

# The Korean Alphabet: An Introduction

## History and Form

The Korean alphabet (called "*Hangul*" in Korean) was developed by a team of scholars under King *Se-jong* (1397–1450) of the *Yi* Dynasty and is the most recently invented and most scientifically designed alphabet in the world. "*Hangul*" has only 21 vowel/vowel combinations and 19 consonants, 5 of which are the same symbol repeated twice and 5 of them are simply a consonant with the addition of an accent mark. That makes a total of only 30 basic character shapes to be learned.

Due to western influence "*Hangul*" is often written from left to right and top to bottom like English, but can also be written from top to bottom and right to left like Chinese.

Each letter of the alphabet is a simple shape that represents a sound, (some characters change sounds or just have a harder sound depending on their location in the syllable). Example: The Korean letter "ㄱ" sounds like a G in the initial position in a syllable and like a K in the final position in a syllable as we can see in the word "국 *Guk*,"

국	Here the letter "ㄱ" sounds like G because it is in the initial position in the syllable.
	Between the two consonants is the vowel "ㅜ"; it is represented by a U and sounds like the oo in <u>Pool</u> .
	And the "ㄱ" here in the final position sounds like a K.

"국 *Guk*" is the Korean word for country. (The sound changes are recorded on the last page and are easy to follow).

Each word in Korean is broken down into syllables which are composed of 2 to 4 characters; every syllable starts with a consonant and has a vowel in it. For example: The word for Korea in Korean is "한국 *Han guk*"; here is a breakdown of the letters and syllables for the word "Han guk"

Syllable #1.

한	Consonant; "ㅎ" sounds like the letter H as in <u>h</u> otel.
	Vowel; "ㅏ" sounds like the letter A as in <u>f</u> ather.
	And the "ㄴ" here in the final position sounds like an N.

Syllable #2.

ㄱ	Consonant; "ㄱ" sounds like the letter G in the initial position.
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Vowel; "ㅜ" is represented by the letter U and sounds like oo as in <u>pool</u> .
Consonant; "ㅇ" same as the first letter but sounds like a K because it is in the final position in the syllable.

Although the words are written in syllables they are pronounced in a continuous flow.

Every word in Korean starts with a consonant and has a vowel; however, the location of the vowel can change in relation to the first consonant depending on which vowel is used. For example; "ㅇ" is a consonant which is silent and has no voiced sound in the initial position and "ㅣ" is a vowel which sounds like the i in machine. Because the long axis of the vowel "ㅣ" is up and down it is placed on the right side of the consonant like this "ㅇㅣ" so this syllable sounds like ee as in Lee, the first letter is silent and the second letter sounds like the i in machine. Other vowels like "ㅡ", which sounds like the oo in good have a long axis that runs from side to side; therefore, they are placed underneath the initial consonant like this "ㅇㅡ" so this syllable will sound like the oo from good.

Every one of the vowels fits into either the group with the long axis up and down like "ㅏ, ㅑ, ㅓ, ㅕ, ㅗ, ㅛ, ㅜ, ㅠ, ㅡ" and "ㅣ" which are placed on the right of the consonant; into the group with the long axis from left to right like "ㅓ, ㅕ, ㅗ, ㅛ" and "ㅡ" which are placed under the consonant; or those vowels which have both an up and down long axis and a left to right long axis in the same vowel. These vowels are combinations of 2 vowels like "ㅑ" which is a combination of "ㅡ" and "ㅣ" or "ㅕ" which is a combination of "ㅜ" and "ㅣ"; and the following "ㅑ, ㅓ, ㅕ, ㅗ, ㅛ" which go under and to the right of the consonant like this "ㅇㅑ, ㅇㅓ, ㅇㅕ, ㅇㅗ, ㅇㅛ"

## Syllable Positions

1. Words in Korean are formed by groups of syllables.
2. Every syllable must start with a consonant and have a vowel.
3. The following vertical vowels go along side the initial consonant like this: "ㅇㅏ, ㅇㅑ, ㅇㅓ, ㅇㅕ, ㅇㅗ, ㅇㅛ, ㅇㅜ, ㅇㅠ, ㅇㅡ, ㅇㅣ"
4. The following horizontal vowels go under the initial consonant like this: "ㅇㅓ, ㅇㅕ, ㅇㅗ, ㅇㅛ, ㅇㅡ"
5. These vowel combinations go to the right and under the consonant like this: "ㅇㅑ, ㅇㅓ, ㅇㅕ, ㅇㅗ, ㅇㅛ, ㅇㅜ, ㅇㅠ, ㅇㅡ, ㅇㅣ"

6. There are only six patterns for the formation of syllables. C = Consonant, V = Vowel.

C	V
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 as in "파" (green onion)

C
V

 as in "코" (nose)

C
V
C

 as in "급" (urgent)

C	V
C	

 as in "김" (seaweed)

these are the 4 most common forms.

Those that have two different consonants in the final position like

C	V
C	C

 as in "닭" (chicken)

C	
V	
C	C

 as in "흙" (dirt)

are not that common.

7. The sounds of some consonants change depending on their position in the syllable, for example: "ㄷ" has an S sound when it is the first (initial) consonant in a syllable but changes to a T sound when it is the last (final) consonant in a syllable.

## Korean Alphabet Chart

### CONSONANTS

Sounds in the initial and final positions.

