, since I have no idea whether or not it really is practical to learn this skill without too much effort. For this reason feedback is welcome.

Section I. The letters of the alphabet are presented here **out of alphabetical order**. (The correct order is given at the end of this section.) The order is designed for ease of learning, going from more familiar to less in a logical pattern. After each letter I give the Russian *name* of the letter, followed by its approximate sound value. The word examples are either familiar proper nouns, or words borrowed from well-known international vocabulary. For example, the first practice word given is **а́том**, which is the Russian word for the English word *atom*. Comments in blue provide additional explanations or background info, not necessary for the main task.

1. These letters are pronounced like similar English words: A E O K M C T

A а 'ah': *a* as in *papa*

К к 'kah': *k* as in *kick*

О о 'awe': pronounced like the vowels in 'coffee talk'—as spoken in New York or Chicago, *not* Los Angeles! (The British RP pronunciation of *awe* is a good approximation.)

С с 'ess': always pronounced like the *c* in *city* or *nice*.

Е е 'yeh' as in *yet*. pronounced with an 'eh' only under stress. Otherwise tends towards 'ee' as in *beet*. [Phonetic note: after a consonant the 'y' *palatalizes* or *softens* the consonant, and is absorbed by it. The consonants affected sound like, e.g., the Spanish ñ or the British *t* in *tune*, *d* in *dune*, except in Russian there are 12 palatalized consonants, and they can occur anywhere in the word.]

М м 'emm': *m* as in *mama*

Т т 'teh': *t* as in *tote*

Try reading these Russian words. The capitalized words are Place Names: Омск, Томск, а́том, ма́ма, такт, коме́та, акт, текст, ма́сса, сексте́т, кот, ма́ска
[A note about practice words: in all cases the words are built from the letters already given. Proper names are given first. The accent mark shows the stressed syllable and is almost never used in normal Russian writing.]

ⁱ An earlier version of my system was published in Levin/Haikalis/Frostenko, *Reading Modern Russian*.

2. These letters look like English letters but have different sounds: Р Н В У Х

Р р 'ehr': A trilled *r* as in Italian or Spanish. Арарáт, мото́р, теа́тр, оркест́р, секрет́, термомо́метр

Н н 'enn': *n* as in *nanny* момéнт, тон, танк, конта́кт, норма, сенáтор

В в 'veh': *v* as in *velvet* Варвара, Вера, Ева, Москва́, ветерáн, самова́р, ве́ктор

У у 'oo': *oo* as in *toot* Сатурн, курс, структу́ра, ва́куум, су́мма

Х х 'kha': *ch* as in *Chanukah* ха́ос, хара́ктер, хромосо́ма, схе́ма

3. Letters that still resemble their Greek letter original models. Г Д Л П Ф

Г г 'geh': *g* as in *go-getter* агрессо́р, грамм, конгресс, орган, грек

Д д 'deh': *d* as in *dodo* Новгород, Одесса, драма, а́дрес, секун́да, до́ктор, ме́тод

Л л 'ell': Hard and soft Л [see above under E] are strikingly different. The hard *л* is like the *l* in *call*; the soft *л* is like the *l* in *leek*. Олег, Александр, солдат, класс, молеку́ла, тала́нт, туалéт, слова́к

П п 'peh': *p* as in *paroose* папа, группа, о́пера, тра́нспорт, пакт, спортсме́н

Ф ф 'eff': *f* as in *fanfare* факт, ко́фе, атмосфе́ра, рефо́рма, пара́граф, платфо́рма

4. Letters borrowed from the Hebrew alphabet. Ш Ц

Ш ш 'shah': *sh* as in *shush* [Cf. Heb שׁ] Наташа, гало́ша, шокола́д, шахмат, душ

Ц ц 'tseh': *ts* as in *bits, tsetse* [Cf. Heb צ] концерт, процент, центр

5. Letters unique to Russian. Ч Щ Б Ж З И Й Э Ю Я Ы Ё Ъ Ы

Ч ч 'ch eh': *ch* as in *church, chachke* Чехов, матч,

Щ щ 'shcha': *shch* as in *fresh cheese, Khrushchev* Хрущёв

Б б 'beh': *b* as in *booboo, Babel* борщ, балéт, алгебра, пробле́ма, банк, баскетбо́л

