

Chapter One

Singular Nouns

Alphabet, Font, and Pronunciation

The Greek Alphabet.

Alphabets and languages are altogether different things, of course. Most languages are primarily mechanisms for putting thoughts into speech. Alphabets are mechanisms for putting speech into writing. The notion of an alphabet was brought to Greece from the Near East sometime about 750 B. C., and over time that original alphabet settled into the standard Greek alphabet with which most Greek literature was written.

A variant of the Greek alphabet eventually found its way to Italy, where it was used by the Romans, whose written Latin became the pattern for most written European languages, including English. So English uses an alphabet descended from the Latin alphabet, and the Latin alphabet was descended from the Greek alphabet. You should not be surprised, then, to find many similarities between the alphabet you already know and the Greek alphabet. In the earliest period Greek was written exclusively in capital letters, usually without punctuation or spacing, sometimes right to left, sometimes left to right, sometimes both directions.

In a few years you can set about learning to read the original inscriptions (“epigraphy”) and early manuscripts (“paleography”) if you want to. In this course, though, you will be learning to read Greek that has been edited and printed in modern typeface, which (just like English) consists mainly of small letters. Consequently, you should pay particular attention to the minuscules (small letters), which are modern printing press versions of a cursive script developed by Medieval scribes.

Font.

A language’s font includes its alphabet, but it may include other conventional elements which help the reader better understand or pronounce what is written. The English font includes accent marks and other elements that help us pronounce foreign words properly (naïve, señor, cliché) and, of course, punctuation marks.

Pronunciation

In the following section you will find reasonable approximations of the sounds represented by the symbols of the Greek alphabet. I am not much inclined at this stage of your education to insist on precise accuracy of pronunciation. In fact, there are at least three serious difficulties involved in trying to replicate the “true” sound of ancient Greek.

First, ancient Greek was spoken in many different localities both inside Greece and around the Mediterranean. There were regional differences in pronunciation of Greek just as there are in modern English. What is the “true” English pronunciation of “Cuba”? You should keep in mind that President Kennedy, from Massachusetts, pronounced it “Cuber.” Louisiana English is not precisely the same as that spoken in Bombay?

Second, “ancient” Greek covers a very long time period. This course begins with the literary Ionic dialect, which stretches back to about 650 B. C. and remains the main source of the Koiné dialect (the language of the New Testament, which was completed about 100 A.D.) You have only to look back the 400 years to Shakespeare to realize how differently English is pronounced now than it was then. It would be naïve to assume that no changes took place in Greek pronunciation in the 700 years from Solon to St. John. To teach you the “true” pronunciation of ancient Greek, we would have to specify a locality, a narrow time period, and probably a social class. The primitive technology of writing, though it does give us a general idea about Greek pronunciation, is simply not up to the task of telling us “the true pronunciation” of ancient Greek.

Third, the ancient Greeks are all dead. If they were alive, we could ask them how they pronounced their words, and they could correct us where we are wrong. If they were alive, and we were hiring one as a butcher, we should no doubt be very concerned not to mispronounce our words and so end up having him butcher our son (υῖός) rather than our hog (ὕος), as is jocularly reported to have happened on occasion in antiquity. But since the ancient Greeks are all dead, the benefits of precise pronunciation in the first year are somewhat limited.

Still, there are practical reasons for attaining to at least a rough approximation of the pronunciation. We will be reading texts together in class, and it will make for a devil of a time if we don’t pronounce things with some uniformity. So, learn the Greek alphabet. Learn to pronounce it. But don’t make yourself miserable about it. The ghosts of Homer and Plato are not looking over your shoulder, ready to ridicule your thick English tongue. For the moment you have the laugh: They’re dead.

Your task

You will need to learn accurately and quickly how Greek is written and pronounced. Students have a tendency either to make too much or too little of the task of learning the alphabet and pronunciation. Those of you who make too *much* of it tend to say to yourselves, “I have to learn a completely different alphabet! And, I’ve always been terrible at pronouncing foreign languages.” I

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urge you to recall, however, that you learned the elements for English writing when you were a very small child, before you learned how to study in a disciplined fashion. But now you are a grown-up, capable of disciplined, systematic study. All you need to do is study and memorize about 30 symbols (most of which will be immediately recognizable to you) and the sounds associated with them. Your mature capacity for focused study makes that task very manageable.