	INITIAL	FINAL
ㄱ	G/K(1)	K
ㄴ	N	N
ㄷ	D	T
ㄹ	R/L(2)	L
ㅁ	M	M
ㅂ	B	P(3)
ㅅ	S	T
ㅇ	silent(4)	NG
ㅈ	J	T
ㅊ	CH	T
ㅋ	K	K
ㅌ	T	T
ㅍ	P	P
ㅎ	H	T

### VOWELS

Romanization

ㅏ	A	as in <u>F</u> ather
ㅑ	AE	<u>P</u> ay
ㅓ	YA	<u>Y</u> acht
ㅕ	YAE	<u>Y</u> ea!
ㅗ	EO	<u>Y</u> oung
ㅛ	E	<u>S</u> et
ㅜ	YEO	<u>Y</u> oung
ㅠ	YE	<u>Y</u> et
ㅡ	O	Y <u>o</u> Yo
ㅘ	WA	<u>W</u> ater
ㅙ	WAE	<u>W</u> aiter
ㅚ	OI	<u>W</u> ait
ㅜㅝ	YO	<u>Y</u> O Y <u>O</u>
ㅟ	U	<u>C</u> ool

ㄱ	GG(5)	K	거	WEO	<u>Won</u>
ㄷ	DD	T	계	WE	<u>Wet</u>
ㅃ	BB	PP	귀	UI	<u>We</u>
ㅅ	SS	T	ㅠ	YU	<u>You</u>
ㅆ	JJ	T	ㅡ	U	<u>Good</u>
			ㄴ	UI	<u>UI</u>
			ㅣ	l(6)	<u>Sheep</u>

1. Sounds like a cross between a G and a K.
2. Sounds like a cross between an R and an L.
3. When this character (in the final position) is directly followed by a "ㄴ" in the next syllable it's sound changes to an M.
4. Because every syllable must start with a consonant the silent "ㅇ" is sometimes used. In syllables that begin with this consonant the first sound pronounced is the vowel.
5. All the double consonants have a harder sound than their single counterparts and are pronounced with no expulsion of air.
6. Except when preceded by an "ㅅ" in which case it sounds like I as in it.

## Handy Word and Phrase List

The following is a list of words phrases in "Hangul" that you can use to practice reading. If you practice with these words you will quickly develop an understanding of "Hangul," and your visit to Korea will be much more enjoyable as you will have a better understanding of the language, and hence the country, you are visiting.

### Vocabulary

### Handy phrases

한국사람	Korean (person)	반갑습니다	Pleased to meet you.
미국사람	American (person)	오래간만입니다	Long time no see
언제	When	<u>noun</u> + 주세요	Please give me + <u>noun</u> .
오늘	Today	갑시다	Let's go!
내일	Tomorrow	한국돈	Korean money
지금	Now	미국돈	American money
어제	Yesterday	<u>noun</u> + 좋아합니다	I like <u>noun</u> .
나중에	Later	어떻게지냈어요	How have you been?
친구	Friend	어디갑니까?	Where are you going?

여자	Woman	들어오세요	Please come in.
남자	Man	앉으세요	Please sit down.
안녕하세요	Hi	얼마입니까?	How much is it?
아침식사	Breakfast	감사합니다	Thank You.
점심식사	Lunch	당신 이름이 무엇입니까?	What's your name?
저녁식사	Dinner	제이름이 + <u>name</u> + 입니다	My name is + <u>name</u> .
좋습니다	Good	이것이 무엇입니까?	What is this?
나쁩니다	Bad	다시 말해주세요	Please say it again.
아가씨	Young lady	천천히 말해주세요	Please speak slowly.
아줌마	Ma'am	영어 할줄압니까?	Can you speak English?
아저씨	Mister, Sir	실례합니다	Excuse me!
미안합니다	Sorry	또 봅시다 <u>noun</u> + 어디 있습니까?	See you again. Where is the <u>noun</u> ?
식당	Restaurant	<u>noun</u> + 원합니다	I want a + <u>noun</u> .
화장실	Bathroom	가고 싶습니다	I want to go.
전화	Telephone	<u>noun</u> + 먹고 싶습니다	I want to eat + <u>noun</u> .
아니요	No	<u>noun</u> + 사고 싶습니다	I want to buy + <u>noun</u> .
네	Yes	저는 피곤합니다	I'm tired.
어디	Where	저는 배고픉니다	I'm hungry.
왜요	Why		

## Grammar Notes

1. Korean sentence structure follows this pattern:

Subject (Subject marker) Verb, as in:

식당(이) 어디 있습니까? (where is a restaurant?)

More complex sentences incorporate an Object and an Object marker:

Subject (subject marker) Object (Object marker) Verb, like this;

저(는) 한국(을) 좋아합니다 (I like Korea.)

2. The understood subject is often dropped in Korean as it is in English;  
so the sentence above can become:

한국(을) 좋아합니다 ([I] like Korea), the understood subject "I" is dropped.

3. Adjectives always go in front of the nouns:  
Adjective Subject (Subject marker) Adjective Object (Object marker) Verb, like  
this:

미국 사람(은) 매운 음식(을) 좋아합니다 (which means; Americans like spicy  
food) 매운 = spicy.

4. Adverbs go in front of the Verb:  
Adverb Verb, as in:  
많이 주세요 (give me a lot).