Ж ж 'zheh': *zh* as in *leisure, pleasure, Jacques* журнал, Жуков, жест

З з 'zeh': *z* as in *zigzag* зоопáрк, зона

И и 'ee': *ee* as in *teepee, Mimi* Минск, Пинск, Америка, Иван, Борис, литература, идеáл, гимнастика, радио, социализм, капитализм, журналист, партизан, зиппо, магазин, спутник, чемпион

Й й 'ee krahtkoye': *y* as in *buy, buoy, toy* [The name means 'short ee'.] Байкал, Толстой, Достоевский, Чайковский, русский, комбайн, волейбо́л, лейтенáнт

Э э 'eh oborotnoye': e as in *Esther, empty* [The name means 'backwards eh'.]
аэродром, эрос, эпоха, эффект

Ю ю 'yoo': yoo as in *you, use, few* [See Phonetic note above.] Юпитер, меню,
юмор, бюро, плюс

Я я 'yah': yah as in *Yankel, yacht* [See Phonetic note above.] Ялта, Мария, яхт,
армия, поляк

Ы ы 'ih': i as in *ilk, kill* Румыния, Громыко, цыган, музыка

Ё ё 'yaw': yaw as in *yawn* [The two dots are hardly ever used in writing, so for reading purposes this letter is indistinguishable from E. Naturally native speakers know when it is pronounced yaw and when yeh.] Кишинёв, актёр, шофёр [Normally written Кишинев, актер, шофер]

Ь ь 'myakhkiy znak' The name means 'soft sign' and at the end of words shows that the preceding consonant is soft (palatalized). It is also used to show a soft consonant followed by another consonant or by an unabsorbed y in *Е, Я, Ю, И*.
апрель, царь, медаль, полька, польский, календарь, большевик, пьедестал, Нью-Йорк

Ъ ъ 'tvyordyy znak' The name means 'hard sign', and before it was dropped in the spelling reform of 1917 it was added after any final consonant that did not merit a soft sign, i.e., it was ubiquitous. Now it survives only to separate a prefix from a root when the prefix ends in a consonant and the root begins with *Е, Я, Ю*. субъект, адъютант

6. The alphabet in its dictionary order:

А Б В Г Д Е* 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
*ё is interalphabetized with е.

Section II. Italics

Here are the groups of letters given above as they appear in italics. This can serve as an introduction to handwriting, since when the italic differs greatly from the standard form, the former is the basis of the script shape.

1. ***А Е О К М С Т а е о к м с т***
2. ***Р Н В У Х р н в у х***
3. ***Г Д Л П Ф г д л п ф***
4. ***Ш Ц ш ц***
5. ***Ч Щ Б Ж З И Й Э Ю Я Ы Ё Ь Ъ ч щ б ж з и й э ю я ы ё ь ъ***

Note carefully the difference between small *м* and *т*, *д* and *б*, *л* and *п*, *и* and *ц*...

Here are practice words already given, but in italics: *медаль, полька, польский, календарь, большевик, актёр, шофёр, Достоевский, сумма, хаос, характер, хромосома, Иван, Борис, литература, идеал, гимнастика, радио, социализм, капитализм, журналист, партизан, мотор, театр, оркестр, секрет,*

термометр, борщ, балет, алгебра, пробле́ма, Чайковский, русский, комбайн, волейбо́л, лейтенант, Москва́, ветера́н, самова́р, ве́ктор, Сатурн, курс, структура, вакуум, банк.

Section III. Practice. Read the following names of the guberniyas of Congress Poland. I switched to Times-Roman font, since it is closer to what you can expect to see in official printed documents. **Note:** The word *guberniya* is Fem. in Russian, so the Adjective forms of the names, e.g., Варшавская = Warsaw as an Adj, agree with the noun, using the ending –ая.

Губернии Царства Польского

Варшавская губерния
Калишская губерния
Келецкая губерния
Ломжинская губерния
Люблинская губерния
Петроковская губерния
Плоцкая губерния
Радомская губерния
Седлецкая губерния
Сувалкская губерния