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HUNGARIAN LESSON

Hungarian Grammar 1 · Chapter 3 · Neutral Vowels and Exceptions

⚖️ Neutral Vowels and Exceptions — Semleges magánhangzók

Chapter 2 gave you the clean rule: the last vowel decides. Now the awkward part. The vowels ***i, í, e, é*** *are called* ***neutral*** *because they sit between the back and front groups: they are front vowels in sound but they do not always force a front suffix. This chapter explains what happens to words that contain them, and gives you the short list of true exceptions so that the rule stays a rule.*

THE RULE IN ONE BOX

The neutral vowels **i í e é** do not decide the suffix on their own. In a word with *only* neutral vowels the suffix is almost always **front**. After a back vowel, **i / í** keep the word **back**, and **e** usually pulls it to **front**. A small list of one-syllable words ignore the rule.

Case 1: only neutral vowels, so front

A word made of i, í, e and é takes the front suffix. This is the biggest group and the easiest: when in doubt, go front.

WORD	MEANING	+ -BAN / -BEN	+ -NAK / -NEK	+ -HOZ / -HEZ / -HÖZ
kéz	hand	kézben	kéznek	kézhez
film	film	filmben	filmnek	filmhez
kert	garden	kertben	kertnek	kerthez
víz	water	vízben	víznek	vízhez
ing	shirt	ingben	ingnek	inghez
tévé	TV	tévében	tévének	tévéhez

Case 2: a back vowel, then i or í, so back

When a back vowel is followed by an **i** or **í** the word stays back: the neutral vowel is 'transparent' and the back vowel before it decides.

WORD	MEANING	+ -BAN / -BEN	+ -NAK / -NEK	+ -HOZ / -HEZ / -HÖZ
papír	paper	papír**ban**	papír**nak**	papír**hoz**
taxi	taxi	taxi**ban**	taxi**nak**	taxi**hoz**
iroda	office	irodá**ban** (a lengthens, Hungarian Grammar 1, chapter 4)	irodá**nak**	irodá**hoz**

Case 3: a back vowel, then e or é

This is the group that surprises learners: the **e** after a back vowel usually pulls the suffix to the **front**, even though the first vowel is back. These are mostly foreign or compound words.

WORD	MEANING	SUFFIX	RESULT
hotel	hotel	-ben, -nek, -hez	hotel**ben** · hotel**nek** · hotel**hez**
tanterem	classroom	-ben, -nek, -hez	tanterem**ben** · tanterem**nek** · tanterem**hez**
Budapest	Budapest	-en (on), -ről	Budapest**en** · Budapest**ről**
kávé	coffee	-ban, -nak (exception: back)	kávé**ban** · kávé**nak** · kávé**hoz**

> **Kávé is the odd one out**
>
> *Kávé* follows the back vowel *á* and takes **back** suffixes (*kávéban*), although *hotel* with an *e* takes front. For words with a back vowel followed by **é** there is no firm rule: learn the word, or check it in a dictionary, which shows the suffix form.

Case 4: a front vowel, then a back vowel: the last vowel decides

If the *last* vowel is back, the word takes back suffixes, whatever comes before: *metró* (e, then ó), *kávézó* (café). Practise reading the last vowel first.

WORD	LAST VOWEL	GROUP	RESULT
metró	ó	back	metró**ban** · metró**hoz**
sofőr	ő	front, rounded	sofőr**ben** · sofőr**höz**
fotó	ó	back	fotó**ban** · fotó**hoz**
kerékpár	á	back	kerékpár**ban** · kerékpár**hoz**

The antiharmonic stems: a short list of exceptions

A small group of one-syllable words contains only neutral vowels but takes **back** suffixes: they are 'antiharmonic'. You simply learn them, and since there are few, the list below covers the ones you will meet most often.

