

Letters and sounds in Ukrainian

Letters		English equivalent	Word	Transcription	Translation
Printed	Written	Sound	Word		
А а	А а	a	бу́с	автомобі́ль [awtomobil']	car
В в	В в	v/w*	ве́л	вікно́ [veeknó]	window
			вчи́ти	вчо́ра [wchóra]	yesterday
			вчи́ти	любо́в [l'oobów]	love
Е е	Е е	e	ле́т	де́рево [dérevo]	tree
И и	И и	i	би́т	кни́га [kníha]	book
І і	І і	ee	бе́г	кві́тка [kveétká]	flower
К к	К к	k	кити́ти	кіт [keet]	cat
М м	М м	m	мо́ре	мо́ре [móre]	sea
Н н	Н н	n	не́б	не́бо [nébo]	sky
О о	О о	o	оли́вець	оли́вець [oleevéts']	pencil
П п	П п	p	па́пір	па́пір [papeér]	paper
Р р	Р р	r	ру́чка	ру́чка [roóchka]	pen
С с	С с	s	се́л	се́ло [seló]	village
Т т	Т т	t	та́т	та́то [táto]	daddy
У у	У у	oo/w*	ту́т	зу́б [zoob]	tooth
			вчи́ти	учо́ра [wchóra]	yesterday
Х х	Х х	kh	хло́п	хло́пчик [khlópchik]	boy

*The letter **в** is pronounced [v] before a vowel, and [w] before a consonant or at the end of a word. Another example: the city of **Львів** in Western Ukraine is pronounced [l'veew].

The letter **у** is pronounced [oo] between consonants, and [w] when it stands at the beginning of a word before a consonant.

You will find that the letters **в** and **у** can be interchanged in the same word (e.g. **вчо́ра** and **учо́ра** above) when they have the same pronunciation [w]. There are certain rules that govern whether you use **в** or **у**; they will be introduced later.

The remaining twenty letters all differ significantly from anything in the English alphabet:

Г [h]	Б [b]	Є [ye]	Ц [ts]
Ґ [g]	Ь [-]	З [z]	Ч [ch]
Д [d]	Ф [f]	Й [yee]	Ш [sh]
Ж [zh]	Ю [yoo]	Ї [y]	Щ [shch]
Л [l]			

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Б б	Б б	b	бу́с	брат [brat]	brother
Г г	Г г	h	го́	га́рний [hárnij]	beautiful
Ґ ґ	Ґ ґ	g	га́н	га́нок [ganok]	porch
Д д	Д д	d	до́	дру́г [drooh]	friend
Є є	Є є	ye	є́	Євге́н [yewhén]	Eugene
Ж ж	Ж ж	zh	жа́	жа́рніст [zhoornal'eést]	journalist
З з	З з	z	зо́	зе́лений [zeléniy]	green
Й й	Й й	yee	я́	я́жа [yeezha]	food
Ї ї	Ї ї	y	ю́	чо́рний [chórnij]	black
Л л	Л л	l	ла́	ла́мпа [lámpa]	lamp
Ф ф	Ф ф	f	фо́	фо́то [fóto]	photograph
Ц ц	Ц ц	ts	це́	це́рква [tsérvka]	church
Ч ч	Ч ч	ch	чу́	чу́рч [cholovík]	man, husband
Ш ш	Ш ш	sh	ша́	ша́пка [sháпка]	hat
Щ щ	Щ щ	shch	щу́	щу́ [kooshch]	bush
Ь ь	Ь ь		ни́	ни́зький [niz'kíy]	low
Ю ю	Ю ю	yoo	ю́	юна́к [yoonák]	young man
Я я	Я я	ya	я́	я́блуко [yáblooko]	apple

Note on transcription: Letters within square brackets will always represent a transcription of the Ukrainian Cyrillic letters into the closest English equivalents that are given in this list. You will sometimes see combinations of letters in the transcription of Ukrainian words that represent quite a different sound from that which the same letters would stand for in an English word. The Ukrainian word **гай** [hay] means 'grove of trees'. The sequence [ay] has more or less the same sound as the letters 'ie' in 'lie' or 'y' in 'my'.

