



THE BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO ITALIAN

EVERYDAY VOCABULARY AND GRAMMAR TO HELP YOU
SURVIVE IN ITALIAN (AND THEN SOME!)



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CHAPTER ONE

PRONUNCIATION

PRONUNCIATION

Italian, as I'm sure you will have discovered by now, is a 'challenging' and often confusing language, and for every rule there seem to be twenty-five exceptions. The good news is that one set of rules *is* consistent, and those are the rules governing pronunciation. Once you have mastered these fixed rules your life as a student of Italian will become much easier.

First the vowels:

a is pronounced like *a* as in apple: e.g. **banca**

e sounds like *e* in met: e.g. **fetta**

i is similar to *ea* as in easy: e.g. **vino**

o sounds like the *o* in toffee: e.g. **opera**

u is pronounced *oo* as in cool: e.g. **uno**

Now for the consonants:

C is one of the consonants that most often confuses English speakers.

Take the word *pronunciation* for example: **la pronuncia**. In the English word *pronunciation* the *ci* is pronounced like the word sea, in Italian however **ci** sounds like *chee* as in cheese.

Likewise **c** followed by **e** uses a soft *ch* sound as in chat.

So the rule is: **c** followed by **i** or **e** = soft *ch* sound:

e.g. **cinque, centro, circo, cena.**

C followed by **a, o, u**, or a consonant, on the other hand, makes a hard sound like *c* as in cat: e.g. **casa, cotto, classico, cucina.**

PRONUNCIATION

G follows a similar rule.

G takes on a soft sound when followed by **e** or **i** like the *g* in ginger. Some examples of this are **Genova**, **giraffa** and **agenzia**.

G uses a hard sound like *g* in gap when followed by **a**, **o** or **u**, and most consonants: e.g. **grazie**, **albergo**, **pagare**, **gamba**.

H is easy because it's silent, we don't pronounce it!

e.g. **hotel** pronounced *otel*, **hai** pronounced *ai*, and so on.

R in Italian is quite difficult for English speakers. The Italian **r** is rolled or 'trilled' by letting your tongue flutter at the front of your mouth.

Z has two variations both different from the English *z*.

The **z** as in the Italian words **zebra**, **zio** and **zappa** sounds like a combination of the English letters *d* and *z* = *dz*.

The **z** in words containing **-zione**, such as **stazione** and **colazione**, and most words with double **z** e.g. **pazzo** or **tazza** have a softer sound, rather like a combination of the English letters *t* and *z* = *tz*.

PRONUNCIATION

In addition to memorizing individual letter sounds, you'll also want to practice **combined letter** sounds:

The combination **gn** is pronounced rather like *ni* in the English word onion:
e.g. **giugno, bagno, bisogna**.

The combination **gli** sounds similar to *lli* in the English word million:
e.g. **moglie, figlio, bottiglia**

The combination **sc** before an **i** or an **e** sounds like *sh* in sheeper:
e.g. **sci, uscita, scelta**

In front of **a, o, u**, or **h** however it sounds like *sk* in skin:
e.g. **scarpa, scuola, scopa, scherzo**

Double consonants in Italian are more deliberately pronounced than single consonants. The vowel that comes before the double consonant is usually shortened: **birra, bello, mamma, anno, faccia** and **occhi** are just a few examples.

As a simple rule of thumb you can say that the double consonant takes twice as long to pronounce, although this is not always easy as in the following examples: **mappa, cappello, sabbia** and **gatto**. In these cases it is necessary to insert a slight hesitation or pause between the vowel and the double consonant.



CHAPTER TWO

PERSONAL PRONOUNS

PERSONAL PRONOUNS

PERSONAL PRONOUNS	
io	I
tu	you (singular, informal)
Lei	you (singular, formal)
lui/lei	he/she
noi	we
voi	you (plural)
loro	they (masculine/feminine)

Examples:

Io prendo un Prosecco , e **lei**? (*I'll have a Prosecco, and **you**?*)

Tu vieni alla festa stasera? (Are **you** coming to the party this evening?)

Note that Italians don't tend to use personal pronouns very often when speaking, as the subject is implicit in the verb conjugation. It is only used to put an emphasis on whom they are talking to or about, or when they need to make clear who is carrying out an action.

With this in mind, in spoken Italian, the examples above would be:

Prendo un Prosecco, e lei?

Vieni alla festa stasera?

PERSONAL PRONOUNS

In Italian, we have two main forms of addressing people: the informal **tu** and the formal **lei**. We normally use **tu** with family, friends, and children. **Lei** is used with people we don't know, and professionals, such as doctors, police officers, etc.

The chart below shows how sentences change based on the level of formality.

