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# Scuola di Italiano

## Impariamo Parlando



## SANDRINO'S ULTIMATE GUIDE TO ITALIAN PRONUNCIATION

Okay, I am going to state the obvious: Italian is a beautiful language! There's a reason that it is called *La Bella Lingua*! Italian is laden with peaks and valleys and spectacular rhythms and melodies. But as a beginning student of Italian, pronunciation can seem anything but simple; am I right?

When you're a new Italian learner and you listen to a fluent speaker – say, a newscaster on *RAI* television (*Radiotelevisione Italiana* - the Italian national radio and television broadcasting company), you might think, “How could I ever sound like that!?”

Fact is, though it might seem both exotic and intimidating at first, Italian pronunciation is actually quite easy. I know what you're thinking... “that's easy for YOU to say, Sandrino.” But it's true; one thing that sets Italian apart from other languages is that the pronunciation rules are absolutely constant. If you don't believe me, look at French!

### ITALIAN IS COMPLETELY PHONETIC

What does this mean? It means that once you learn a few rules – okay, maybe a few more than a few – you are capable of correctly pronouncing ANY Italian word you see written down, even if you've NEVER heard it spoken before!

Let's examine this further so you can jump in and start speaking with confidence.

You'll see that once you've devoted some time **practicing** pronouncing Italian words using these rules, your mouth and your mind will start to work together to discern the patterns. Before you know it, correct Italian pronunciation will become second nature. But – and I've said it so many times – you *must practice...* a lot!

### WHY IS ITALIAN PRONUNCIATION SO MUCH EASIER THAN IT WOULD APPEAR TO BE?

So first, what about English pronunciation? If you see a never-before-seen word written down, are you always one hundred percent certain of its pronunciation? Of course not! That's a problem for many foreign learners of the English language!

English has all sorts of weird pronunciation peculiarities: “Daughter” looks like it *should* rhyme with “laughter”, but does it? No way! Meanwhile, “borough” and “burrow” are pronounced the exact same way. The letter ‘a’ is pronounced several ways, as in “bat” and “cake” and “bar.” Same with “o”; like “long” and “lone” and “money” as well as “cook” and “kook.” These were just a few of many examples.

Thing is, if you can handle that kind of crazy inconsistency, you can definitely handle Italian. It will never play a trick on you like that! You can count on Italian to follow simple and consistent rules of pronunciation.

What does it mean when we say that Italian is a phonetic language? This is fundamental: it means that Italian is spoken *the way that it is written*. Of course, with just a handful of minor, but consistent, exceptions. There are *always* exceptions... without them, this wouldn't be any fun!

It goes without saying that learning pronunciation is always much easier in phonetic languages like Italian and Spanish, than in non-phonetic languages, like English and French. Here's even better news for you: in Italian, **every letter is always spoken**. That's right, there are no silent letters to flummox you in Italian like there are in English (for example, the silent ‘e’ in “home”) and French (so many silent letters in *‘beaucoup’*)!

Italian uses the same alphabet as English, so there are no new symbols for you to memorize – just a couple of diacritical marks (accents) here and there. Wait... I forgot something! in fact, *there are fewer letters to worry about in Italian!* Again, all this brings home the point that all this meant to convince you that learning to read and pronounce Italian correctly is not particularly hard. In fact, it's a lot of fun, and that's a beautiful thing!

### PRESENTING: THE ITALIAN ALPHABET LETTER-BY-LETTER!

**A:** Always pronounced like the ‘a’ in the word ‘bar’. For example, “*albero*” (tree).



## Continua...

**B:** Exactly the same sound as in English.

**C:** If followed by an 'e' or an 'i', it is pronounced like the 'ch' in 'chick'. For example, "*cena*" (dinner) and "*cinema*" (movie theater). If 'c' is followed by an 'he' or 'hi', it will sound like the hard 'c' in 'cat' as in "*cherosene*" (kerosene) and "*chitarra*" (guitar). If the letter 'c' is followed by an 'a', 'o' or 'u', it will be a hard 'c'; for example, "*cane*" (dog), "*cosa*" (thing or what), and "*cura*" (cure). Finally, when 'c' is preceded by an 's' and followed by an 'e' or an 'i', 'sc' is pronounced the way we pronounce 'sh' in English, as in 'she'. For example, "*sciare*" [she-ah-reh] (to ski) and "*pesce*" [peh-sheh] (fish).