Stress

The stressed part of the word will also be marked in transcription by an accent mark ['] over the vowel that bears the stress. Remember that the double letters [oo] and [ee] in transcription represent one sound. The stress mark will appear on the second letter, e.g. **ручка** [roóchka]. You have to learn the stress position of each new word in Ukrainian; there are no rules to help, unfortunately!

Consonants and vowels

We can now divide the alphabet into **consonants**:

Бб, Вв, Гг, Дд, Жж, Зз, Йй, Кк, Лл, Мм, Нн, Пп, Рр, Сс, Тт, Фф, Хх, Цц, Чч, Шш, Щщ

and **vowels**:

Аа, Ее, Єе, Ии, Іі, Її, Оо, Уу, Юю, Яя

Note that the letters **Э, Ї, Ю, Я**, listed as vowels above, in fact stand for the consonant **Й** followed by the vowels **Е, І, У, А**. In other words these letters stand for two sounds.

Here is the complete Ukrainian alphabet:

**Аа Бб Вв Гг Гг Дд Ее Єе Жж Зз Ии Іі Її Йй
Кк Лл Мм Нн Оо Пп Рр Сс Тт Уу Фф Хх
Цц Чч Шш Щщ Ъь Юю Яя**

Notes:

1 The letter **Щ** stands for a combination of two sounds: **Ш + Ч**. Conversely there are some combinations of two letters that actually stand for one sound:

ДЖ for the 'j' sound in 'jam', e.g. **я ходжу** [ya khojoo] (*I go*);

ДЗ for the 'dz' sound that can be heard at the end of the word 'buds', e.g. **дзеркало** [dzérkalo] (*mirror*).

2 You can see that several of the letters have exactly the same shape in both capital and small forms, e.g. **Вв, Кк, Мм, Нн, Тт**, in contrast to letters in the English alphabet which look like them, e.g. *Bb, Kk, Mm, Hh, Tt*. This similarity is preserved in some of the handwritten forms as well, for example:

PRINTED		HANDWRITTEN	
capital	small	capital	small
В	в	<i>В</i>	<i>в</i>
К	к	<i>К</i>	<i>к</i>
М	м	<i>М</i>	<i>м</i>
Н	н	<i>Н</i>	<i>н</i>
Т	т	<i>Т</i>	<i>т</i>


Examples: квітка *квітка*
кіт *кіт*
вікно *вікно*

3 Look at the handwritten forms of the letters **Л, М, Я** when they are joined to preceding letters.

PRINTED		HANDWRITTEN	
capital	small	capital	small
Л	л	<i>Л</i>	<i>л</i>
М	м	<i>М</i>	<i>м</i>
Я	я	<i>Я</i>	<i>я</i>

Here are some examples of these letters in various combinations; note the hook before the handwritten forms:


олівець *olivets'* земля *zemlia*
зелений *zelenii* лампа *lamna*

 Земля [zeml'á] *the planet Earth* земля [zeml'á] *ground*

You will see that the handwritten form of the letter Л has exactly the same height as the corresponding handwritten forms of а, г, е, ж, и, м, etc.

Make sure that you differentiate М and Т in handwriting, e.g.

PRINTED	HANDWRITTEN
ма́ма	<i>мама</i>
та́то	<i>тато</i>

 ма́ма [máma] *тато*

The 'soft sign'

As we said earlier, there are thirty three letters in the Ukrainian alphabet. However, if you count the number of letters that represent consonants and vowels, you will find only thirty two. There is one letter – ь – that has no sound value of its own, but which has a direct effect on the pronunciation of the consonant that stands before it.

