

The Greek Alphabet I

Familiar Letters for English Speakers

A lesson for the *Paideia* web-app

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A Familiar Cousin

- Most of us find the Greek alphabet intimidating at first
- But there are a lot of familiar letters
 - The Greek alphabet was the source of our own



The Alpha-bet

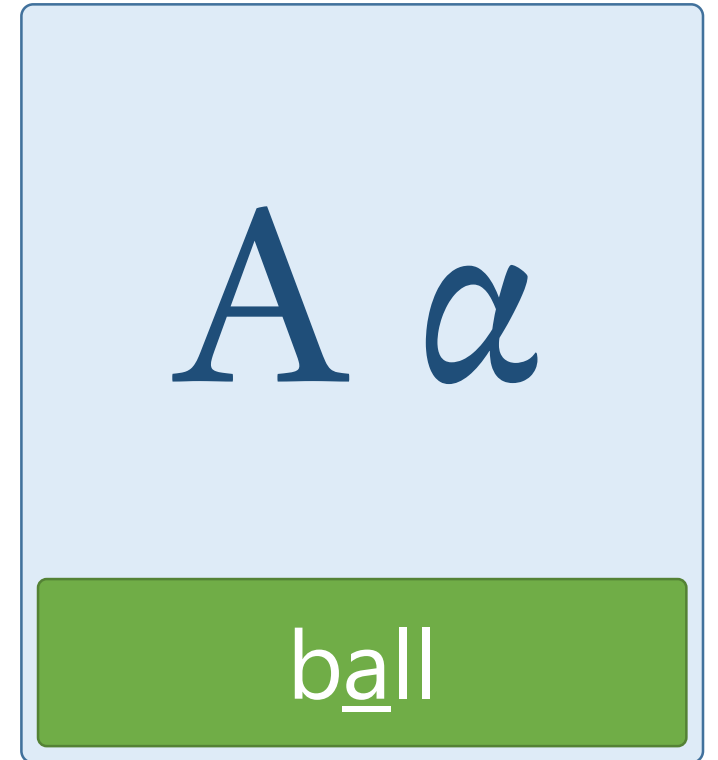
Alpha	Beta	Gamma	Delta	Epsilon	Zeta	Eta	Theta	Iota	Kappa	Lambda	Mu
α	β	γ	δ	ϵ	ζ	η	θ	ι	κ	λ	μ

Nu	Xi	Omicron	Pi	Rho	Sigma	Tau	Upsilon	Phi	Chi	Psi	Omega
ν	ξ	\omicron	π	ρ	σ	τ	υ	ϕ	χ	ψ	ω



Alpha

- Shape
 - looks just like our letter "a"
- Sound
 - never a short "a" like "hat"
 - always a long a like "mall" or "ball"



Beta

- Shape
 - Lower-case looks like our capital "B" with a short tail
 - Like a bird perched in silhouette
- Sound
 - Sounds just like our "b" as in "bird"
 - Later Greeks came to pronounce it like "v"



Beta

- Shape
 - Lower-case looks like our capital "B" with a short tail
 - Like a bird perched in silhouette
- Sound
 - Sounds just like our "b" as in "bird"
 - Later Greeks came to pronounce it like "v"



bird



Beta

- Shape
 - Lower-case looks like our capital "B" with a short tail
 - Like a bird perched in silhouette
- Sound
 - Sounds just like our "b" as in "bird"
 - Later Greeks came to pronounce it like "v"



Delta

- Shape
 - lower case looks like our "d" tilted forward
 - upper case is a triangle
 - can sometimes be confused with "A"
- Sound
 - sounds like our "d" as in "dipper" or "dart"



Epsilon

- Shape
 - looks like our capital "E"
 - lower case is just a short, curvy version
- Sound
 - sounds like our short "e" as in "edge"
 - never long "e" like "mere"
 - never "ay" sound like "werewolf"
 - never silent, even at the end of a word