Those of you who are inclined to make too *little* of the task need to hear this: Learning these symbols and the sounds associated with them is certainly not a difficult task, but if you don't actually accomplish that task on schedule, you will fall behind. And trust me, you don't want to fall behind on the first day of this march. Put your butt in a chair and your brain in gear and get to work. If you want to travel with us to the place where all of us can read Greek together, start marching. If you just want to *imagine* yourself reading Greek but have no interest in the actual butt-in-the seat work of learning Greek, ... Well, you probably don't need anyone to tell you what is likely to come of that.

The Greek Alphabet & Font: Chart

The Greek font, consists of a few *vowels* (7), a few *consonants* (17), and a few other marks that help with pronunciation and reading (*accents and other pronunciation marks, and punctuation marks*).

Alphabet

Minuscule	Capital	Name	Working Pronunciation
α.....	A.....	alpha	father
β.....	B.....	beta	boy
γ.....	Γ.....	gamma.....	girl
δ.....	Δ.....	delta	ready
ε.....	E.....	epsilon	red
ζ.....	Z.....	zeta.....	beds or zd
η.....	H.....	eta.....	great
θ.....	Θ.....	theta.....	thirst
ι.....	I.....	iota	green
κ.....	K.....	kappa	back
λ.....	Λ.....	lambda.....	lead
μ.....	M.....	mu	mother
ν.....	N.....	nu	ninny
ξ.....	Ξ.....	xi.....	ax, example
ο.....	O.....	omicron.....	note

Greek Before Christmas

π	Π	pi	p uddle
ρ	Ρ	rho	r eady
σ, ς	Σ	sigma	s tory
τ	Τ	tau	h istory
υ	Υ	upsilon	t ru e
φ	Φ	phi	p hantom
χ	Χ	chi	C hristmas
ψ	Ψ	psi	s top s
ω	Ω	omega	o ld
Ϝ	Ϝ	digamma	w ork
γγ, γκ, γχ, γξ, γμ		angma	a ngle, a nkle, a nxious

Breath Marks

' (above a vowel)	smooth breath	ø [no sound]
ˆ (above a vowel)	rough breath	h elp

Diairesis

¨ (above a vowel)	diairesis	divides a diphthong into two syllables
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Accents

' (above a vowel)	acute accent	indicates stressed syllable
` (above a vowel)	grave accent	indicates stressed syllable
˘ (above a vowel)	circumflex accent	indicates stressed syllable

Punctuation marks

.	period	end of statement [just like our period]
;	hemistop	subdivides a statement [like our semicolon]
?	question mark	end of question [just like our ?]

The Greek Alphabet and Font: Details

Vowels

The main vowels in English are a, e, i, o, and u. Greek has virtually the same written symbols: α, ε, ι, ο, and υ. It also has two additional vowels: η (a lengthened ε) and ω (a lengthened ο).

Diphthongs

Diphthongs are pairs of vowels that are pronounced as a single sound. The Greek diphthongs and their approximate pronunciations are listed below. Notice that the second vowel in the pair is always either ι or υ.

α ι aisle	α υ powder
ε ι they	ε υ eh-oo
η ι they	η υ eh-oo
ο ι oil	ο υ oh-oo (or simply oo)
ω ι oil	ω υ oh-oo
υ ι queen	

Few, if any, of these combinations should seem particularly odd to you since the pronunciation of the diphthong is merely a rushed-up version of the pronunciation of the two vowels separately.

The Diaresis (¨)

Occasionally you will encounter an apparent diphthong with a double dot over the second vowel. This symbol is called a *diaresis* (= *division*) and functions just as it does in the English font—to show that two vowels should be pronounced separately rather than as a diphthong (naïve: *nah-eave*, not *nave*). So, for example the diaresis shows that αἶδώς is pronounced as three (not two) syllables: ἀ/ιδ/ώς.

