

The Greek Alphabet

The letters, their sounds, and reading simple Greek words

A small skill. Best done in short bursts, often.

This belongs to **Henry**.

1. Alphabet

2. Gods

3. Myths

4. Buildings and Games

The big idea

Greek uses different letters from English. Once you know the sound each one makes, you can read Greek words, even ones you have never seen.

How to use this booklet

Read this once. Then you can ignore it.

- You do **not** need to write all 24 letters perfectly. You need to know the common sounds and the tricky ones.
- The table is for looking things up. Do not try to learn it all at once.
- Spend most time on the "false friends" page. Those are the letters that catch people out.
- Nothing here is timed. A few letters at a time is plenty.

The kinds of question

Quick check

Short recall. Answers at the back.

Matching

Match a Greek letter to its English sound.

Reading

Turn a Greek word into English letters. This is called transliteration.

What is transliteration?

The big question: How do you read a word written in Greek letters?

Two different things

Translation means changing the meaning into English.

Transliteration is different. It means swapping each Greek letter for the English letter that makes the same sound. You are not changing the meaning. You are just writing the sounds in our letters.

An example

The Greek word **ΜΥΘΟΣ** is made of the sounds m, u, th, o, s.
Written in English letters that is **muthos**. That is where our word **myth** comes from.

So the trick is simple. Learn the sound each Greek letter makes. Then take a word one letter at a time, and write the sounds down. The word appears.

The 24 letters

For looking up, not for learning all at once. The shaded rows are the tricky ones (next page).

Name	Big	Small	Sound
Alpha	A	α	a, as in cat
Beta	B	β	b
Gamma	Γ	γ	g, as in go
Delta	Δ	δ	d
Epsilon	E	ε	e, short, as in pet
Zeta	Z	ζ	z
Eta	H	η	e, long, as in they
Theta	Θ	θ	th, as in thin
Iota	I	ι	i, as in machine
Kappa	K	κ	k
Lambda	Λ	λ	l
Mu	M	μ	m
Nu	N	ν	n
Xi	Ξ	ξ	x, as in box
Omicron	O	ο	o, short, as in pot
Pi	Π	π	p
Rho	P	ρ	r

Sigma	Σ	σ	s
Tau	Τ	τ	t
Upsilon	Υ	υ	u or y
Phi	Φ	φ	ph, said as f
Chi	Χ	χ	ch, as in loch
Psi	Ψ	ψ	ps, as in lapse
Omega	Ω	ω	o, long, as in go

The false friends

The big question: Which Greek letters look like English letters but sound completely different?

These four catch everyone out. Spend your time here.

Ρ ρ Rho looks like our **P**, but it says **R**. Think of the R in "Rome".

Η η Eta looks like our **H**, but it says a long **E**, as in "they".

Χ χ Chi looks like our **X**, but it says **ch**, as in the Scottish "loch".

Ν ν The small nu looks like our **v**, but it says **n**.

Watch out

The shape of a letter does not tell you its sound. Ρ is the classic trap. It is not a P. It is an R.

Reading simple words

Take the word one letter at a time. Write each sound. The word appears. Notice that many Greek words are the start of words we still use.

ZEYΣ → Z + E + U + S = **Zeus**

ΘΕΟΣ → TH + E + O + S = **theos**, meaning "god"

ΑΘΛΟΝ →

A + TH + L + O + N = **athlon**, a contest. Think "pentathlon".

ΝΙΚΗ → N + I + K + E = **nike**, meaning "victory"

Notice

In ΝΙΚΗ the last letter is eta, so it sounds like a long "e". And the first letter is nu, which says "n" even though it can look like a v.

YOUR TURN

Alphabet: questions

MATCHING

Write the English sound each letter makes.

1. P =

2. H =

3. X =

4. Φ =

READING

Turn each Greek word into English letters.

5. ΒΗΤΑ

6. ΑΛΦΑ

7. ΔΕΛΤΑ

EXPLAIN

8. Why is the Greek letter rho (P) easy to get wrong?

Locking it in

Memory aids

- **Rho says Rrr.** It looks like P, but roll an R like a pirate. P is a trap.
- **Eta, "ee".** It looks like H, but say "ee" as in "see".
- **Chi, "ch".** It looks like X, but clear your throat like "loch".
- **Many Greek words are hiding in English.** Myth, athlete, theology, telephone. Spotting them makes the letters stick.

What you must know to pass comfortably

- The four false friends: rho is R, eta is a long E, chi is ch, nu is n.
- The common sounds: a, b, d, l, m, n, o, p, s, t.
- How to read a short word one letter at a time.
- That transliteration means writing the sounds in English letters, not translating the meaning.

Answers

1. r
2. a long "e" (as in they or see)
3. ch (as in loch)
4. ph, said as f
5. beta
6. alpha
7. delta
8. Because it looks like an English P, but it actually makes the sound R.