Informal	Formal	Translation
Piacere di conoscerti.	Piacere di conoscerla.	Pleased to meet you.
Scusa.	Scusi.	Excuse me.
Come ti chiami?	Come si chiama?	What is your name?
Che lavoro fai?	Che lavoro fa?	What is your job?
Dove abiti?	Dove abita?	Where do you live?
Sei sposato/a?	È sposato/a?	Are you married?
Mi puoi dire se c'è una banca qui vicino?	Mi può dire se c'è una banca qui vicino?	Can you tell me if there is a bank near here?
Ti dispiace aspettarmi un attimo?	Le dispiace aspettarmi un attimo?	Do you mind waiting for me a moment?
Non mi aspettare.	Non mi aspetti.	Don't wait for me.
Ti chiamo più tardi.	La chiamo più tardi.	I'll call you later.



CHAPTER THREE

DEFINITE AND INDEFINITE ARTICLES

DEFINITE AND INDEFINITE ARTICLES

All Italian nouns have gender (either masculine or feminine), which is indicated by the accompanying article. A good rule of thumb is that nouns ending in –o are masculine, while nouns ending in –a are feminine. Of course there are exceptions and many nouns that have different endings which can be either masculine or feminine, so you'll have to memorize them.

English uses a/an as the **indefinite article**. This is not too different from Italian, which has four forms.

INDEFINITE ARTICLES	
un, uno	masculine nouns
una, un'	feminine nouns

Masculine: un/uno. **Un** is used when preceding a masculine word (un tavolo /a table, un treno/a train, un orologio/a watch). However if a masculine word begins with **z**, **ps**, or **s+consonant**, we use **uno** (uno zaino/a backpack, uno psicologo /a psychologist, uno studente/a male student).

Feminine: una/un'. **Una** is used before a feminine word starting with a consonant or group of consonants (una sedia/a chair, una zanzara/a mosquito, una studentessa/a female student). **Un'** is used before a feminine word starting with a vowel (un'arancia/an orange, un'estate/a summer).

DEFINITE AND INDEFINITE ARTICLES

English only has one **definite article**, the, which can be used with all nouns, singular or plural (*the cats, the flower*). In Italian, we have eight:

DEFINITE ARTICLES	
il, lo, l'	masculine, singular
gli, i	masculine, plural
la, l'	feminine, singular
le	feminine, plural

Masculine singular: il/l'/lo. **Il** is used with masculine singular nouns (il tavolo, il treno) with the exception of words starting with a vowel in which case **l'** is used (l'orologio, l'ago). **Lo** is used before masculine words starting with **z**, **ps**, or **s+consonant** (lo zaino, lo psicologo, lo studente).

Masculine plural: gli/i. The plural of *il* is **i** (i tavoli, i treni). Meanwhile, both *lo* and *l'* become **gli** (gli zaini, gli psicologi, gli studenti, gli orologi, gli aghi.)

Feminine singular: la/l'. **La** is used with feminine singular nouns (la sedia, la zanzara, la studentessa), while **l'** is used with feminine nouns that begin with a vowel (l'arancia, l'estate).

Feminine plural: le. Both *la* and *l'* become **le** without an apostrophe, ever (le sedie, le zanzare, le studentesse, le arance, le estati).



CHAPTER FOUR

PLURAL NOUNS

PLURAL NOUNS

Unlike most Western European languages, the Italian language pluralizes by changing the final vowel. But as we Italians are very creative and chaotic, we are not happy with just a couple of changes. The chart below outlines the major changes.

MASCULINE		FEMININE	
Sing	Plural	Sing	Plural
-o	-i	-a	-e
-e	-i	-e	-i
-a	-i		

The most common group of nouns ends in **-a** in the feminine singular and in **-o** in the masculine singular. They respectively change to **-e** and **-i**.

la casa → le case

il cappuccino → i cappuccini

Another main group of nouns presents only one ending in the singular (**-e**) and one in the plural (**-i**). The difficulty with this group is that it includes **both masculine and feminine** nouns.

il padre/i padri

la madre/le madri

As you can see from the examples these nouns look exactly the same but they have their own gender, so articles and adjectives have to agree with the noun gender:

il padre buono/**i** padri buoni

la madre buona/**le** madri buone.

PLURAL NOUNS

There are other groups of plurals that behave strangely. These are less common but still important to memorize:

Some nouns change gender from singular to plural. Names of parts of the human body form the bulk of this group.

il braccio → le braccia

il dito → le dita

l'uovo → le uova

There is another group of nouns that have their origins in Greek and these are characterized by the ending **–ma** in the singular, but the gender is masculine.

il problema → i problemi

il teorema → i teoremi

A similar group is composed of nouns ending in **–ista** and it mainly describes professions. These nouns have the same ending in the singular for both the feminine and the masculine, while in the plural they follow the rule of the first group (explained on the last page).

il dentista → i dentisti

la dentista → le dentiste

Finally, there are nouns that **do not change** when they become plural. Within this class of nouns we can distinguish 3 main groups:

Words ending in **–tà**: **la città → le città**

Foreign words: **il bar → i bar**;

Abbreviations of nouns: **la foto → le foto** (from fotografia)



CHAPTER FIVE

VERB CONJUGATION

VERB CONJUGATION

Present tense Italian verb conjugation may seem overwhelming at first, but once you learn the different types of verbs, it becomes much simpler.

