

01400 The Hindi Alphabet (Devanagari): A Reference Material देवनागरी

Please check the website www.hindibhasha.com to both hear the pronunciation of the sounds and get a dynamic demonstration of how to write the letters.

Definition of Consonants and Vowels

Consonants are sounds that are produced by the tongue or the lips or the glottis closing off or otherwise significantly altering the flow of air through the mouth or nose.

Vowels are sounds that are produced with the mouth open. The position of the tongue or lips or jaw will change to alter the resonating chamber (ie the mouth) and thus to produce different vowel sounds. However, no parts of the vocal apparatus close to shut off the air flow through the mouth or nose.

The Consonants

क	ख	ग	घ	ङ
ka	kha	ga	gha	nga
च	छ	ज	झ	ञ
cha	chha	ja	jha	nya
ट	ठ	ड	ढ	ण
Ta	Tha	Da	Dha	Na
त	थ	द	ध	न
ta	tha	da	dha	na
प	फ	ब	भ	म
pa	pha	ba	bha	ma
य	र	ल	व	
ya	ra	la	va	
श	ष	स	ह	
sha	SHa	sa	ha	

The Consonants Analyzed

	voiceless		voiced			voiced flaps	
	unasp.	asp.	unasp.	asp.	nasal	unasp.	asp.
velar (back of tongue on roof of mouth)	क ka	ख kha	ग ga	घ gha	ङ nga		
palatal (mid-front of tongue on mid-front of roof of mouth)	च cha	छ chha	ज ja	झ jha	ञ nya		
retroflex (underside of tongue tip on mid-front of roof of mouth)	ट Ta	ठ THa	ड Da	ढ DHa	ण Na	ड़ RDa	ढ़ RDHa
dental (tongue tip on teeth)	त ta	थ tha	द da	ध dha	न na		
bilabial (two lips)	प pa	फ pha	ब ba	भ bha	म ma		
glides (between consonant and vowel)	य ya	र ra	ल la	व va			
fricative (slight friction as air goes through)	श sha	ष SHa	स sa	ह ha			

The terms ‘voiceless’ and ‘voiced’ refer to the vibration of the vocal chords. In English one of the essential differences between a ‘b’ and a ‘p’ is that the vocal cords are vibrating (voiced) for the ‘b’ sound and are not vibrating (voiceless) for the ‘p’ sound. You can feel the vocal cords vibrating if you put your fingers on your throat.

‘Aspirated’ refers to a little puff of air that comes with the release of the two articulators. English speakers will tend to have difficulty hearing the difference between the first column of sounds (voiceless, unaspirated) and the third column (voiced unaspirated). This is because the English voiceless sounds are also slightly aspirated. When you take the aspiration away you have fewer cues for hearing the difference. It’s also necessary to learn to pronounce the first column sounds without the slight aspiration. The trick that’s helpful here is to realize that the English sounds are actually unaspirated when they directly follow the sound ‘s’. Thus:

the ‘p’ in ‘spit’ is actually unaspirated (like Hindi प)

the ‘p’ in ‘pit’ is slightly aspirated (more like Hindi फ).

The same is true for the ‘k’ sounds:

the ‘k’ in ‘scat’ is actually unaspirated (like Hindi क)

the ‘k’ in ‘cat’ is slightly aspirated (more like Hindi ख)

and it’s also true of the ‘t’ sounds

the ‘t’ in ‘stun’ is unaspirated (like Hindi ट)

the ‘t’ in ‘ton’ is slightly aspirated (more like Hindi ठ).

The third column of sounds (voiced, unaspirated) are virtually the same as their English counterparts. However, the fourth column (voiced, aspirated) have a strong puff of air with no intervening vowel sound. The trick here is to take an English word like ‘doghouse’. Note that the usual syllable division comes between the ‘g’ and the ‘h’. Shift the syllable division mentally to between the ‘o’ and the ‘g’. Now say ‘doghouse’ and you will get an equivalent to Hindi ष. You need to put your attention on how it feels to pronounce the sound with aspiration in order to get control of the new sound for production in actual speech. Some words that work well for the syllable division transfer trick are ‘page holder’ to learn the ञ sound, ‘mad hatter’ to learn the ध and ढ sounds and ‘abhor’ to learn the ञ sound.