Breath Marks (´ and ˘)

A vowel sound (single vowel or diphthong) at the *beginning* of a word always includes a breath mark to indicate whether the vowel sound is “aspirated” (preceded by the *h* sound) or not. The breath mark is placed above the vowel sound (above the second vowel in a diphthong).

The **smooth breath mark** ´ indicates that the vowel sound *is not aspirated*: i.e., an *h* sound is not placed in front of it. The smooth breath mark makes no change in the pronunciation of a vowel sound.

The **rough breath mark** ˘ indicates that the vowel sound *is aspirated*: i.e., it is pronounced as though it has an *h* in front of it. The rough breath mark also accompanies initial ρ because initial ρ’s were aspirated. So, you will see words beginning with ρ̣. They are “transliterated” (written in Latin letters) as *rh* as in *rhythm*.

Greek Before Christmas

Examples of smooth breath marks and pronunciations:

ᾱ, ἑ, ῆ, ἰ, ὀ, ὕ, ὦ**ah, eh, ay, ee, oh, oo, ooh**

αἰ, οἰ, οὖ, εἰ**ai, oy, oh-oo, ey**

Examples of rough breath marks and pronunciations:

ᾱ́, ἕ, ῆ́, ἴ, ὄ, ὕ́, ὦ́**ha, he, hay, hee, hoh, hoo, hooh**

αἴ, οἴ, οὖ́, εἴ**hai, hoy, hoh-oo, hey**

Consonants

So, most of the Greek letters representing vowels turn out both to look and to sound rather like the ones you've known since elementary school. The same is true of the consonants. Most of them are old work horses that have served Greek, Roman, and English readers with little change in their shape or pronunciation. A couple are familiar to you through their service as mathematical and scientific symbols.

β, δ, κ, τ No problems here.

ς, σ ς is used only as the last letter of a word. Else, the sound is written σ.

λ Note how much lambda resembles our cursive *l* with the top loop left off.

γ Note how much gamma resembles our cursive *g* with the top loop left open.

π You know Pi from geometry (3.14).

μ Mu (for “microns”) is used by engineers.

Greek also uses three symbols that resemble English letters, but represent completely different consonant sounds than those represented by the English letters they resemble.

ν Nu, the “n” sound. Remember that η is used to represent the long ε sound.

ρ Rho, the “r” sound. Remember that π represents the “p” sound.

χ Chi, the “ch” in *Christmas*; **not** the “x,” “ks” sound of *axe*, and **not** the “ch” in *child*.

That leaves you the huge task of learning five honest-to-goodness new consonant symbols:

ζ Zeta. At different periods in antiquity it was pronounced **zd** and **dz**. I personally pronounce it the latter way, but the Greeks in Homer's and Plato's audiences would probably have pronounced it **zd**.

θ Theta, the “th” sound as in *theatre*, though purists rightly insist on pronouncing it as an aspirated τ (**t...h**).

ξ Xi, the **x** (**ks**, **gs**) sound as in *axe* and *example*.

φ Phi, the **ph** or **f** sound as in *photograph*, though purists rightly insist on pronouncing it as an aspirated π (**p...h**). φ is drawn like an o with a vertical line through it.

ψ Psi, the **ps** sound as in *drops*. ψ is drawn like an v with a vertical line through it.

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Digamma (Ϝ). Prior to the Classical period Greek also contained a *w* sound (as in *water*), which was maintained in some Greek dialects and spelled with the symbol Ϝ. The Greeks called the symbol “digamma” because it looked like *two* capital *gammas* (Γ) stacked together. The letter is extremely rare in actual written Greek, but linguists sometimes use it to clarify certain otherwise odd forms or to show etymological connections.

Angma (γγ, γκ, γχ, γξ, γμ). Gamma (γ) in front of another “guttural” (γ, κ, χ, ξ) or in front of μ, is pronounced like **ng** in *sing*. The Greeks recognized this as a separate letter and called it not “gamma,” but “angma.”

