

Italian Pronunciation Guide: Quick Start

Most **consonants** are pronounced as in English. However, watch out for the following:

- r** ALWAYS with tip of the tongue behind TOP teeth. Tongue is NEVER curled backward as in English. Tongue does NOT drop in back of throat.

R is rolled (trilled) if **doubled** or at the **beginning of a word**.

Practice by being cold! : Brrrrrrrrrrrr. Ex. *burro, ricco*

If single between vowels or after a consonant, “flap” it. It will sound more like an English *d* (only one trill). Ex. *tiro, tre*

- l** Back of tongue is NEVER involved and tip of the tongue does NOT touch bottom teeth. The tip of the tongue touches just in back of **upper** teeth. *lago, alla*

- p,t,c** These sounds are “non-aspirated”; no puff of air after them as in English. Try saying *spin, sting, skin*, gradually removing the *s*. What’s left is an unaspirated *p,t,k* sound. This is what is used in ALL positions in Italian.

fatto, tappa, attacca, piano, caro

- c,g** The letters *c* and *g* in English are pronounced differently depending on what vowel follows them. The same distribution holds for Italian, except that the ***c + e/i*** is not pronounced as *s* as in English, but as English ***ch*** as in ***church***:

HARD sounds: *caro, coro, curare* (like *k* [unaspirated!])

gara, gola, guerra (like hard *g* as in *gas*)

SOFT sounds: ***cedere, città*** (like Eng ***ch*** in ***church***)

gelare, giro (like Eng *g* in *George*)

If the SOFT sounds are required before *a,o,u*, an *-i-* is inserted after the *c* or *g*.

The *-i-* is NOT pronounced as a separate vowel in this case!

ciao (pron. TSCHOW, not TSCHEE-OW), ***cioccolato*** (pron. TSCHO...),

piaciuto (pron. ...TSCHOO...).

già (pron. JA), ***giocare*** (pron. JO...), ***giù*** (pron. JOO)

Conversely, if the HARD sound is needed before *e* or *i*, ADD an **H** (for “hard”)

to indicate this: ***che*** (pron. KAY), ***chi*** (pron. KEY) [unaspirated *k* sound]

or ***lunghe*** (loonGAY), ***lunghi*** (loonGHEE)

Note: *bruschetta* !

- h** Always SILENT in Italian. It is only used as indicated above to indicate hard *c* or *g*, and in a few forms of the verb *avere* ‘to have’: *ho, hai, ha, hanno*

- j** If used at all, sounds like English *y*.

- z** Sounds either like ***ts*** as in *pizza* or ***dz*** as in *zero*. NEVER sounds like English *z*.

Pronounce all double consonants VERY LONG. They often distinguish meaning!

sonno (son-no) = dream

sono (soh-no) = I am, they are

ditta (deet-ta) = company, firm

dita (dee-ta) = fingers

anno (an-no) = year

ano (ah-no) = anus (!)

MANY such pairs!

VOWELS follow the general European standard vowels (as in German or Spanish). Vowels are NEVER reduced to a schwa (*uh*) in unaccented positions; always pronounce the full sound, regardless of where in the word. “Open your mouth” when you speak Italian.

- a** AH as in *father*, but a mix between *father* and *cup*. It is farther forward in the mouth than English *father*.
casa, La Scala

- e** AY as in *May* (closed *e*), but NO OFFGLIDE (*May* is pronounced *May-ee*)
vero, mento, dove, generare phonetic symbol: [e]
This *e* is used in **ALL unaccented** syllables and some accented ones.
OR
EH as in *bed* (open *e*): **only in accented syllables**
piède, caffè phonetic symbol: [ɛ]

- i** like English EE in *feet*
sito, visitare

- o** OH as in *toe* (closed *o*), but NO OFFGLIDE (*toe* is pronounced *TOH-oo*)
dottore, allora, vino phonetic symbol: [o]
This *o* is used in **ALL unaccented** syllables and some accented ones.
OR
AW as in *lord* or *law* (open *o*): **only in accented syllables**
scuola, però phonetic symbol: [ɔ]

- u** like English OO in *scoot*
tu, virtù

Open versus closed pronunciation of *e* and *o* in accented syllables is indicated in Italian dictionaries according to Tuscan usage, which is considered standard Italian. Be aware that there is tremendous variation according to dialect area, just as in the U.S. Don’t worry if you use the ‘wrong’ one, in other words! If you’re unsure, aim somewhere in between the two.

