

Guide to the
Shingle Springs Band of Miwok Indians

Nisenan Alphabet

Guide to the SSBMI Nisenan Alphabet written by:
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The Shingle Springs Band of Miwok Indians Tribal Council has adopted the following 24-letter alphabet for writing Nisenan. This alphabet is “phonetic” – each letter has a consistent and unique pronunciation. You do not need to memorize special rules for the pronunciation of individual letters in different words.*

’ a b c’ d e ə h i † k k’ l m n o p p’ s t t’ u w y

The purpose of this booklet is to teach you to read this alphabet, so that you can read and write the Nisenan language.

Vowels

- a pronounced like “a” in *father*
- e pronounced like “a” in *tape* or “e” in *get* *
- ə pronounced like “u” in *cut*
- i pronounced like “ea” in *seat* or “i” in *sit* *
- † pronounced like (but not the same as) the vowel in *ewww*
- o pronounced like “o” in *smoke*
- u pronounced like “oo” in *boot* or “u” in *put* *

Consonants

- ’ pronounced as a pause, like in the middle of *uh-oh*
- b pronounced like “b” in *boy*, but by sucking air inward
- c’ ... pronounced like “ch” in *chip*, but with more force
- d pronounced like “d” in *dog*, but by sucking air inward
- h pronounced like “h” in *home*

- k pronounced like “k” in *kick*
- k’ ... pronounced like “k” in *kick*, but with more force
- l pronounced like “l” in *ladder*
- m ... pronounced like “m” in *man*
- n pronounced like “n” in *nope*
- p pronounced like “p” in *piece*
- p’ ... pronounced like “p” in *piece*, but with more force
- s pronounced like “s” in *snake* or “sh” in *shape* *
- t pronounced like “t” in *top*
- t’ ... pronounced like “t” in *top*, but with more force
- w ... pronounced like “w” in *win*
- y pronounced like “y” in *yes*

Long Vowels and Consonants

Any sequence of two identical letters in a row, such as “aa” or “ss”, is pronounced the same as the base letter but held for longer (e.g. “aa” is pronounced longer than “a”).

Stressed Vowels

Any vowel that is written with an acute accent “´” above it, such as “á” or “úu”, is “stressed”, meaning that it is pronounced with greater emphasis than other vowels within the same word.

* You will see that we list multiple pronunciations for some letters, like “e” and “s”. This is because Nisenan speakers vary in their pronunciation of these sounds: For example, speakers pronounce “e” like the “a” in *tape* or like the “e” in *get*, with this difference having no effect on word meaning. Similarly, speakers pronounce “s” as a sound intermediate between the “s” in *seat* and the “sh” in *sheet*; whether you pronounce it more like “s” or “sh” has no bearing on word meaning in Nisenan.