Accents. Greek has three kinds of written accents: ´, ` , and ~ . The differences in pronunciation that they indicate are rather too subtle to concern us now. All you need to notice for now is that *they indicate the stressed syllable*. They are not letters or variants of letters.

Practice Phrases

You will learn to read the Greek alphabet by reading, repeating, and memorizing the pattern phrases on the following pages.

Greek Before Christmas

English	this the Athena	that the head	the battle
Row 1			
Greek	αὕτη ἡ Ἀθήνη	ἐκείνη ἡ κεφαλή	ἡ μάχη
English	this the cithara	a door	this the injustice
Row 2			
Greek	αὕτη ἡ κιθάρη	θύρη	αὕτη ἡ ἀδίκη
English	the wagon	that the table	this the Muse
Row 3			
Greek	ἡ ἄμαξα	ἐκείνη ἡ τράπεζα	αὕτη ἡ μουσα

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English	a sailor	the soldier	that the young man
Row 4			
Greek	ναύτης	ὁ στρατιώτης	ἐκεῖνος ὁ νεανίης
English	this the god	the man	a slave
Row 5			
Greek	οὗτος ὁ θεός	ὁ ἄνθρωπος	δούλος
English	this the goddess	that the road	this the entrance
Row 6			
Greek	αὕτη ἡ θεός	ἐκείνη ἡ ὁδός	αὕτη ἡ ἔσοδος

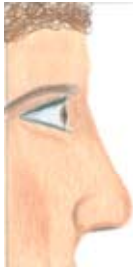
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English	a gift	that the stadium	the face
Row 7			
Greek	δῶρον	ἐκεῖνο τὸ στάδιον	τὸ πρόσωπον
English	this the love	a boy	this the bird
Row 8			
Greek	οὗτος ὁ ἔρως	παῖς	αὕτη ἡ ὄρνις
English	this the body	that the letter	the statue
Row 9			
Greek	τοῦτο τὸ σῶμα	ἐκεῖνο τὸ γράμμα	τὸ ἄγαλμα

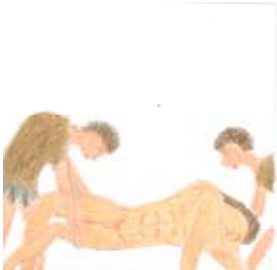
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English	this the cup	that the sphinx	this the hair
Row 10			
Greek	αὕτη ἡ κύλιξ	ἐκείνη ἡ σφίγξ	αὕτη ἡ θρίξ
English	this the cyclops	that the vulture	this the handwash
Row 11			
Greek	οὗτος ὁ κύκλωψ	ἐκεῖνος ὁ γύψ	αὕτη ἡ χέρνιψ
English	an orator	that the mother	this the fire
Row 12			
Greek	ῥήτωρ	ἐκείνη ἡ μήτηρ	τοῦτο τὸ πῦρ

Greek Before Christmas

English	this the Amazon	that the harbor	this the nose
Row 13			
Greek	αὕτη ἡ Ἀμαζών	ἐκεῖνος ὁ λιμὴν	αὕτη ἡ ῥίς
English	an old man	that the elephant	this the fitting thing
Row 14			
Greek	γέρων	ἐκεῖνος ὁ ἐλεφάς	τοῦτο τὸ πρέπον
English	the acropolis	that the base	this the look
Row 15			
Greek	ἡ ἀκρόπολις	ἐκεῖνη ἡ βάσις	αὕτη ἡ ὄψις

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English	this the corpse	that the axe	this the town
Row 16			
Greek	οὗτος ὁ νέκυσ	ἐκεῖνος ὁ πέλεκυς	τοῦτο τὸ ἄστυ
English	a king	that the ship	this the cow
Row 17			
Greek	βασιλεὺς	ἐκείνη ἡ νηὺς	αὕτη ἡ βοῦς
English	this the Socrates	that the warship	this the sword
Row 18			
Greek	οὗτος ὁ Σωκράτης	ἐκείνη ἡ τριήρης	τοῦτο τὸ ξίφος

Questions concerning the pattern phrases

Why do the translations of many phrases contain “a” or “an” but no equivalent Greek word?