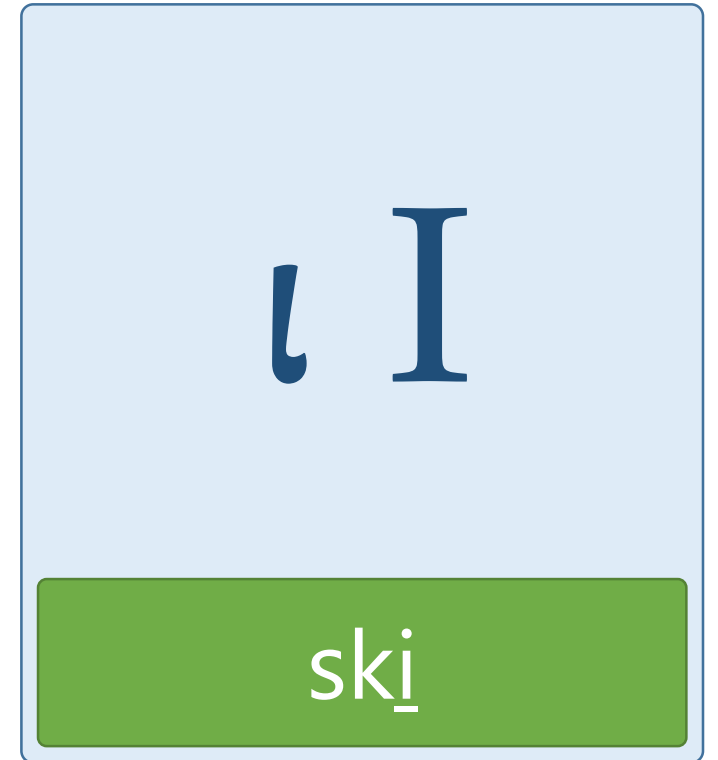
ε E

edge



Iota

- Shape
 - looks just like our "i"
 - no dot over the lower-case i
- Sound
 - usually sounds like "ee" as in "ski"
 - occasionally a shorter "i" as in "pin"
 - never a long "eye" as in "mile"



Kappa

- Shape
 - looks just like our upper case "K"
 - lower-case looks like a shrunk "K"
- Sound
 - sounds like our "k" as in "kite"

κ K

kite



Mu

- Shape
 - lower case looks like very rounded "m" with long arm
 - careful not to confuse with our "u"
- Sound
 - sounds like our "m" as in "mole"

μ M

mole



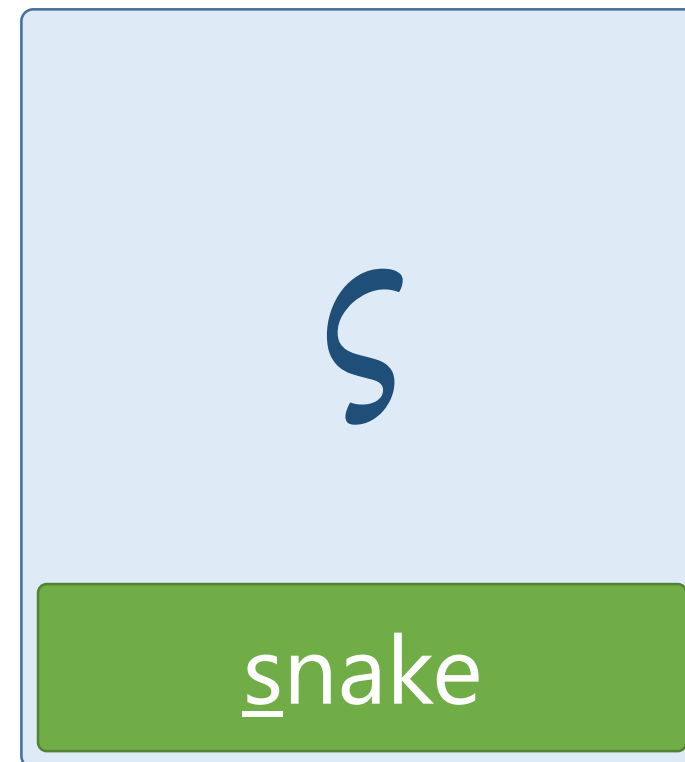
Omicron

- Shape
 - looks like our "o"
- Sound
 - always sounds like our short "o" as in "ostrich"
 - never a long "o" like in "hole"
 - Greek has another letter for the long-"o" sound
- "omicron" literally means "little o"



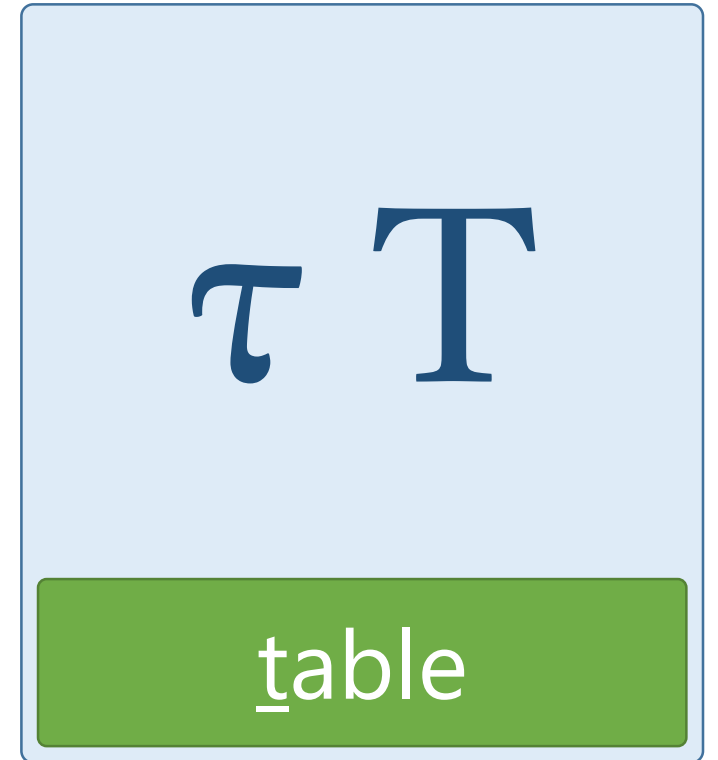
Sigma (final)