-ARE VERBS

The first group of verbs, known as –are verbs, includes verbs that end in –are, such as *amare* and *parlare*. To conjugate –are verbs, drop the –are from the end of the verb (this forms the “root”) and append the correct conjugation suffix. The suffix changes depending on the subject performing the verb, so it’s important to memorize these endings.

Suffixes for –are verbs are as follows:

-ARE VERBS			
io	-o	noi	-iamo
tu	-i	voi	-ate
lui/lei/Lei	-a	loro	-ano

amare (to love)

io amo

tu ami

lui/lei/Lei ama

noi amiamo

voi amate

loro/Loro amano

parlare (to speak)

io parlo

tu parli

lui/lei/Lei parla

noi parliamo

voi parlate

loro/Loro parlano

VERB CONJUGATION

-ERE VERBS

The second group of verbs, known as –ere verbs, includes verbs that end in –ere, such as *credere* and *vedere*. Once again, drop the –ere from the end of the verb and append the correct conjugation suffix.

Suffixes for –ere verbs are as follows:

-ERE VERBS			
io	-o	noi	-iamo
tu	-i	voi	-ete
lui/lei/Lei	-e	loro	-ono

credere (to believe)

io credo

tu credi

lui/lei/Lei crede

noi crediamo

voi credete

loro/Loro credono

vedere (to see)

io vedo

tu vedi

lui/lei/Lei vede

noi vediamo

voi vedete

loro/Loro vedono

VERB CONJUGATION

-IRE VERBS

The third group of verbs, known as –ire verbs, includes verbs that end in –ire, such as *dormire* and *finire*. Once again, you drop the –ire from the end of the verb and append the correct conjugation suffix.

But here's the catch: there are two type of –ire verbs, each with its own set of suffixes. As with most things Italian, you'll have to memorize which –ire verbs take which endings.

Suffixes for the first set –ire verbs are as follows:

-IRE VERBS			
io	-o	noi	-iamo
tu	-i	voi	-ite
lui/lei/Lei	-e	loro	-ono

dormire (to sleep)

io dorm**o**

tu dorm**i**

lui/lei/Lei dorm**e**

noi dorm**iamo**

voi dorm**ite**

loro/Loro dorm**ono**

partire (to leave)

io part**o**

tu part**i**

lui/lei/Lei part**e**

noi part**iamo**

voi part**ite**

loro/Loro part**ono**

VERB CONJUGATION

-IRE VERBS

Suffixes for the second set of –ire verbs are a little more complex:

-IRE VERBS			
io	-isco	noi	-iamo
tu	-isci	voi	-ite
lui/lei/Lei	-isce	loro	-iscono

finire (to finish)

io fin**isco**

tu fin**isci**

lui/lei/Lei fin**isce**

noi fin**iamo**

voi fin**ite**

loro/Loro fin**iscono**

capire (to understand)

io cap**isco**

tu cap**isci**

lui/lei/Lei cap**isce**

noi cap**iamo**

voi cap**ite**

loro/Loro cap**iscono**

Other verbs that take these endings include:

preferire (to prefer)

costruire (to build)

pulire (to clean)

impedire (to prevent)

fornire (to provide)

colpire (to hit)



CHAPTER SIX

NUMBERS 1-100

NUMBERS 1-100

Numbers 1-20	
1	uno
2	due
3	tre
4	quattro
5	cinque
6	sei
7	sette
8	otto
9	nove
10	dieci
11	undici
12	dodici
13	tredici
14	quattordici
15	quindici
16	sedici
17	diciassette
18	diciotto
19	diciannove
20	venti



Practice pronouncing these numbers with our video on Italian Numbers 1-20.

NUMBERS 1-100

To form numbers in the twenties, you typically combine venti (twenty) and the single digit (uno, due, etc.) with a few notable exceptions:

*Twenty-one and twenty-eight both drop the “i” in venti.

Numbers 20-29	
20	venti
21	ventuno*
22	ventidue
23	ventitré
24	ventiquattro
25	venticinque
26	ventisei
27	ventisette
28	ventotto*
29	ventinove

For numbers higher than 30 simply follow the same pattern of adding uno, due, tré, etc. onto the decimal: cinquantasette (57), settantaquattro (74), and so on.