WORD	MEANING	TAKES	EXAMPLES
híd	bridge	back	híd**ban** · híd**nak** · híd**hoz**
cél	aim, goal	back	cél**ban** · cél**nak** · cél**hoz**
sír	grave	back	sír**ban** · sír**nak** · sír**hoz**
nyíl	arrow	back	nyíl**ban** · nyíl**nak**
férfi	man	back	férfi**nak** · férfi**val** · férfi**ak** (plural)

> **Same spelling, different word**
>
> *Sír* means 'grave' (*sírban*, in the grave) and also 'cries' (a verb). The two take different suffixes only when they are nouns, so context tells you. Likewise *víz* (water) is a normal front word: *vízben*, not

> *vízban.*

Loanwords, names and compounds

Loanwords follow their *pronunciation*, not their spelling: *film* is pronounced FEELM, so *filmben*. A foreign name that ends in letters that are silent in Hungarian takes the harmony of the sound you say, which can look odd in print: *Edinburgh-ban* (said ED-in-burg). **Compounds** follow the *last part*: *kézikönyv* (handbook) ends in *könyv*, so *kézikönyvben*. Check a dictionary if a name is truly unfamiliar.

A checklist for a doubtful word

1. Is the last vowel **a á o ó u ú**? Back.
2. Is it **ö ő ü ű**? Front.
3. Is it **i / í**? Back if any earlier vowel is back; front if the word is all neutral. Check the antiharmonic list.
4. Is it **e**? Front (*hotelben*). Is it **é**? Front if the word is all neutral; after a back vowel check the dictionary (*kávéban*).

🗣️ In Use — Használatban

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

① At the hotel

A:
Hol szálltál meg Budapesten?
Where did you stay in Budapest?

B:
A hotelben, a hídhoz közel.
In the hotel, close to the bridge.

A:
És a tanteremben tanultál?

② Taxi or metro?

A:
Taxival vagy metróval megyünk?
Shall we go by taxi or by metro?

B:
A metró gyorsabb, a taxi drágább.
The metro is faster, the taxi dearer.

A:
Rendben, megyünk a metróhoz.

And did you study in a classroom?

B:

Nem, a kávézóban, kávéval és papírral!

No, in the café, with coffee and paper!

Fine, let's go to the metro.

📋 Quick Reference — Gyorstábla

PATTERN	TAKES	EXAMPLES
Only i í e é	front	**kézben** · **filmben** · **vízben** · **tévében**
Back vowel + i / í	back	**papírban** · **taxiban**
Back vowel + e	front	**hotelben** · **tanteremben**
Back vowel + é	check the dictionary	**kávéban**
Last vowel is back	back	**metróban** · **fotóhoz**
Last vowel is ö ő ü ű	front, rounded	**sofőrben** · **sofőrhöz**
Antiharmonic stems	back	**hídban** · **célban** · **sírban**

🖍️ Try It Yourself — Gyakorlás

Say the answer first, then click to check.

1. *papír* + -ban / -ben

▼ Show answer

papírban. Back vowel a, then í: back.

2. *hotel* + -ban / -ben

▼ Show answer

hotelben. Back vowel o, then e: front.

3. *víz* + -ban / -ben

▼ Show answer

vízben. Only neutral vowels: front.

4. *híd* + -ban / -ben

▼ Show answer

hídban. Antiharmonic: learn it.

5. *kávé* + -ban / -ben

▼ Show answer

kávéban. Back + é: take the dictionary form.

6. *film* + -ban / -ben

▼ Show answer

filmben. Only i: front.

7. *taxi* + -ban / -ben

▼ Show answer

taxiban. Back vowel a, then i: back.

8. *sofőr* + -nak / -nek

▼ Show answer

sofőrnek. Last vowel ő: front.

9. *cél* + -ban / -ben

▼ Show answer

célban. Antiharmonic.

10. *tanterem* + -ben / -ban

▼ Show answer

tanteremben. Back vowel a, then e: front.

Coming up in Chapter 4: Linking Vowels and Stem Changes. Why *ház* becomes *házak* but *kéz* becomes *kezek*, and where the vowel in *tükör* goes.