

Reading Russian Documents: The Alphabet

Russian “How to” Guide, Beginner Level: Instruction

December 2019

GOAL

This guide will help you to:

- understand a basic history of the Cyrillic alphabet.
- recognize and identify Russian letters – both typed and handwritten.
- learn the English transcription and pronunciation for letters of the Cyrillic alphabet.

INTRODUCTION

The Russian language uses the Cyrillic alphabet which has roots in the mid-ninth century. At this time, a new Slavic Empire known as Moravia was forming in the east. In 862, Prince Rastislav of Moravia requested that missionaries from the Byzantine Empire be sent to teach his people. Shortly thereafter, two brothers, known as Constantine and Methodius, arrived from what is now modern-day Macedonia. Realizing that a written alphabet could aid in spreading the gospel message, Constantine created a written alphabet to translate the Gospels and other religious texts. As a result of his work, the Orthodox Church later canonized Constantine as St. Cyril, Apostle to the Slavs.

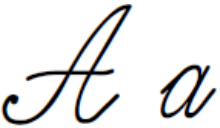

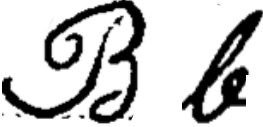





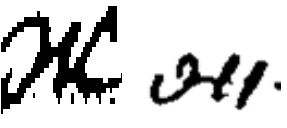
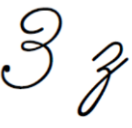
The Russian Empire adopted St. Cyril's alphabet in 988 and used it for centuries until some changes were made in the seventeenth century. In 1672, Tsar Peter the Great came into power and immediately began carrying out several reforms, including an alphabet reform. Peter wanted the Cyrillic characters to appear less Greek and more westernized. As a result, several Greek letters were eliminated and other letters that looked “too” Greek were replaced with Latin visual equivalents. Additionally, Peter the Great replaced the Cyrillic numbering system for the usage of Arabic numerals.


















The next major change to the alphabet came in 1918, following the Russian Revolution. In an effort to expand literacy and simplify language, reformists removed several letters from the alphabet, solidifying the alphabet that is still in use in Russia today. To learn more about the letters of the Russian alphabet as it existed from 1672-1918, continue reading below! For information about reading Old Church Slavonic, please see [“Old Church Slavonic: Numbers, Dates and Months,”](#) by Matthew Bialawa.¹


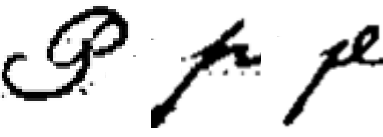

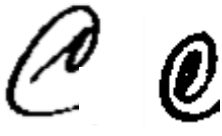
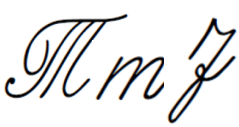





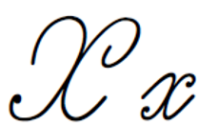
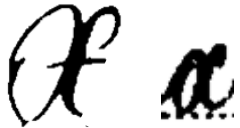

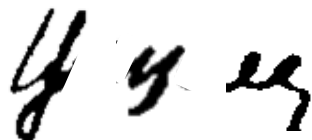
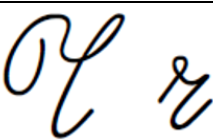
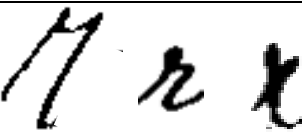


HOW TO

Use the chart found on the following pages to learn to recognize the letters of the Russian alphabet – both printed and typed, as well as the English transcriptions and pronunciations.

¹ Matthew Bialawa, “Old Church Slavonic: Numbers, Dates, and Months,” *East European Genealogical Society*, 8, no. 2 (Winter 1999): 7-14.

Printed Russian	Handwritten Russian	Examples from Documents	English Transcription/ Pronunciation
Аа			a fa <u>th</u> er
Бб			b <u>b</u> ox
Вв			v <u>v</u> ery
Гг			g go
Дд			d <u>d</u> ay
Ее			ye <u>y</u> es
Ёё		Not typically found in historical documents.	yo <u>y</u> olk
Жж			zh meas <u>u</u> re
Зз			z <u>z</u> oo

Printed Russian	Handwritten Russian	Examples from Documents	English Transcription/ Pronunciation
Ии			i <u>see</u>
Іі *			i <u>see</u>
Йй			y boy
Кк			k <u>kite</u>
Лл			l <u>lion</u>
Мм			m <u>man</u>
Нн			n <u>name</u>
Оо			o pol <u>o</u>
Пп			p <u>pet</u>

