

# Beginning Grammar 00

## The Korean Alphabet, 한글(Hangeul)

The Korean Alphabet, 한글 (Hangeul), was created under 세종대왕 (Se Jong Dae Wang, meaning "Sejong the Great")'s ruling. 한글 was completed in 1443, and after three years' tests it was proclaimed in 1446.

Through 한글, transcribing the spoken language<sup>1</sup> that the people of Korea (back then, Joseon Dynasty) were using was possible. As the original name of the Korean alphabet, 훈민정음 (Hun Min Jeong Um, "The Correct Sounds That Teach People") indicated, one of the main reasons for creating the Korean alphabet system was to let the ordinary people use it for their written communication<sup>2</sup>.

Note 1: The spoken language of Korean used by all Korean people already existed, but the writing system of Korean did not exist before the creation of 한글.

Note 2: The upper class, or the educated people only were using Chinese characters as a tool for written communication or writing. The lower class, or the ordinary people were not even given a chance to learn the Chinese writing system. 세종대왕 felt compassion about this problem of the ordinary people not being able to read or write, so he created the Korean alphabet, one of the most scientific writing systems in the world.

The Korean alphabet, 한글 consists of 21 vowels and 19 consonants.

Trivia:

#01: The statue of 세종대왕(**Se Jong Dae Wang**) is located in front of the royal palace, 경복궁 (Gyeongbok Goong) at Gwanghwamoon, Seoul, Korea.

#02: 세종대왕(**Se Jong Dae Wang**) appears on the 10,000 Won bill (= around \$10) currently used in Korea .

# Grammar 01

## Vowels

### Korean Vowels

To understand the making of Korean vowels better, let's briefly look at the two following concepts:

1. **Yin Yang** philosophy/principle

## 2. Three basic elements

According to **Yin Yang principle**, all the existing things in the world have complementary opposites that are interconnected. If there is Highness, there is Lowness. If there is Brightness, there is Darkness. If there is man, there is woman, and so forth.

Here is a table with some of the yin and yang examples. (You don't have to agree to this classification. :)

<b>Yin</b>	<b>Yang</b>
<b>Dark</b>	<b>Bright</b>
<b>Bottom</b>	<b>Top</b>
<b>Left</b>	<b>Right</b>
<b>Cold</b>	<b>Hot</b>

If you are given some opposite concepts, can you classify which one is yang (+, or positive) and which one is yin (-, or negative)?

Along with the yin and yang philosophy, 세종대왕 (Se Jong Dae Wang) used the second concept of the three basic elements that compose the world: Heaven, Earth, and Man.

Concept	Representation
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To represent Heaven, a round dot was used; to represent Earth, a horizontal bar was chosen, and to represent Man, a vertical bar was selected.

Using the Yin and Yang philosophy and combining the three basic elements, the Korean vowels were created.

## How the 10 basic vowels were made:

(1) A vertical bar + One dot on the **right**

(Ah)

(2) A vertical bar + Two dots on the **right**

(Yah)

(3) A vertical bar + One dot on the **left**

(Uh)

(4) A vertical bar + Two dots on the **left**

(Yuh)

(5) A horizontal bar + One dot on **top**

(Oh)

(6) A horizontal bar + Two dots on **top**

(Yoh)

(7) A horizontal bar + One dot at the **bottom**

(8) A horizontal bar + Two dots at the **bottom**

(Wuh)

(Yu)

(9) A horizontal bar itself

(10) A vertical bar itself

(Euh)

(Eeh)

Now the little dot above was replaced with a short stroke, and the **current ten basic vowels of Korean** look like:

ㅏ	ㅑ	ㅓ	ㅕ	ㅗ	ㅛ	ㅜ	ㅠ	ㅡ	ㅣ
Ah	Yah	Uh	Yuh	Oh	Yoh	Wu	Yu	Euh	Eeh

Among the ten vowels, can you guess what are classified as Yang vowels?

Currently, among simple<sup>1</sup> vowels, ㅏ and ㅗ are only classified as **yang** vowels.

Note 1: ㅑ and ㅕ are not simple vowels but complex vowels.

## More vowels:

With the **ten basic vowels** above, more vowels were created by combining some existing vowels.