The Vowels

Each of the thirteen Hindi vowel sounds can be written in two different ways. The symbols below I call the “unabridged” vowel symbols.

Unabridged Vowel Symbols

The unabridged symbols are used in two places,

- 1) at the beginning of a word
- 2) immediately after another vowel within a word.

(Note about the transliteration: The sounds for the vowels are something like this;

- ‘a’ like ‘a’ in ‘about’
- ‘aa’ like ‘a’ in ‘father’
- ‘i’ like ‘i’ in ‘pick’
- ‘ii’ like ‘ee’ in ‘peek’
- ‘u’ like ‘u’ in ‘put’
- ‘uu’ like ‘u’ in ‘lute’
- ‘e’ like ‘e’ in ‘Pedro’ or like ‘a’ in ‘cake’
- ‘ai’ like ‘i’ in ‘Mike’ and varying to the ‘e’ in ‘Peg’
- ‘o’ like ‘o’ in ‘poke’
- ‘au’ like ‘o’ in ‘off’
- ‘n’ is used to represent nasalization (which is represented by the ‘dot’ above the line in Devanagari).
- ‘h’ is used to represent a voiceless puff of air

	a about	aa father	i pick	ii peek	u put	uu lute	ri Skt loans only
beg of words or after vowel within a word	अ	आ	इ	ई	उ	ऊ	ऋ
after a consonant within a word		ा	ि	ी	ु	ू	ृ

	e Pedro cake	ai mike varying to peg	o poke	au off	nasaliz ation	voice- less puff of air	
beg of words or after vowel within a word	ए	ऐ	ओ	औ	अं	अः	
after a consonant within a word	े	ै	ो	ौ	ं	ः	

The Inherent Vowel

Notice that the transliteration of the consonant sounds always includes an 'a'. This is what we call the 'inherent vowel'. It is considered to be part of the consonant and will always be there unless

- (a) it has been altered to another vowel sound, or
- (b) some other regular rules of the language cause the 'inherent vowel' to be dropped.

The Abridged Vowel Symbols or 'maatras'

The 'abridged' vowel symbols can occur only in conjunction with a consonant. In the chart below you see each of the abridged vowel symbols with the consonant त (ta).

त	ता	ति	ती	तु	तू	तृ
ta	taa	ti	tii	tu	tuu	tri
ते	तै	तो	तौ	तं	तः	
te	tai	to	tau	ta ⁿ	ta ^h	

Below are each of the abridged vowel symbols with the consonant क (ka)

क	का	कि	की	कु	कू	कृ
ka	kaa	ki	kii	ku	kuu	kri
के	कै	को	कौ	कं	कः	
ke	kai	ko	kau	ka ⁿ	ka ^h	

And here they are with the consonant ब 'ba'.

ब	बा	बि	बी	बु	बू	बृ
ba	baa	bi	bii	bu	buu	bri
बे	बै	बो	बौ	बं	बः	
be	bai	bo	bau	ba ⁿ	ba ^h	

Notice that the vowel symbols remain constant no matter which consonant they are attached to. The only exceptions to this are the consonant vowel combinations

रु 'ru' and रू 'ruu'.

Compare and Contrast the Unabridged and the Abridged Vowel Symbols

अ	आ	इ	ई	उ	ऊ	ऋ
	।	ि	ी	ु	ू	ृ
a	aa	i	ii	u	uu	ri

ए	ऐ	ओ	औ	अं	अः
े	ै	ो	ौ	ं	ः
e	ai	o	au	a ⁿ	a ^h

See 01401 Vowel Table, showing the individual unabridged vowels and each consonant together with each of the abridged vowel symbols or ‘maatras’

Consonant Clusters or ‘Conjuncts’

When two consonants are articulated together with no intervening vowel, it is called a consonant cluster (such as the ‘st’ and ‘ng’ of the word ‘sting’ in English. When such combinations occur in Hindi the shape of the first element of the cluster usually changes. If there is a vertical line in the consonant, it will be dropped and the following sound symbol will be attached directly to the modified first symbol. Thus ‘sta’, made up of the symbols स and त come together as स्त. Once you are familiar with the shapes of the letters it is usually fairly easy to figure out the conjunct symbols.

See 01402 Conjunct Table for a chart showing all the possible consonant clusters or ‘Conjuncts’ used in Hindi.