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HUNGARIAN LESSON

Hungarian Grammar 1 · Chapter 1 · The Sound Map

🔊 The Sound Map — A hangtérkép

Hungarian grammar is built out of sounds. Every suffix you will meet in this course changes its shape depending on the vowel or consonant next to it, so before the rules you need a clear map of the sounds themselves. This chapter is not a second alphabet course: it takes what Hungarian Alphabet 1 taught you letter by letter and re-sorts it into the groups that grammar cares about.

THE RULE IN ONE BOX

Every grammar rule in this course asks one of three questions about a sound: **Is the vowel back or front?** (Hungarian Grammar 1, chapters 2 and 3) **Is it short or long?** (Hungarian Grammar 1, chapter 4) **Is the consonant voiced or voiceless?** (Hungarian Grammar 1, chapter 5). Learn the map below and the rules become lookups.

The 14 vowels in three groups

Say a back vowel and your tongue sits towards the back of the mouth and your lips are rounded. Say a front vowel and your tongue moves forward. The front vowels split again: **unrounded** (lips spread, as in English *bed*) and **rounded** (lips rounded while the tongue stays forward, as in German *schön* or French *peu*). Hungarian *Alphabet 1*, chapters 4 to 7, introduced them one pair at a time; here they are together.

GROUP	SHORT	LONG	SAY IT (CAPITALS = THE VOWEL)
Back	**a** · **o** · **u**	**á** · **ó** · **ú**	a = the *o* in Scottish *hot* · á = *a* in *father* · o = short *go* · ó = long *go* · u = *put* · ú = *moon*
Front, unrounded	**e** · **i**	**é** · **í**	e = *bed* · é = *say* without the glide · i = *sit* · í = *see*
Front, rounded	**ö** · **ü**	**ő** · **ű**	ö = say *e* with rounded lips · ő = the same, long · ü = say *i* with rounded lips · ű = the same, long

Two pairs differ in more than length

a / á and **e / é** are different vowels, not just short and long versions of one sound (the short *a* is rounded and far back, the long *á* is open and unrounded; the short *e* is open, the long *é* is closed). The other five pairs differ mainly in length. In writing, the accent marks the length (or, for ö/ü, the long double-acute *ő ű*), so spelling tells you which you need.

Short and long pairs: why the length matters

Length changes the meaning of a word, and, as Hungarian Grammar 1, chapter 4 shows, it changes how words take suffixes. A few pairs to say aloud:

SHORT	LONG	MEANING	SAY IT
kar	**kár**	arm · damage, pity	KAWR · KAHR
hat	**hát**	six · back	HAWT · HAHT
kor	**kór**	age · illness	KOR · KOHR
kert	**kért**	garden · asked	KEHRT · KAYRT
tör	**tőr**	breaks · dagger	TEUR · TEUR (longer)
ujj	**új**	finger · new	UYY · OOY

The consonants: voiced and voiceless partners

Hungarian consonants come in pairs that differ only in whether the vocal cords vibrate. Put your fingertips on your throat: for a **voiced** consonant you feel a buzz; for a **voiceless** one you do not. This matters in Hungarian Grammar 1, chapter 5, where suffixes make a consonant take over its neighbour's voicing.

VOICED (BUZZ)	VOICELESS (NO BUZZ)	EXAMPLE PAIR	SAY IT
b	**p**	**bor** wine · **por** dust	BOR · POR

VOICED (BUZZ)	VOICELESS (NO BUZZ)	EXAMPLE PAIR	SAY IT
d	t	**dél** noon · **tél** winter	DAYL · TAYL
g	k	**gép** machine · **kép** picture	GAYP · KAYP
z	sz	**zár** lock · **szár** stem	ZAHR · SAHR
zs	s	**zsír** fat · **sír** cries	ZHEER · SHEER
v	f	**vér** blood · **fér** fits	VAYR · FAYR
gy	ty	no common pair; both are 'soft'	DY · TY
dz, dzs	c, cs	rare; see below	DZ, DJ · TS, CH

The Hungarian twist: s and sz

sz is the English *s* (*szia*, SEE-aw) and **s** is the English *sh* (*sál*, SHAHL). The letters look swapped compared with English, so check your reading of every *s*.