Now look at the following table. Please look carefully where the extra stroke is added to produce new vowels and where the extra stroke is not added to create gaps.

Simple Vowels <sup>1</sup>	Added Stroke	Simple Vowels	Complex Vowels <sup>1</sup>	Added Stroke	Complex Vowels
└ Ah	+	⌋ <sup>5</sup> <u>A</u> nt	└ <sup>6</sup> Yah	+	⌋ <u>Y</u> ea
└ Uh	+	└ <sup>5</sup> <u>A</u> ny	└ <sup>6</sup> Yuh	+	└ <sup>6</sup> <u>Y</u> es
└ Oh	+	└ <sup>2</sup> Oe	└ <sup>6</sup> Yoh		
└ Wu	+	└ <sup>2</sup> We	└ <sup>6</sup> You		
— Eu	+		└ EuEe		
Ee					

ㅏ + ㅓ ㅗ

ㅛ O+Ah

+ ㅓ

ㅜ Oae

ㅓ +

ㅜ U+uh

+ ㅓ

ㅜ Wueh

ㅓ ㅓ

Note 1: Simple vowels are vowels that you do not change your mouth shape (technically, the configuration of your oral cavity) while pronouncing. Complex vowels are the combinations of two existing simple vowels, and you change the shape of your mouth during their production.

Note 2: Most Koreans pronounce ㅛ and ㅜ like complex vowels these days, but ㅛ and ㅜ were originally simple vowels (as a few words like 외갓집 and 쥐 still have the hint of simple vowels).

Note 3: When combining these two vowels to make ㅛ, vowel harmony that yang goes with yang and yin goes with yin was considered: ㅏ is a yang vowel and so is ㅓ.

Note 4: ㅓ is a yin vowel, and it goes with another yin vowel, ㅓ.

Note 5: The difference between ㅓ and ㅓ is gone in Modern Korean pronunciation.

Note 6: y sound was added before ㅓ, ㅓ, ㅏ, ㅓ respectively and created ㅑ, ㅓ, ㅕ, ㅖ.

## Consonants



Many phoneticians (scientists studying the sounds of languages) are amazed by **the Korean consonants**, because the Korean consonants were created **imitating the shapes of the vocal tract** when the sounds were pronounced.

You are going to match the shape of each consonant with the sound value it has. The explanations given below may work as mnemonic devices that you can use to remember the sound values of Korean consonants better.

## 1. The shape of the vocal tract:

The areas shaded light-green are the passages **the airstream goes through**. One passage is connected to the nose (**nasal passage**), and the other passage is connected to the mouth (**oral passage**). **The structure above the tongue where the uvula is attached** plays an important role of **opening or closing the nasal passage**.

Below the vocal cords, **the green passage** is ultimately **connected to your lung**.

The other **passage** where the **food** goes through is connected **to your stomach**.

## 2. Basic consonants you can start with: ㄱ, ㄴ, ㅁ, ㄷ, ㄹ

**(1) ɟ (like [g] in English)**

When you pronounce ɟ, you go through these processes:

(1) **The back part** of the structure above the tongue (velum) is **closing the nasal tract**, and the **back** of your **tongue is raised** to block the oral passage as well. ɟ **imitated this configuration** as you see in the picture.

(2) The air pressure is accumulated.

(3) The back of the tongue is lowered and the air is released while the vocal cords below are vibrating.

**(2) ɲ (like [n] in English)**

When you pronounce ʌ, you go through these processes:

(1) The back part of the structure above the tongue (velum) keeps the nasal tract open, and the **tip** of your **tongue is raised** to block the oral passage for a while. ʌ **imitated this configuration** as you see in the picture.

(2) The blocked **air** in the oral passage **goes through the nasal passage**. The air is coming out of your nostril. (Try this sound and feel the air from your nose).

(3) ɱ (like [m] in English)

When you pronounce □, you go through these processes:

(1) The back part of the structure above the tongue (velum) keeps the nasal tract open, and the **two lips are put together** to block the oral passage. □ **imitated this configuration (two lips together)** as you see in the picture. The closed mouth was simplified as a square.