Consonants

Consonants can be pronounced either **hard** or **soft**. Take the Ukrainian letter т; if you pronounce it with the tip of your tongue against your top teeth, you produce the **hard** sound. If you try to pronounce the same sound with the tip of your tongue against the palate, you will automatically produce the **soft** sound. Try the same thing with some other Ukrainian consonants: л, ц, н. First try to say the hard sound followed by the vowel а: та – ла – ца – на.

Now try the **soft** equivalent with the same vowel sound, but look at how we write them together: тя – ля – ця – ня.

тя – ля – ця – ня

The difference between hard and soft consonants can also occur at the end of words or in front of another consonant inside a word. Try to pronounce the vowel а before the hard consonants: ат – ал – ац – ан. Now look at how we write the soft equivalent; try to read the following sequences: ать – аль – аць – ань.

ать – аль – аць – ань

The letter ь is called the '**soft sign**'; it has no sound of its own, but is used to show that the consonant that stands before it is a soft one. The letter will be represented in transcription by an **inverted comma** ['].

Just to make matters more complicated the soft sign normally appears as an ordinary apostrophe ['] or as an acute accent ['] or is omitted entirely when Ukrainian words (most frequently, placenames and personal names) are written in the Latin alphabet. The female first name Ольга will appear as [ól'ha] as a guide to understanding the Ukrainian letters in this chapter, but would normally be written as Ol'ha, Ol'ha or Olha. The city of Львів appears as [l'veev] in our transcription system in this chapter, but normally looks like L'viv, L'viv or Lviv. In later units, when the transcription system is no longer being used, you will find Ol'ha and L'viv.

Here are some examples of actual Ukrainian words:

день [den']	<i>day</i>	<i>день</i>
учитель [wchítel']	<i>teacher</i>	<i>учитель</i>
дóнька [dón'ka]	<i>daughter</i>	<i>донька</i>
низький [niz'kíy]	<i>low</i>	<i>низький</i>

Note that the handwritten form of the soft sign looks something like the English 'b', but has a shorter downward stroke.

Vowels

Let's look again at the vowel letters that denote sounds beginning with й [y]: я [ya], ю [yoo], є [ye], ї [yee]. When we read the letters in the alphabet, they denote two sounds: [y] followed by a vowel. This combination of sounds occurs very frequently in Ukrainian words:

яблуко [yáblooko]	<i>apple</i>	Євгѐн [yewhén]	<i>Eugene</i>
юна́к [yoonák]	<i>young man</i>	їжа [yéczha]	<i>food</i>

Three of these letters (я, ю, є) can also be used to show that a consonant occurring before them is to be pronounced soft, e.g. **тя** [t'a], **лю** [l'oo], **не** [n'e]. As you can see, the [y] sound before the vowel {a, oo, e} disappears.

Now let's have some more practice:

який [yakiy] <i>what kind of?</i>	любов [l'oo'bo'v] <i>love</i>
Юрій [yoo'riy] <i>George</i>	цирк [tsirk] <i>circus</i>
лялька [l'a'l'ka] <i>doll</i>	лампа [lám'pa] <i>lamp</i>

The letter ґ is best described as lazy; it can only stand for the sounds [y] + [ee].

Let's go over this ground again. How do we know when to read the letters я, ю, є as two sounds when they occur inside a word, and when to read them as one?

They are read as two sounds when they occur after a vowel, e.g. **по́езія** [po'eze'ya] (*poetry*), **ше́я** [she'ya] (*neck*). We also read them as two sounds when between a consonant and one of the letters я, ю, є, ґ you see an apostrophe ['] (not the reverse one ['] that we are using in the transcription to denote soft consonants!). This denotes that the consonant is to be pronounced 'hard' with a following clear 'y' sound before the vowel. Here are some examples:

ім'я [eemyá]	<i>name</i>
здоров'я [zdo'ro'vya]	<i>health</i>
прем'єра [premye'ra]	<i>first night of a play</i>
інтерв'ю [eentervyoo'b]	<i>interview</i>

Now let's look at how these letters work together to form words. In Ukrainian we say most words just as we write them, and write them just as we say them. This phonetic principle in Ukrainian works most of the time.