Dictionaries meant for Italians usually indicate “correct” (i.e. standard) pronunciation of all instances of accented *e* and *o* by using *acute accent marks for closed vowels* (é, ó) and *grave accents for open vowels* (è, ò). These accent marks are almost never written EXCEPT to avoid confusion with another word. Note that if the stressed vowel in question is at the **end of the word**, the accent mark **MUST be written**.

Dictionary entries (indicating standard pronunciation but not written):

<i>not usually written</i>		FINAL vowels (these are <u>always</u> written):
OPEN	CLOSED	
<i>piède</i>	<i>véro</i>	<i>caffè</i> (open), <i>perché</i> (closed)
<i>scuòla</i>	<i>dottóre</i>	<i>però</i> (only occurs open in final position)

Standard written Italian: *piède, vero* // *caffè, perché* (or *perchè* in some printings)
scuola, dottore // *però*
 (no accents) // (accents required)

- sc** As with *c* (described above), this combination sounds like *sk* before *a*, *o*, or *u*:
 Ex: *La Scala, scuola, tedesco*
 It sounds like English *sh* before *e* or *i*: *scelto, sci*
 If you need the *sk* sound before *e* or *i*, use the hardening *-h-*: *scheletro, freschi*
 If you need the *sh* sound before *a*, *o*, or *u*, insert the softening *-i-* (which is NOT pronounced): *lascio* [like Engl. **-sho**, not *sheeo*], *lasciare* [**-sha-**, not *-sheea-*].

Palatalized consonants. These take some attention to master. For both of these sounds, hump your tongue up onto the hard ridge behind the front teeth where it seems thickest. The tip of your tongue is not involved. Think of trying to get peanut butter off the roof of your mouth. This has the effect of adding a *y*-like element to the sound. Details:

- gli** Similar to the sound in million, or Italian *l + y* but crammed into one sound. It is always spelled *gli*, but the *-i-* is not pronounced as a full vowel before *a*, *e*, *o*, or *u*. Ex.: *miglia, moglie, gli*
- gn** Like the *-ny-* in *canyon*, but try to make the two sound like one sound. It's like when you taunt: *Nyah, nyahnyah nyah nyah!* Ex: *compagno, gnocchi, montagna*

Word accent: Italian words are *most often* accented on the *second-to-last syllable*, called the penultimate. In Italian, such words are called *parole piane*, or “soft” words, “gentle” words. These have the “default” accent pattern and *do not need a written accent mark*.

Parole piane: *Primo, secondo, molto, felice, Marina, fortuna*, etc. DEFAULT

Some words are accented on the FINAL syllable (the ultima). These are often shortened forms deriving from longer Latin endings. For instance, Lat. *civitatē* became Ital. *città*. Since they are “truncated,” they are called *parole tronche*. There are also some foreign borrowings and a few other Italian words likewise accented on the final syllable.

Parole tronche ALWAYS bear a *written accent mark*! Remember that final accented *e* may be closed (*é*) or open (*è*), but final accented *o* is always pronounced open and written *ò*.

Parole tronche: *facoltà, caffè, perché, virtù, parlò*

The final group is the tricky, but actually really fun one in Italian. These are “sliding” words, *parole sdrucciole*, because the accent ‘slides’ or ‘slips’ farther back in the word to the third-from-the-end (antepenultimate) syllable:

Unfortunately for the learner, these are generally NOT INDICATED by written accents. Drag! Recall that *your book puts a dot* under the accented vowel to help you with these. Recall also that better Italian dictionaries indicate them with a written accent mark (usually grave accent, but *é*, *è*, *ó*, or *ò* depending on closed or open quality). Such accents are NOT part of the official spelling.

Parole sdrucciole *visita, opera, sinonimo, automobile, attitudine, immagine, biologo, periodo*
In your book: *visita, sinonimo, periodo* Dictionary: *visita, òpera, perìodo*, etc.

It gets better! There are instances of *bisdrucchiole* and even *trisdrucchiole* in verbs with pronouns attached:

<i>sdrucchiolo</i>	<i>bisdrucchiolo</i>	<i>trisdrucchiolo</i>
<i>Fatelo!</i> (Do it.)	<i>Fatemelo!</i> (Do it for me.)	<i>Parlinogliene</i> (Talk to them about it.)