**Bonus question:** Quick! You just learned how to pronounce "*pesce*". So... what about the word "*pesche*" (peaches)?

**D:** Exactly the same sound as in English.

**E:** It can sound open (like the 'e' in 'bet') or closed (like the 'a' in 'way'). The difference is basically a regional one (northern Italy vs the south), but this is not something you need to be overly concerned about. It doesn't really matter either way.

**F:** Exactly the same sound as in English.

**G:** The rules for the 'g' are pretty much the same as for the letter 'c'. So, if followed by an 'e' or an 'i', it is pronounced like the 'j' in 'job'. For example, "*generale*" (general) and "*ginocchio*" (knee). If 'g' is followed by an 'he' or 'hi', it will sound like the hard 'g' in 'goat', as in "*ghetto*" (ghetto) and "*ghisa*" (cast iron). If the letter 'g' is followed by an 'a', 'o' or 'u', it will be a hard 'g'; for example, "*gamba*" (leg), "*gonna*" (skirt), and "*gufo*" (owl). Here's where the 'g' differs from the 'c' rules: If followed by an 'n', they will together sound like the Spanish 'ñ' (there's no English equivalent, but it's still easy for English native speakers to master – think of the 'ny' sound in the word 'cognac'). For example, "*gnocchi*" (the little dumpling we all love) and "*diagnosi*" (diagnosis). If 'g' is followed by other consonants, it is pronounced as a hard 'g' as in the English words like 'go.' For example, "*grotta*" (cave) and "*gladiatore*" (gladiator). However, as with 'gn', there is another type of 'gl' sound that is commonly used, and it's pronounced like the 'll' in 'billion.' For example, "*biglietto*" (ticket), "*foglia*" (leaf), and "*gli*" (masculine definite article in the plural, "the").

**H:** Used only to define the pronunciation of 'c' or 'g' as already noted as well as a few conjugations of the verb "*avere*" (to have). Otherwise, 'h' is not used in Italian words; Italians don't really pronounce it as English speakers do. If there are words based in English (as in "hotel" or "hobby") or in French ("hors-d'oeuvre"), Italian speakers simply treat the 'h' as silent.

**I:** Always pronounced like the 'ee' in 'see'. For example, "*importante*" (important).

**J:** This is not used in Italian, but if pronouncing a word based on English, then Italians pronounce it exactly the same as in English. For example, 'jumbo jet' in Italian would be pronounced "*joomboh-jet*". However, occasionally a 'j' will sound like a 'y' such as for the word 'judo' which Italians pronounce like "*yoo-doh*".

**K:** Also not used in Italian. However, the letter "k" is seen in many anglicisms and are freely used. For example, 'ketchup', 'killer', and 'kayak', and the sound is the same as in English.

**L:** Exactly the same sound as in English

**M:** Exactly the same sound as in English

**N:** Exactly the same sound as in English, except when used in the 'gn' combination as discussed above.

**O:** Always pronounced like the 'o' in 'horse', not like the 'o' in 'home'.

**P:** Exactly the same sound as in English

**Q:** Always pronounced like the 'k' in the English word 'bike'. For example, "*quattro*" (four) and "*quaderno*" (school notebook). It is usually followed by the 'u' and together, "qu" is pronounced 'koo'. So, for "*quaderno*", it's pronounced 'kuu-ah-dehr-noh'.



## Continua...

**R:** It is slightly rolled, but not as much as is done in Spanish, and certainly not the guttural sound used in French. For the Italian 'r', the top of the tongue lightly touches the roof of the mouth. For example, "*rana*" (frog) and "*barba*" (beard).

**S:** Exactly the same sound as in English

**T:** Exactly the same sound as in English

**U:** Always pronounced like the 'oo' in 'boo' but not so "rounded", and not like 'book'.

**V:** Exactly the same sound as in English

**W:** Also not used in Italian words. However, the letter 'w' is seen in many anglicisms and is freely used. For example, 'winner', 'weekend', and 'whiskey', and the sound is the same as in English. However, occasionally a 'w' will sound like a 'v' such as for the word 'wafer' which Italians pronounce like "vah-fehr".

**X:** Not commonly used in Italian, and most are scientific terms or originate from languages such as Greek.

**Y:** Also not used in Italian words. However, the letter 'y' is seen in many anglicisms and is freely used. For example, 'yogurt', 'yo-yo', and 'yeti', and the sound is the same as in English. By the way, the actual letter 'Y' is known as "*ipsilon*" in Italian, which is 'upsilon' in English; representing the greek word representing the 'y'.

**Z:** Often pronounced like the 'ts' sound in the English word 'mats' or in 'pizza'. Can also be pronounced like the softer 'ds' as in 'beds'. For example, "*zucchero*" (sugar) and "*zaino*" (backpack - a fave of mine!)