Pronunciation exercises

Remember that the stress marks are intended as a guide to help you with pronunciation. They are not used in everyday printed texts, and you do not need to write them except as a means of helping you memorise the position of the stress in each new word that you meet.

1 Reading practice

- (a) The first group of letters are close to their English counterparts in both shape and the sound that they represent.

А	Е	З	І	К	М	О	С	Т
Аа		[a]			Ее	[e in let]		
Зз		[z]			Іі	[ee]		
Кк		[k]			Мм	[m]		
Оо		[o]			Сс	[s]		
Тт		[t]						

замо́к
міст
місто
сім
кіт

- (b) This second group contains letters some of which look like English letters but in fact represent different sounds.

В	Д	И	Н	Р	У	Х
Вв		[v, w]			Дд	[d]
Ии		[i]			Нн	[n]
Рр		[r]			Уу	[oo]
Хх		[kh]				

Ри́нок
рис
ка́ва
ві́сім
тури́ст
рука́
ніс
ву́хо

- (c) This third group contains letters that are quite unlike anything in the English alphabet.

Б	Г	Ґ	Є	Ж	Ї	Й	Л	П	Ф	Ц	Ч	Ш	Щ	Ю	Я
Бб			[b]						Гг		[h in how]				
Гг			[g in gang]						Єє		[ye in yellow]				
Жж			[zh]						Її		[yee]				
Йй			[y]						Лл		[l]				
Пп			[p]						Фф		[f]				
Цц			[ts]						Чч		[ch]				
Шш			[sh]						Щщ		[shch]				
Юю			[yoo]						Яя		[ya]				

You have now seen all the letters of the Ukrainian alphabet several times over! Here are some lists of words for you to

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practise. How many can you understand already? The first group is the easiest; the third group may require some guesswork.

- (d)
- | | | | | | |
|--------|--------|-------|-------|---------|--------|
| бар | банк | факс | о́фіс | му́зика | таксі |
| акто́р | метро́ | ма́ма | віза | сестра́ | те́ніс |
- (e)
- | | | | | | |
|---------|------------|------------|----------|--------------|-----------|
| бага́ж | бізнес | бізнесме́н | балко́н | баскетбо́л | інфе́кція |
| клі́мат | телефо́н | го́льф | план | калькуля́тор | фо́то |
| вокза́л | троле́йбус | лимо́н | шокола́д | журналі́ст | календа́р |
- (f)
- | | | | | | |
|------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|--------------|--------------|
| компані́я | дире́ктор | ка́ртка | інститу́т | університе́т | папі́р |
| комп'ю́тер | Аме́рика | рестора́н | па́спорт | гара́ж | міні́стр |
| партне́р | адре́са | но́мер | аеропо́рт | докуме́нт | авто́бус |
| де́нь | еконóміка | іде́я | інтерв'ю́ | коме́рція | америка́нець |
| креді́т | ла́мпа | лі́фт | сто́п | сигаре́та | молоко́ |
| бана́н | суп | со́ус | вино́ | сосі́ска | верміше́ль |

2 Reading and writing practice

- (a) Now practise the handwritten forms of the Ukrainian alphabet. You have seen these words already.

Example: Друг *Друг* Фото *Фото*

село́	ді́вчина	вікно́	ла́мпа
кущ	ля́лька	га́нок	папі́р
я́блуко	пое́зія	кіт	їжа
цирк	любо́в	кві́тка	де́рево
Ю́рій	мо́ре		

- (b) Here are some names of towns and rivers in Ukraine. Some you may have heard of, others may be completely new. Practise reading and writing the names.

(i) towns and cities

Ки́їв	Льві́в	Оде́са	Ялта́
Полта́ва	Ужгоро́д	Черка́си	Ха́рків
Черні́гів	Чорно́биль	Луцьк	Жито́мир
Ві́нниця	Терно́піль	Севастопо́ль	Сімферо́поль

(ii) rivers

Дніпро́	Буг	Доне́ць	Дні́стер
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