

한글 [Hangeul] (The Korean alphabet)

The Koreans are very proud of their language and alphabet, furthermore it is essential to understand briefly how and why it was created, especially if you are planning on travelling or living there, and do not want to be called ignorant.

Before the alphabet was created, the Korean people were using Chinese characters, unfortunately only a minority of elites would be able to use them and write properly as the commoners were illiterate. This is why, in order to remedy the situation, and allow everybody to speak for themselves, King Sejong (*Joseon Dynasty*) ordered the creation of a new means of communication which would respect the sounds of the Korean language, and which would be easier and faster to learn for the people. The Korean alphabet- commonly named **Hangeul**- appeared in 1444 and was promulgated two years later.

Hangeul is a writing system that follows the logic of the Western alphabets (but instead of writing one letter after the other, it is written in syllables) which makes Korean much more approachable to read and write than Mandarin or Japanese, as you will not need to learn *Hanja* (Chinese characters) at all. In daily life, people use *Hangeul*, and, the only times you might encounter *Hanja* are when Korean people write their names in a traditional way, or sometimes they may appear in books or on TV but it is on specific occasions and not essential to foreigners at all to survive in the country.

The Korean alphabet is composed of 10 vowels and 14 consonants. The shapes of the consonants are based on the shape of the mouth when the corresponding sound is made. (*we will see it later*)

1) Simple vowels

Vowels in Korean are composed of “sticks” and “dots” glued together to symbolize nature (the sky, the land, a person) which explains why the shape of the letters look as if they were taken from a Tetris game. There are six basic vowels.


Vowels	Pronunciation	Vowels	Pronunciation
ㅏ	a as in “apple”	ㅑ	eo as in “olive”
ㅗ	o as in “omg”	ㅜ	u [oo] as in “oops”
ㅡ	eu as in “em” (them shortened)	ㅣ	i [ee] as in “tea”

When you wish to form a syllable with only a vowel, you need to add **O** before (for **vertical vowels**) or on top of (**horizontal vowels**) the vowel. It is silent but acts as a consonant. **Korean vowels can never be on their own without anything attached to them.** See after → **아 어 오 우 으 이**


2) Simple consonants

There are five basic consonants. Each consonant is based on the shape of the mouth, lips or throat when pronouncing the sound. See below →

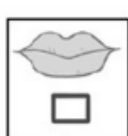
Consonants	Pronunciation
ㄱ	g/k as in "kick" as in "garage"
ㄴ	n as in "notebook"
ㅁ	m as in "marble"
ㅇ	s/sh as in "sorry" as in "shirt"
ㅇ	silent/ng (as a final consonant)




Tongue back
/k, g/




Tongue tip /n/



Lip sound /m/



Tooth
(hissing sound)
/s/



Throat /ng/

3) Syllable construction : simple vowels and consonants

In *hangeul*, a syllable is always composed of at least one vowel (maximum two). It can be combined with one or two consonants. Today, we are going to study simple combinations: **1 vowel + 1 consonant**:

- A vowel by itself → O + vowel → 아 어 오 우 으 이
- Vertical vowels → Consonant on the left →
 - 가 거 기
 - 나 너 니
 - 마 머 미
 - 사 서 시
- Horizontal vowels → Consonant on top →
 - 고 구 그
 - 노 누 느
 - 모 무 므
 - 소 수 스

 The consonant sound always occurs first → ex: 나 [na] ; 머 [meo] ; 수 [su]...

Writing in Korean goes the same way as writing in English, once you memorize the letters, you can combine them together to create syllables.

ex: ㄱ + ㅏ = 가 [ga]

ㅁ + ㅓ = 맏 [meo]

ㅈ + ㅜ = 주 [su]



The transliteration of the Korean alphabet is called *romanization* and is often used to help foreigners read the sounds at the beginning of their learning (e.g. [ga], [meo], [su] on the left).

Exercises: 1/ Practise writing the following combinations

아	아	아						
이	이	이						
오	오	오						
으	으	으						
그	그	그						
나	나	나						
누	누	누						
머	머	머						
모	모	모						
사	사	사						
시	시	시						

2/ Copy the following words

5 → 오 →

2 → 이 →

Cucumber → 오이 →

Child → 아이 →

Cow → 소 →

Singer → 가수 →

Mother → 어머니 →