

# Introduction to Ancient Greek

No study is presumed for the first class, but if you can look over the following pages and begin to try to memorise the alphabet it will help greatly.

The key to language study is consistency. If you can find even 5 or 10 minutes a day to write out the alphabet or something else we learn that will be worth more than several hours work once per week.

The central aim of studying ancient Greek is to learn to read it. However, this is best achieved by practicing also to write and pronounce it. So from the beginning we will try to practice these modes of learning as well.

The study of a language has three aspects:

1. Vocabulary: the words
2. Morphology: the changes in word forms as their role in a sentence changes
3. Syntax: the arrangements of words into phrases, clauses and sentences

As a preliminary we will study the basic elements of the language: the alphabet.

## Video for the alphabet and pronunciation

The Youtube channel for JACT has many helpful videos, including the one below on the alphabet and its pronunciation:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hr5eXakQw4o&list=PLthhDsUWX4ziE6YridKrgjsAwX4gmqgYv>

Like the description below, this video is based on the “reconstructed pronunciation,” now widely accepted in classics departments. People who know Modern Greek have many advantages in learning Ancient Greek. The pronunciation of the Ancient Greek is, however, somewhat different from the Modern.

## Pronunciation

The Greek alphabet was borrowed from the Phoenicians early in the first millennium BC. It has 24 letters in the version printed in modern texts. The pronunciation below is based on that which the scholarship has established for the classical period (fifth century BC).

Upper Case	Lower Case	Name	Transliteration	Pronunciation
A	α	alpha	a, ā	(short:) <i>await</i> (long:) <i>father</i>
B	β	beta	b	<i>bet</i>
Γ	γ	gamma	g	<i>get</i>
Δ	δ	delta	d	<i>did</i>
E	ε	epsilon	e	<i>met</i>
Z	ζ	zeta	z	<i>wisdom</i>
H	η	eta	ē	<i>pair</i> (Fr. <i>fête</i> )
Θ	θ	theta	th	<i>tank</i>
I	ι	iota	i, ī	(short:) <i>bit</i> (long:) <i>meet</i>
K	κ	kappa	k	<i>skid</i>
Λ	λ	lambda	l	<i>let</i>
M	μ	mu	m	<i>met</i>
N	ν	nu	n	<i>net</i>
Ξ	ξ	xi	x	<i>tax</i>
O	ο	omicron	o	<i>top</i>
Π	π	pi	p	<i>pet</i>
P	ρ	rho	r	<i>run</i> (but tapped or trilled)
Σ	σ,s	sigma	s	<i>set</i> (zed before β, γ, μ)
T	τ	tau	t	<i>pet</i>
Υ	υ	upsilon	u, ū	(short:) <i>put</i> (long:) <i>pool</i>
Φ	φ	phi	ph	<i>pot</i>
X	χ	chi	ch	<i>chorus</i>
Ψ	ψ	psi	ps	<i>lapse</i>
Ω	ω	omega	ō	<i>saw</i>

Examples for practice:

ἐγώ *I*                      κόσμος *kosmos*                      ψυχή *soul, vital power*                      τρέχω *I run*  
 λόγος *speech, reason*                      φύσις *nature*                      θεωρία *theory*                      ἄνθρωπος *human being*

## Vowels

Short	Long
α	ᾱ
ε	ῆ
ι	ῖ
ο	ω
υ	ῦ

Long vowels take approximately twice as long to pronounce as short vowels.

## Diphthongs

Some pairs of vowels are pronounced together. Their quantity is always that of a long vowel.

αι high

οι boil

αυ how

ου pool

ει reign

υι twin

ευ (combine ε + υ)

ηυ (similar to ε + υ)

Some examples of the most common diphthongs for practice:

λέγει he says

δαίμόνων of daemons

ἔνιοι some

ἄθανάτους deathless

## Iota Subscript

An iota following a long α, η or ω is usually written beneath the vowel:

α	η	ω
---	---	---

The iota is barely pronounced in the classical period: you can just read the vowel.

## Breathings

All words in Greek that begin with a vowel or diphthong have a mark indicating “aspiration,” which means “breathing.” A rough breathing indicates that the word is aspirated or pronounced with as if preceded by a “h,” and a smooth breathing indicates the absence of aspiration.

The breathing sign appears over the second letter of a diphthong.

Rough Breathing	Smoothing Breathing
ἡδονή pleasure (pronounced “hairdonair”)	ἀρχή origin, principle (pronounced “archair”)
ἑαυτὸν oneself (as an object)	οἰκία house
ὑδωρ water (cf. “hydro”)	εἶναι to be (the infinitive)

## Accents

### 1. Pitch and Stress Accents

In English all words that are two syllables or longer have a stress accent. One syllable is given more emphasis than the other(s) (and sometimes a second syllable or a word that more than two syllables longer is given a secondary accent): *boring, today, understanding*

In Greek accent is one of pitch tone rather than stress or emphasis. In English, changes in tone or pitch are generally used to indicate the meaning of a sentence, but they are not part of the spelling of a particular word. Think of how “no” can be used to signify

- angry repudiation (falling pitch)
- hesitation or query (rising pitch)
- even pitch

### 2. Accent Marks

There are three kinds of accent in Greek. The accent can only be placed on one of the final three vowels. We will pronounce all of these accents as a light stress accent as we do for English words. The circumflex can appear only over a long vowel or diphthong. The accent can only appear on the last three vowels of a syllables and the grave appears only on the last.

Acute (rising pitch)	Grave (absence of pitch)	Circumflex (rising then falling)
ό	ο̄	ω̂
τό <i>the</i>	λογός <i>speech</i>	πρώτος <i>first</i>

## Punctuation

Punctuation	Mark	Example
Comma	,	λόγος,
Period	.	λόγος.
Semicolon	·	λόγος·
Full colon	⋮	λόγος⋮
Question Mark	;	λόγος;

### More examples for practice:

ἐγώ <i>I</i>	κόσμος <i>cosmos</i>	ψυχή <i>soul, vital power</i>	τρέχω <i>I run</i>
λόγος <i>speech, reason</i>	φύσις <i>nature</i>	θεωρίας <i>theory</i>	ἄνθρωπος <i>human being</i>
μετά <i>after</i>	πολιτικός <i>political</i>	φυσικός <i>natural</i>	δύσκολον <i>difficult</i>
δέ <i>and/but</i>	ἐμψυχον <i>ensouled</i>	πάντων <i>of all things</i>	γινώσκειν <i>to know</i>
ἔνιοι <i>some</i>	φασί(ν) <i>they say</i>	τάχιστον <i>fastest</i>	νοῦς <i>mind</i>
θάνατος <i>death</i>	διαφέρει <i>it differs</i>	ζωή <i>life</i>	οὐ <i>no, not</i>