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HUNGARIAN LESSON

Hungarian Grammar 1 · Chapter 6 · Two Conjugations: What and Why

🧩 Two Conjugations — Két ragozás

*Almost every Hungarian verb has two complete sets of present-tense endings. English speakers meet this as 'the definite conjugation' and often feel they will never get it. They will, because the choice follows one simple test. This chapter explains what the two conjugations are, gives the test, and teaches the **indefinite** forms in full; Hungarian Grammar 1, chapter 7 gives the definite forms.*

THE RULE IN ONE BOX

The verb's ending tells the listener whether the **object** is a specific, known thing. If the verb has **no object**, or the object is **not specific** (*egy könyvet*, 'a book'), use the **indefinite** endings. If the object is **specific** (*a könyvet*, 'the book'), use the **definite** endings.

The test: what is the object?

Ask *what or whom?* after the verb. If there is an answer, check whether it is a specific thing both people know about. Compare:

INDEFINITE (A BOOK, ANY BOOK)	DEFINITE (THIS PARTICULAR BOOK)	WHY
Olvasok egy könyvet. I'm reading a book.	**Olvasom a könyvet.** I'm reading the book.	a / az makes the object definite
Kérek egy kávét. I'd like a coffee.	**Kérem a kávét.** I'd like the coffee.	same pattern
Látok egy filmet. I'm watching a film.	**Látom a filmet.** I see the film.	same pattern
Tanulok magyarul. I'm learning Hungarian.	**Tanulom a nyelvet.** I'm learning the language.	no article, adverb magyarul; versus a nyelvet

INDEFINITE (A BOOK, ANY BOOK)	DEFINITE (THIS PARTICULAR BOOK)	WHY
Dolgozom.	—	no object at all; always indefinite (and -ik, see Hungarian Grammar 1, chapter 9)

> **You have already met both**
>
> Hungarian Basic Conversation 1, chapter 8 used *Kérek egy kávét* (a coffee) and *A számlát kérem* (the bill). Hungarian Basic Conversation 2, chapter 2 contrasted *szeretek úszni* (I like swimming) with *szeretem a zenét* (I like the music). This course explains why those pairs differ.

The present indefinite endings

The indefinite endings depend on harmony, using the group of the verb *stem*: back, front unrounded or front rounded. The 3rd person singular has **no ending** at all.

PERSON	BACK	FRONT, UNROUNDED	FRONT, ROUNDED
én (I)	-ok	-ek	-ök
te (you)	-sz	-sz	-sz
ő (he/she)	—	—	—
mi (we)	-unk	-ünk	-ünk
ti (you, plural)	-tok	-tek	-tök
ők (they)	-nak	-nek	-nek

Three model verbs

PERSON	VÁR (WAIT) · BACK	KÉR (ASK FOR) · FRONT	ÜL (SIT) · FRONT ROUNDED
én	vár**ok**	kér**ek**	ül**ök**

PERSON	VÁR (WAIT) · BACK	KÉR (ASK FOR) · FRONT	ÜL (SIT) · FRONT ROUNDED
te	vár**sz**	kér**sz**	ül**sz**
ő	vár	kér	ül
mi	vár**unk**	kér**ünk**	ül**ünk**
ti	vár**tok**	kér**tek**	ül**tök**
ők	vár**nak**	kér**nek**	ül**nek**

Verbs whose stem ends in -s, -sz or -z

The 2nd person *-sz* would produce an awkward cluster after an s, sz or z, so these verbs use **-ol / -el / -öl** instead. Everything else is regular.

PERSON	OLVAS (READ) · BACK	NÉZ (WATCH) · FRONT	FŐZ (COOK) · FRONT ROUNDED
én	olvas**ok**	néz**ek**	főz**ök**
te	olvas**ol**	néz**el**	főz**öl**
ő	olvas	néz	főz
mi	olvas**unk**	néz**ünk**	főz**ünk**
ti	olvas**tok**	néz**tek**	főz**tök**
ők	olvas**nak**	néz**nek**	főz**nek**

> **Which verbs are 'neutral' for harmony?**
>
> A verb like *ír* (writes) has only the neutral vowel *í*, so you might expect front, but it takes back endings: *írok, írsz, ír, írunk, írtok, írnak*. The rules for neutral vowels in Hungarian Grammar 1, chapter 3 apply to verbs too, and the dictionary shows the pattern. For many neutral-vowel verbs you will see both: *kér* (front) and *ír* (back).

Intransitive verbs and -ik verbs

Verbs with no object (*megy*, *jön*, *alszik*, *dolgozik*) always use the indefinite set. A large group, the **-ik verbs**, has a few forms that look like the definite endings (*dolgozom*, *eszem*) even though they are indefinite: Hungarian Grammar 1, chapter 9 explains them. Do not worry about them yet.

🗣️ In Use — Használatban

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

① At the café

A:

Mit kérsz?

What would you like?

B:

Kérek egy kávét. Te mit kérsz?

I'd like a coffee. What would you like?

A:

Én egy teát kérek.

I'll have a tea.

② A quiet evening

A:

Mit csinálsz?

What are you doing?

B:

Olvasok egy könyvet, te pedig vársz a telefonra.

I'm reading a book, and you are waiting for the phone call.

A:

Igen, várok. De mit nézünk este?

Yes, I'm waiting. But what shall we watch this evening?

📋 Quick Reference — Gyorstábla

PERSON	BACK	FRONT, UNROUNDED	FRONT, ROUNDED	-S / -SZ / -Z STEMS (2ND)
én	-ok	-ek	-ök	same
te	-sz	-sz	-sz	-ol / -el / -öl

PERSON	BACK	FRONT, UNROUNDED	FRONT, ROUNDED	-S / -SZ / -Z STEMS (2ND)
ő	—	—	—	same
mi	-unk	-ünk	-ünk	same
ti	-tok	-tek	-tök	same
ők	-nak	-nek	-nek	same

🖍️ Try It Yourself — Gyakorlás

Say the answer first, then click to check.

1. I read a book. (olvas)

▼ Show answer

Olvasok egy könyvet. Indefinite 1st person singular.

2. You wait (várs**z**). Which verb ending is it?

▼ Show answer

Indefinite 2nd person singular, back: -sz.

3. We ask for a coffee. (kér)

▼ Show answer

Kérünk egy kávét. Front unrounded: -ünk.

4. You (singular) watch a film. (néz)

▼ Show answer

Nézel egy filmet. Stem ends in z: -el.

5. They cook soup. (főz)

▼ Show answer

Főznek egy levest. Front rounded, -nek.

6. She is sitting. (ül)

▼ Show answer

Ül. No ending in the 3rd person singular.

7. You (plural) are waiting. (vár)

▼ Show answer

Vártok. Back: -tok.

8. I write a letter. (ír)

▼ Show answer

Írok egy levelet. Neutral stem, back ending.

9. Which is definite? *Kérek egy kávét* or *Kérem a kávét*?

▼ Show answer

Kérem a kávét. The object has the article a.

10. Which conjugation does *Megyek* use?

▼ Show answer

Indefinite. The verb has no object.

Coming up in Chapter 7: The Definite Conjugation: Forms. The second set of endings, in full, for all three harmony groups, and what happens to the j.