Printed Russian	Handwritten Russian	Examples from Documents	English Transcription/ Pronunciation
Рр			r <u>run</u>
Сс			s <u>sit</u>
Тт			t <u>tall</u>
Уу			u <u>moon</u>
Фф			f <u>fan</u>
Хх			kh <u>loch</u>
Цц			ts <u>boots</u>
Чч			ch <u>chat</u>
Шш			sh <u>show</u>

Printed Russian	Handwritten Russian	Examples from Documents	English Transcription/ Pronunciation
Щщ		Very few words begin with the uppercase letter Щ	shch fresh <u>ch</u> ese
Ъ**			--- hard sign
Ы			y i <u>ll</u>
Ь			--- soft sign
Ѣѣ*			ye <u>y</u> es
Ээ			e <u>e</u> nd
Юю			yu <u>y</u> ou
Яя			ya <u>y</u> ard
Ѧѧ*			f <u>f</u> an

Vv*		- - -	y it
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*This letter was eliminated in the 1918 spelling reforms.

**The role of this letter was altered in the 1918 spelling reforms.

Summary of 1918 Alphabet Reform Changes

Other changes made by the 1918 alphabet reform are reflected below:

- з → c
- і → и
- ѳ → ф
- ъ → е
- ъ → ∅ (ending no longer used at the conclusion of most masculine words)

Russian Letter Practice

Use the chart above to identify the letters in these names. Then find the Russian transcription, English transliteration and the English pronunciation.

Елена

Е

This letter, which looks similar to a Latin **E**, corresponds with the Russian letter **Е**. **Е** is transliterated as **E** and sounds like “ye” as in yes.

л

This letter begins with a hook and consists of an upwards stroke which immediately comes down to connect with the next letter. This is the lowercase **л**, which is transliterated as **l (L)** and makes the sound “l” as in lion.

е

This letter, which looks similar to a Latin **e** is the Russian letter **е**. The letter **е** is transliterated as **e** and is pronounced “ye” as in yes.

н

This letter looks like an uppercase Latin **H**, but corresponds to a Russian **н**, which is transliterated as **n** and sounds like the “n” in the word name.

а

The final letter is identical to a Latin **a** and is the Russian letter **а**. This letter is transliterated as **a** and is pronounced like the “a” in father.

Handwritten	Russian Transcription	English Transliteration	Pronunciation
	Елена	Elena	Ye-le-na

The Russian letter **А** is identical to the Latin **A** and is also transliterated as **A**. It makes the sound “a” as in in father.

This letter begins with a hook and consists of an upwards stroke which immediately comes down to connect with the next letter. This is the lowercase **л**, which is transliterated as **l (L)** and makes the sound “l” as in lion.

This letter, which looks similar to a Latin **e** is the Russian letter **е**. The letter **е** is transliterated as **e** and is pronounced “ye” as in yes.

This letter is similar to a Latin **k** and corresponds with the Russian letter **к**. It is transliterated as **k** and makes the sound “k” as in kite.

The Russian letter **с** looks like a Latin **c**, but sounds like “s” as in sit. This letter is transliterated as **s**.


This letter is identical to a Latin **a** and is the Russian letter **а**. This letter is transliterated as **a** and is pronounced like the “a” in father.

This letter looks like an uppercase Latin **H**, but corresponds to a Russian **н**, which is transliterated as **n** and sounds like the “n” in the word name.

This variation of the Russian letter **д** looks similar to a traditional Latin **d**. Keep in mind that there are other handwritten variants of the letter **д**. Be sure to look at the guide above to see the other variations. **д** is transliterated as **d** and sounds like the “d” in day.

This letter looks like a Latin **p**, however, it is the Russian letter **р**. **р** is transliterated as **r** and sounds like the “r” in the word run.

The final letter is **ъ**, the tvordi znak, or the hard sign. Prior to 1918, this letter was written at the end of the word, with no effect on pronunciation. This letter was removed during the 1918 alphabet reform.

Handwritten	Russian Transcription	English Transliteration	Pronunciation
	Александръ	Aleksander	Al-eks-an-der

For more practice and information regarding the Russian alphabet, you may find the following links useful:

<https://www.familysearch.org/ask/learningViewer/76>

<http://allbell.tripod.com/cursive/field.html>

<http://www.russianforeveryone.com/RufeA/Lessons/Introduction/Alphabet/Alphabet.htm>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XLxzTWNhMes>

ACTIVITY

Now, test your skills you have learned in this “How to” Guide. The Activity is a way to check your knowledge and let you know you’ve mastered the Guide! Click [here](#) to try out the Activity.