(2) The blocked **air** in the oral passage **goes through the nasal passage**. The air is coming out of your nostril.

(4) ㄣ (like [s], but softer, in English)

When you pronounce 入, you go through these processes:

(1) The structure above the tongue (velum) is closing the nasal tract.

(2) **The air is passing through the narrow passage between the upper and lower teeth** to produce a hissing sound. 入 **imitated the shape of this sharp tooth**, which plays a pivotal role making this hissing.

(5) ○ (like [ng] in English at the syllable final position)

As you might have guessed this letter, ㅇ, looks like an opening or hole. This ㅇ is **imitating the passage of the throat** (simply like **a hole in a pipe**).

This consonant **does not have a sound** value when it comes **at the beginning** of a syllable, but it **sounds like an English [ng]** sounds as in sing when it comes **at the syllable final position**. To make this sound, a brief and little constriction is happening in the throat area.

## (6) How to create other consonants (with the basic consonants above)

### Non-stop

The airstream is not blocked.

### Blocked & Released

The airstream is briefly blocked.

ㄱ (g)

### Greater Explosion or Frication Tense & Unaspirated

During the blocked period, greater air pressure is accumulated.

ㅋ (k)

No puff of air is coming out during pronunciation.

ㆁ (sky)

		1 more stroke to ㄱ	doubling ㄱ
ㄴ (n)	ㄷ (d)	ㅌ (t)	ㄸ (star)
Shape of a tongue tip bent upward	1 more stroke to ㄴ	1 more stroke to ㄷ	doubling ㄷ
ㅁ (m)	ㅂ (b)	ㅍ (p)	ㅃ (spa)
Shape of a mouth	A little air is released from mouth.	More & stronger air is released from the mouth in all 4 directions.	doubling ㅂ
ㄹ (s) softer	ㅈ (Joy)	ㅊ (church)	ㅆ (sun), ㅉ(tsar)
Shape of a tooth	A little blockage is represented by a stroke on the top.	Two more strokes on the top represent more air pressure and greater release (frication).	doubling ㄹ, doubling ㅈ
ㅇ (empty / ng)	ㄱ	ㅎ (h)	
An opening in the throat	Used to exist but gone now.	Two more strokes indicate greater hissing in the throat.	

So far, all Korean consonants have been explained except one: ㄹ. ㄹ imitated the shape of the tongue, but this time it is not a static but a moving one. The sound value of ㄹ is something like between L and R of English. To pronounce the sound, ㄹ, the tongue starts from the upper part ( ㅡ ) of the mouth and ends in the lower part ( ㅗ ) of the mouth. If you can record the transitions of the movement of the tongue, it would look like ㄹ.

## (7) 7 Representatives of the syllable-final consonants.

Not all consonants of Korean can keep their sound values when they come at the syllable-final position. Only seven consonants can keep their sound values and those are ㄱ, ㄴ, ㄷ, ㄹ, ㅁ, ㅂ, ㅇ.

**A more fundamental rule that may help you understand better is as follows:**

Except ㄴ, ㅁ, ㅇ (nasal sounds), and ㄹ, for all other consonants, when they are located at the syllable end, the airstream that has been blocked in the middle of pronouncing the consonant sounds is not released at all. If the air is not released after its short blockage, there is no way to tell the difference among the blocked family sounds (like ㄱ, ㅋ, ㆁ). Please look at the table below.

Representative	Family Members	Examples
ㄱ	ㄱ, ㅋ, ㆁ	북(drum), 부엌(kitchen), 밖(outside)
ㄴ	ㄴ	간(liver)
ㄷ	ㄷ, ㅌ, (ㄸ) <sup>1</sup>	밭침(syllable-final consonant), 밭(field),
ㄹ	ㄹ, ㄺ, ㄻ, ㄼ,	낫(sickle), 낮(day), 낮(face), 낯,
	ㅎ	낳다(to give birth)
ㄺ	ㄺ	물 (water)
ㅁ	ㅁ	몸 (body)



ㅈ

ㅈ, ㅊ, (ㅊ)

입 (mouth), 잎 (leaf)

ㅇ

ㅇ

강 (river)

Note 1: A gap: no Korean word ends in either ㅈ or ㅊ.