The soft consonants

gy (like the *d* in British *due*), **ty** (like the *t* in British *tune*) and **ny** (like the *ny* in *canyon*) are made with the middle of the tongue against the hard palate. **ly** is pronounced exactly like **j** (English *y*): *király* sounds like KEE-rah-y. These are written with two letters but each is one sound and one letter of the alphabet, which matters for sorting and syllable counting.

Stress and rhythm

The stress in a Hungarian word falls on the **first syllable**, always. A suffix never moves it: *HÁZ*, *HÁZ-ban*, *HÁZ-ak-ban*. Long vowels are longer, but they do not carry the stress: in *BU-da-pest* and *DEH-breh-tsen* the stress is at the front and the other syllables are said evenly, without the reduced *uh* sounds of English. Treat every vowel in a word as full.

Questions

> A yes/no question is marked by pitch: your voice rises towards the end and then falls on the last syllable. The word order often stays the same as the statement, so *Magyar vagy.* (You are Hungarian.) and *Magyar vagy?* (Are you Hungarian?) differ only in melody.

What the map is for

QUESTION YOU WILL ASK	CHAPTER	EXAMPLE
Back or front? Rounded or not?	Hungarian Grammar 1, chapters 2 and 3	**ház** → **házban** but **kert** → **kertben**
Short or long?	Hungarian Grammar 1, chapter 4	**alma** → **almák** (a becomes á)
Voiced or voiceless?	Hungarian Grammar 1, chapter 5	**kéz** + **-val** → **kézzel**

🗣️ In Use — Használatban

The rule in real sentences. Read each exchange aloud and spot the pattern.

① Arm or damage?

A:

Kar vagy kár? Nem hallom a különbséget.

Arm or damage? I can't hear the difference.

B:

Kár, hosszú á-val. Figyelj: kar … kár.

Damage, with a long á. Listen: kar … kár.

A:

Most már hallom!

Now I can hear it!

② Where is the stress?

A:

Hogy ejtik: Budapest?

How do you say Budapest?

B:

BU-da-pest. Mindig az első szótagon van a hangsúly.

BU-da-pest. The stress is always on the first syllable.

A:

És Debrecen?

And Debrecen?

B:

DEB-re-cen. Ugyanígy.

DEB-re-cen. The same.

📋 Quick Reference — Gyorstábla

GROUP	LETTERS	WHAT TO REMEMBER
Back vowels	**a á o ó u ú**	Take back suffixes (-ban, -nak, -hoz)
Front unrounded	**e é i í**	Take front suffixes (-ben, -nek, -hez); i/í/e/é are 'neutral' (Hungarian Grammar 1, chapter 3)
Front rounded	**ö ő ü ű**	Take front suffixes; three-way suffixes use the rounded form (-höz, -ön)
Voiced / voiceless	**b p · d t · g k · z sz · zs s · v f**	Partners in assimilation (Hungarian Grammar 1, chapter 5)
Soft consonants	**gy ty ny ly**	Each is one letter; ly sounds like j
Stress	first syllable	Never moves, whatever the suffix

🖍️ Try It Yourself — Gyakorlás

Say the answer first, then click to check.

1. Which vowel group does *u* belong to?

▼ Show answer

Back. (a, á, o, ó, u, ú)

2. Which vowel group does *ö* belong to, and what are its long partner and group-mates?

▼ Show answer

Front rounded. Long partner: ő. Group-mates: ü and ű.

3. Which of these pairs differ in *quality* and not just length: a/á, o/ó, e/é, u/ú?

▼ Show answer

a/á and e/é.

4. Say *kar* and *kár*. Which is 'damage'?

▼ Show answer

Kár, with the long á.

5. Give the voiceless partner of b, d, g and zs.

▼ Show answer

p, t, k and s.

6. How is *ly* pronounced, and what other letter sounds the same?

▼ Show answer

Like English y; the letter j sounds the same.

7. On which syllable is the stress in *házakban* (in houses)?

▼ Show answer

On the first: HÁ-zak-ban. Suffixes never move the stress.

8. *Zár* and *szár* differ in only one sound. Which sound, and is it voiced or voiceless in *szár*?

▼ Show answer

The first consonant (z versus sz). In *szár* it is voiceless.

Coming up in Chapter 2: Vowel Harmony: The Rule. You will meet the single test that tells you whether a word takes *-ban* or *-ben*, *-hoz*, *-hez* or *-höz*.