Numbers 20-29	
30	trenta
40	quaranta
50	cinquanta
60	sessanta
70	settanta
80	ottanta
90	novanta
100	cento



CHAPTER SEVEN

QUESTION WORDS

ASKING QUESTIONS

Asking yes or no questions in Italian is actually quite simple. You don't need to add any words or change their order, you just need to change the tone of your voice!

Make sure that your voice rises at the end of the sentence, which will change your sentence from being declarative to interrogative. We have the same concept in English. You could say "She's pregnant." But when you change your intonation and raise the pitch at the end, it becomes "She's *pregnant?*"

Example:

Scusi, posso usare il bagno?* (Excuse me, can I use the bathroom?)

***Note:** Excuse me is a good thing to know when asking questions in Italian! **Scusi** is the third person singular, polite form of **scusare** (to excuse). You will need to use the plural form **scusate** when addressing more than one person.

You can also turn a sentence into a question by adding "no" or "vero" (right) to the end.

Example:

Il tempo è brutto, vero? (The weather is bad, right?)

ASKING QUESTIONS

To ask a more specific question, you'll want to memorize the question words.

QUESTION WORDS	
Who	Chi
What	Che/cosa
Where	Dove
When	Quando
Why	Perché
How	Come
How much	Quanto
Which	Quale/quali

Examples:

Chi è lui? (Who is he?)

Come sta? (How are you?)

Dov'è* l'aquila? (Where is the eagle?)

*Note that "dove" contracts to "dov" before "è" (is). Dove means "where", while "Dov'è" means "where is". If you were asking about a plural noun, you would use "Dove sono" (where are). As you will see in other examples below, this same behavior happens with other question words placed before "essere" as well.

Perché devi comprare una macchina? (Why do you have to buy a car?)

Quand'è il tuo compleanno? (When is your birthday?)



CHAPTER EIGHT

IRREGULAR VERBS: ESSERE & AVERE

ESSERE & AVERE

Earlier, we gave an overview of Italian verb conjugations, but beware that there are exceptions to those rules. All three verb groups have irregular verbs and you must simply memorize their conjugations.

Two of the most important irregular verbs are **essere** (to be) and **avere** (to have). These verbs are commonly used on their own, in colloquial expressions and idioms, and as auxiliary verbs for conjugating in different tenses and moods of other verbs.

ESSERE

The conjugation of essere is as follows:

Singular		Plural	
io	sono	noi	siamo
tu	sei	voi	siete
lui/lei/Lei	è	loro	sono

Examples:*

Sono impegnato. (I **am** busy).

Lei **è** vegetariana. (She **is** a vegetarian.)

Questo **è** uno dei miei libri preferiti. (This **is** one of my favorite books.)

Siamo già arrivati? (**Are** we there yet?)

Voi **siete** qui. (You **are** here.)

*Remember: you do not need to use subject pronouns when speaking Italian, as the verb conjugation implies the subject.

ESSERE & AVERE

AVERE

The conjugation of avere is as follows:

Singular		Plural	
io	ho	noi	abbiamo
tu	hai	voi	avete
lui/lei/Lei	ha	loro	hanno

Examples:

Hai delle banane? (Do you **have** any bananas?)

Abbiamo dei soldi? (Do we **have** any money?)

Avere is also used with many expressions that use the verb "to be" in English:

avere fame - to be hungry

avere sete - to be thirsty

avere caldo - to be warm

avere freddo - to be cold

avere fretta - to be in a hurry

avere fortuna (to be lucky)

avere paura (di) - to be afraid (of)

avere ragione - to be right

avere torto - to be wrong

avere sonno - to be sleepy

avere bisogno di - to need

avere voglia di (to want/to be in the mood for)

Examples:

Se **hai** sonno perché non vai a fare un riposino? (If you are sleepy, why don't you go and take a nap?)

Ho freddo, mi vado a mettere la felpa. (I'm cold, I'm going to put my sweatshirt on.)



CHAPTER NINE

NEGATION

NEGATION

To make a sentence negative, simply add **non** before the verb.

Vengo alla festa. (I'm coming to the party).

Non vengo alla festa. (I'm **not** coming to the party.)

For more specific negations, you'll want to learn the following negative expressions.

Negatives	
non...mai	never
non...più	no longer, no more
non...niente / nulla	nothing
non...nessuno	nobody, no one
non...neanche	not even
non...né...né	neither...nor

Examples:

Non c'è **nessuno** in casa. (There is **nobody** at home.)

Non c'è **niente** di più importante della salute. (There is **nothing** more important than health.)

Non faccio **più** il ciclismo. (I don't go cycling any more.)

Non ride **mai**. (He **never** laughs.)

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