To recap: Isn't it great that many of the letters: b, d, f, j, k, l, m, p, s, t, v, w, x, and y – are the exact same in Italian as they are in English? Additionally, you will rarely encounter j, k, w, x and y in Italian, because they are only used in words that are "borrowed" from other languages. This means that there are really only eight commonly used letters that are different from what you're used to in English. Doesn't all this good news make you want to jump right in and learn even more?

### WHAT ABOUT THOSE ITALIAN DOUBLE CONSONANTS?

You will often see double consonants in written Italian. These double-letters must be pronounced in a more prolonged manner or with a bit more emphasis than when the consonant stands alone. For example, "*casa*" (house) versus "*cassa*" (cash register). Making the distinction between single and double consonants is very important in order to avoid any misunderstanding and potential embarrassment. By the way, we talked about the slight rolling pronunciation of the letter 'r' in Italian. When the 'rr' is present, the roll is a bit longer – more like Spanish. For example, "*caro*" (expensive) versus "*carro*" (cart).

### TIPS AND TRICKS FOR MASTERING ITALIAN PRONUNCIATION

Hopefully, I've just convinced you that Italian pronunciation is much simpler than you first expected. But, do I need to remind you that as with any other skill, practice makes perfect? How trite... but true! The more often you attempt to speak in Italian, the more quickly you will master the pronunciation. The following tips will help you practice better and will make the learning process even easier:

**1. Exaggeration Is Good** – I exaggerate and force my pronunciation at the front of Italian class; you know that. I don't do it only to flaunt my propensity for being a goofball. I just happen to know what many Italian learners already know; that when they feel like they are speaking in a silly caricature of Italian is actually when they sound the best to native Italian speakers. I'm not talking about making fun of how Italians speak, but actually enunciating by exaggerating the accent. Don't be afraid to do this! You might feel silly, but you actually sound good. Practicing your Italian in this manner can help you learn speech patterns quicker.

**2. Listen To Italian Native Speakers** – How can you possibly expect to say anything correctly in Italian if you have not heard a single example of spoken Italian? This means that listening is fundamental to improving your spoken Italian. If you don't live in Italy you obviously can't immerse yourself in the sounds of Italian just by simply going out and about your business. Do as I do: expose yourself to more Italian on a daily basis.



## Continua...

You can do this by watching Italian movies, YouTube videos, Italian television where available, podcasts in Italian, and digitally delivered Italian lessons. Here's the thing... don't be concerned if you cannot understand some or all of what you're listening to. It doesn't matter! If anything, it's about the sounds, the patterns, the intonations and the subtleties of Italian.

**3. Sing Along To Italian Songs** – Simply make a playlist of your favorite Italian music, and do your best to sing along. It can be pop music, opera and even traditional songs like “O Sole Mio.” In my classes, even in my recent food class, *A Tavola! Learning and Cooking Italian*, it wasn't hard to get about forty-five people, most of whom were not students of Italian, to sing Domenico Modugno's *Nel Blu Dipinto di Blu (Volare)*. Some students told me that was the highlight of the course! They really got into it, and even learned some Italian to boot – including great pronunciation! Singing along is a great practice tool because you can do it while you're busy with something else, like unloading the dishwasher (my favorite domestic activity) or taking a walk! When you sing along, you get real-time pronunciation correction from the singers in the recording. As a bonus, the looks you'll get from your neighbors will be legendary!

**4. Repeat Those Words and Phrases that Give You Difficulties** – If you find a particular word that trips you up each and every time, repeat it to yourself correctly over and over again. And then over again. The more times you repeat it, the more likely proper pronunciation will come naturally next time you are trying to use the word in conversation. Sometimes – especially with long words – it's just a case of wrapping your tongue around it and getting your mouth used to forming new sounds and sound combinations. In these cases, a great solution is often to literally 'exercise' your speech muscles and give your mouth 'reps' producing a particular word or sound just like you might do in fitness training by lifting weights in the gym. Don't laugh; it works!

In conclusion, once you learn the rules and practice them regularly a mastery of Italian pronunciation will soon follow. Clearly, to accelerate the learning process, the best ways are through exposure to Italian and repetition of the spoken language. Every second you spend practicing your Italian – whether it's repeating a phrase over and over or singing along to your favorite Italian songs – you are one step closer to attaining perfect pronunciation.

You've learned that Italian is a wonderful phonetic language, therefore the learning process will not be nearly as difficult as it seems at first. In fact, it ought to be pretty easy, and you will even have fun in the process!

**GARANTITO!**

