

Italian Pronunciation Guide

Compared to English or French, Italian is an easy language to pronounce. There are a few rules to master but their application is entirely regular. Everything is written and pronounced in a consistent way. There is not even a word for spelling and only those with funny foreign names are asked, “How do you write that?”



Vowels

In Italian there are five vowel symbols and five vowel sounds. Compare and contrast with English which has the same five symbols (and the occasional “y”) and 28 distinct vowel sounds. There are no diphthongs or triphthongs. Where vowels occur consecutively they are pronounced separately. The vowels are:

- a – as in can, fat, pack
- e – as in pet, bent, send
- i – as in feet, meat, bean (the most unintuitive from an English perspective)
- o – as in pot, bomb, flop
- u – as in put, foot, soot

Consonants

- Italian has slightly fewer consonants than English. They occasionally appear in words of foreign or dialect origin but you will not normally encounter J, K, W or X.
- H does appear in written Italian but is never sounded. Its main role is to vary the pronunciation of C and G (see below).
- Rs are rolled in a way that should be familiar to most Scots.
- Double consonants are basically emphasised with a slight hesitation. Thus *capelo* (a hat) is differentiated from *capello* (a hair).
- Double z (as in *pizza*, *piazza*, *mazza*) is pronounced ts.
- The tricky bit for English speakers:
 - C followed by a, o, u is always hard as in cat, cot, cut or *coltello* (knife).
 - C followed by e or i is pronounced ch as in chest, chin or *cinese* (chinese).
 - C followed by an H (followed by e or I) renders the C hard. Thus *pachetto* is pronounced like packet and *bruschetta* also has a hard C.
- The same principles apply here:
 - G followed by an a, o, u is always hard as in get, got, gut or *grappa*.
 - G followed by e or i is pronounced j as in gem, gin or *girasole* (sunflower).
 - G followed by H (followed by i or e) renders the G hard - e.g. *spaghetti*.
- Other combined sounds:
 - S before a C followed by i or e is a “sh” as in shiver or *scimio* (monkey)
 - GL might be characterised as an ly sound which hasn’t many equivalents in English – lieutenant perhaps but can be heard in *tagliatelle*.
 - Likewise GN might be characterised as a ny sound as in news or *gnocchi*.