- This is how sigma looks at the *end* of a word
 - looks different in the middle of a word
 - a hold-over from medieval scribes
- Shape
 - looks like our "s" except that it curves below the line
 - the upper curve is often larger than the lower curve
- Sound
 - always sounds like our "s" as in "snake"
 - never like "z" as in "has"



Tau

- Shape
 - looks like our capital "T"
 - lower case looks like a shrunken "T"
- Sound
 - sounds just like our "t" as in "table"



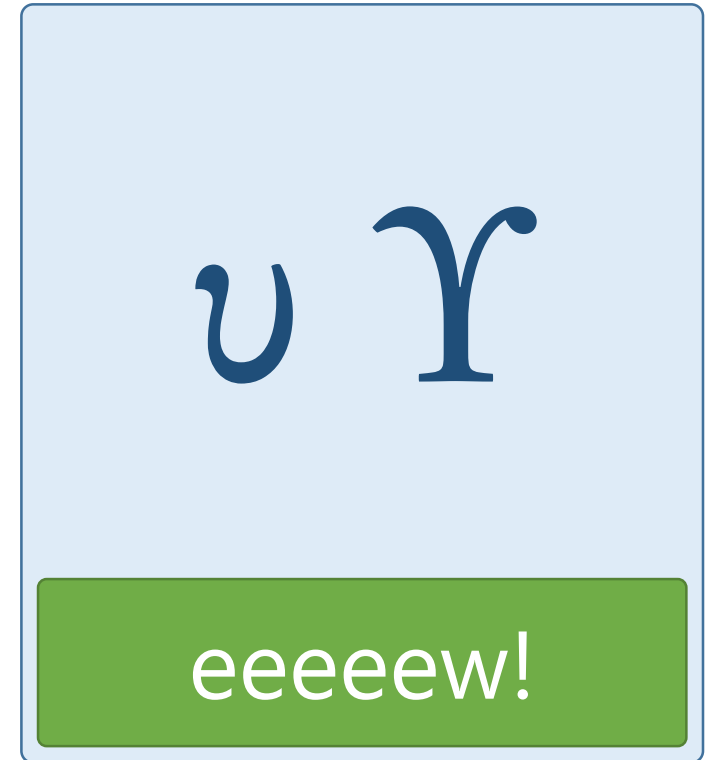
Upsilon

- Shape

- looks like our "u"
- upper case looks like our "Y"
- both our "u" and "y" come from upsilon

- Sound

- sound is between "oo" and "ee"
 - like German *ü*
 - a bit like the exclamation "eeeew!"
- many just pronounce like "u" in "rude"



Rough Breathing Mark

- Greek has no letter 'h'
 - the ones that look like 'h' actually make a very different sound
- The 'h' sound is made by a mark above the letter
 - almost always at the beginning of a word
 - only over a vowel or the letter ρ

A blue Greek letter alpha (α) with a small hook-like mark above it, representing the rough breathing mark.

hheart



Smooth Breathing Mark

- Another mark signals the *absence* of the *h* sound
 - Seems a bit odd to us
- Just indicates an ordinary vowel-sound
 - As in "open" or "ambulance"
 - A slight burst of air from the throat
 - in English too
- Keep the two breathing marks straight!
 - Open at the front, sounds like "open"



Accent Marks

- Greek is written with four accent marks
 - Like French or Spanish
- You should not try to use these accents
 - Usually no affect on meaning
 - Tricky to use correctly
 - Present system a medieval invention
- Except in a few cases that we'll discuss later

Acute accent	ά
Grave accent	ὰ
Circumflex accent*	ᾶ
Umlaut / Diarresis	ä

* Depending on the Greek font being used, the circumflex accent may look like a tilde (~) or like a downward-facing curve. There is no difference in meaning between them.



What Do Accent Marks Mean?

- Help with pronunciation
 - Accent placed on the stressed syllable
 - just treat them all as equivalent emphasis
- Historically, showed changes in pitch (tone) for pronunciation
 - But these tones fell out of use in Hellenistic Greek
- Help with remembering forms
 - circumflex and dieresis often indicate that letters have combined

Acute accent	acute
Grave accent	grave
Circumflex accent*	circumflex
Umlaut / Dieresis	umlaut

* Depending on the Greek font being used, the circumflex accent may look like a tilde (~) or like a downward-facing curve. There is no difference in meaning between them.



Using Our ΑΒΓ's

- We can use these Greek letters to spell out familiar English words
 - Pay attention to the sounds of the word, not the English letters
 - Look for Greek letters that make those sounds
- To begin with the townspeople will ask you to do the same thing
 - Help you become comfortable with the Greek letters and their sounds

bed	βεδ
deck	δεκ
deal	διλ
mute	μυτ



Keep Learning

- You can find more about the Greek alphabet, accents, and pronunciation in the following slide decks as well as in:
 - Mounce, *Basics of Biblical Greek* (3rd edition)
 - The Greek alphabet, Chapter 2
 - Accents and breathing marks, 4.2, 4.5



Mounce introduces the whole alphabet and writing system at once. We're going more slowly, so if Mounce's chapter is overwhelming at first don't worry.