Greek doesn't normally use an **indefinite article** (“a” or “an”). Instead, the absence of the **definite article** (“the”) implies an indefiniteness which we must usually translate as “a” or “an.”

Why do the translations of many phrases contain the?

Greek *always* says “this *the* x” instead of “this x” and “that *the* x” instead of “that x” while English *never* says “this (or ‘that’) *the* x.” I have included the English word “the” in the practice phrases because if I had left it out, you would not have understood why the Greek phrase had three words instead of two. I want you to learn the Greek words for “the” from the very beginning because they are the most common words in Greek. On the other hand, “this the X” and “that the X” don't make sense in English. So, I put the word “the” in gray font to indicate that although it is present in the Greek phrase, English omits it.

Why did Greeks say “this/that the x” instead of “this/that x”?

I think it's because Greek doesn't have an indefinite article (*a* battle). The word μάχη by itself means “a battle.” So, if someone had said to Socrates, “αὕτη μάχη,” its sense would have been “this *a* battle.” When we say “this,” though, we always have in mind a specific battle—the specific battle that we are referring to as “this.” So, Greek always says “this the (i.e., the one that I am referring to) battle.”

Why does Greek use “the” with people's names?

Greek often uses “the” with names of people, gods, and places. “*The* Socrates” sounds funny in English, but you need to remember that if the word “the” were left out in Greek, the idea might be heard as something rather like “*a* Socrates.” In fact, when we say “Socrates,” we have a specific person in mind, and the Greek word *the* indicates that sort of specificity.

Would people ever really have said “this (or that) Socrates”?

I know that including “this” with proper names is a bit of a stretch—as though someone would need to distinguish “this Socrates” from “another Socrates.” It's good linguistic practice, though, and it won't do you any harm. Moreover, it's not entirely far-fetched: There were people who had the same name, and there were certainly different local versions of gods with the same name. Occasionally people did need to distinguish “this” Socrates from some other one or “that” particular Athena from some other statue or cult.

Why are there 3 different words for “the” (ὁ, ἡ, τό) and three different words for “this” (οὗτος, αὗτη, τοῦτο) and “that” (ἐκεῖνος, ἐκείνη, ἐκεῖνο)?

If you have studied another foreign language, you are probably familiar with the phenomenon of **grammatical gender** in the words for “the”: “el” (masculine) and “la” (feminine) in Spanish; “le”

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(masculine) and “la” (feminine) in French; “der” (masculine), “die” (feminine), and “das” (neuter) in German.

In Greek any noun that uses ὁ (= “the”) is called a **masculine noun** because ὁ is the form of “the” used with the Greek word for “man.” The masculine forms of “this” and “that” are οὗτος and ἐκεῖνος.

Any noun that uses ἡ (= “the”) is called a **feminine noun** because ἡ is the form of “the” used with the Greek word for “woman.” The feminine forms of “this” and “that” are αὕτη and ἐκείνη.

Any noun that uses τό (= “the”) is called a **neuter noun** because τό is the form of “the” used with neither the word “man” nor the word “woman.” (“Neuter” means “neither” in Latin.) The neuter forms of “this” and “that” are τοῦτο and ἐκεῖνο.

What now?

Go to work, of course! Use whatever tools you have available—computer drills, flash cards, group work with other students, singing in the shower—to thoroughly learn these practice phrases. More specifically,

- Read the practice phrases *aloud* until you can read them all without stumbling over troublesome letters.
- Memorize the nouns represented by each picture, along with the correct form of the word for “the.” (That is, make sure you know the *gender* of the noun.)
- Make sure you understand which form (masculine, feminine, or neuter) of the words “this” and “that” to use with each noun.
- Make sure you can write each practice noun (along with a “this the” or “that the” without looking at the book.
- Make a list of things that you find troublesome or confusing, and ask about them in class.

There’s no way to learn Greek except to learn it. So get busy. You’re on your way to reading Greek. Did you ever imagine you’d actually be taking this journey?