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# The Arabic Alphabet

Reading and Writing the Arabic Script

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Course Code: TAS001A

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## Introduction

**There are five free video lectures which accompany this text. They can be downloaded at [www.arabic-studio.com](http://www.arabic-studio.com).**

This course has been designed to teach the complete beginner how to read and write the Arabic script. It assumes no prior knowledge of Arabic.

The course covers most of the rules a beginner needs to correctly read and pronounce Arabic. However, a few rules can only be fully understood and applied after learning some grammar, and these will be covered in the course *Basic Arabic Grammar* (TAS004A).

In Appendix A at the end of this text, an alphabet cut-out has been provided, which the student can use to make alphabet cards. These can be used to practice letter recognition and for writing exercises, as explained in the accompanying video lectures.



# 1 The Alphabet

## A The Primary Letters

There are twenty-eight letters in the Arabic alphabet, shown in the table below. For each letter, the table also gives the transliteration of its name, and an example English word which begins with the sound made by that letter. Some letters don't have a corresponding English sound; the correct pronunciation for these is given in §1B.

Letter	Transliteration of the letter's name	English word which begins with the sound of this letter
ا	`alif	(see §1C)
ب	bā`	<b>book</b>
ت	tā`	<b>table</b>
ث	<u>th</u> ā`	<b>thin</b>
ج	jīm	<b>jack</b>
ح	ḥā`	-
خ	<u>kh</u> ā`	-
د	dāl	<b>dolly</b>
ذ	<u>dh</u> āl	<b>that</b>
ر	rā`	-
ز	zāy	<b>zebra</b>
س	sīn	<b>sun</b>
ش	<u>sh</u> īn	<b>shatter</b>
ص	ṣād	-
ض	ḍād	-



ط	tā`	-
ظ	zā`	-
ع	‘ayn	-
غ	ghayn	-
ف	fā`	<b>fat</b>
ق	qāf	-
ك	kāf	<b>king</b>
ل	lām	<b>light</b>
م	mīm	<b>mad</b>
ن	nūn	<b>night</b>
ه	hā`	<b>hello</b>
و	waw	<b>wing</b>
ي	yā`	<b>yellow</b>

## B Pronunciation

Most Arabic letters have an English equivalent, as you will have noticed from the previous section. A few, however, don't have corresponding English sounds. The correct way to pronounce these is as follows:

- ح This is similar to the English *h*, except that you must constrict the throat when exhaling, as is sometimes heard in the exclamation: '**aha!**'
  
- خ This sound is sometimes heard in Scottish English; it is like the *ch* in the word '**loch**'.
  
- ر Imagine isolating a single 'tap' which the tongue makes when roll your *r*'s - that's the sound you need for this letter. It is often heard in Scottish English for the letter *r*, such as in the word '**free**'.



ظ ط ص These are deeper, or emphatic, versions of س , ت and ذ respectively. In each case, the tongue is pressed harder against the mouth, although its position (i.e. the point of contact with the mouth) doesn't change. At the same time, the back of the tongue is raised, which constricts the pharynx. For this reason, these letters are sometimes said to be *pharyngealized*.

ض This is a difficult sound to get right. It is made by using the left or right side of the tongue with the premolar and molar teeth. It is again a deep sound, and as a first approximation may be considered the emphatic version of د . Along with the above three letters, ض is also said to be *pharyngealized* for the same reasons.

ع This is not quite a glottal stop (see §1C), but very close. Its sound is made by the throat constricting, much as it does for ح , except even more tensely, allowing less air to escape.

غ This is similar to the gurgling sound in English.

ق This is roughly similar to the English *k*, but is pronounced from the part of the tongue closest to the throat (i.e. the uvula).

## C Supplementary Letters

As well as the above twenty-eight letters, there are three supplementary letters. These aren't usually included in the alphabet, but are used frequently nonetheless.

### Hamzah (هَمْزَة)

The hamzah is written: ء , and is represented in transliteration by a single inverted apostrophe: ` . It represents a glottal stop. Although there isn't an equivalent letter for this sound in the English alphabet, English speakers still make this sound all the time:

- *At the beginning of words:* when pronouncing a word which begins with a vowel, such as 'in', 'on' and 'at'.



- *In the middle and end of words:* in some English dialects, such as Cockney, it replaces the *t* in the middle and end of some words and phrases, such as 'fitness', 'what if', and 'shut up'.

If the hamzah occurs at the start of a word, it is always written 'sitting' on top of or beneath an **ا**, like this: **أ** and **إ** (see §4). For this reason, it is sometimes said that **ا** is for 'apple'. In fact, it is the hamzah sitting on top of the **ا** which gives us the glottal stop at the beginning of 'apple'.

More details about the hamzah are given in Section §4.

#### Tā` Marbūtah (تَاءٌ مَرْبُوطَةٌ)

This is written: **ة**, i.e. **ه** with two dots above, and it may be thought of as a mixture of **ه** and **ت**. It only ever occurs at the end of a word. When speaking or reading aloud, if we stop at a word which ends in **ة**, such as at the end of a sentence, or to draw breath, then we pronounce it as a **ه**. Otherwise, we pronounce it as a **ت**.

More details about the rules for speaking and reading aloud are given in §3F.

#### Alif Maqsūrah (أَلِفٌ مَّقْصُورَةٌ)

This is written: **ى**. It is written like a **ي**, but without two dots beneath it. It also only occurs at the end of a word, and is used to form long vowels (see §3B).



## 2 Writing

Arabic is written from right to left. Most of the letters in an Arabic word have to be joined together, like joined-up handwriting in English. There are however six letters which can't be joined on to any other letter which comes *after* them:

ا د ذ ر ز و

To write Arabic, we need to know what each letter looks like in its initial form (i.e. when there is a letter attached after it only), its medial form (i.e. when there is a letter on both sides of it), and its final form (i.e. when there is a letter attached before it only). In the table below, you can see the electronic or printed forms of the letters. The hand-written forms of a few of the letters is slightly different from the printed forms, and is covered in the video lectures.

Isolated Form	Final Form (A letter attached before it only)	Medial Form (Letters attached on both sides)	Initial Form (A letter attached after it only)
ا	ا	Cannot attach a letter after it.	
ب	ب	ب	ب
ت	ت	ت	ت
ث	ث	ث	ث
ج	ج	ج	ج
ح	ح	ح	ح
خ	خ	خ	خ
د	د	Cannot attach a letter after it.	
ذ	ذ	Cannot attach a letter after it.	
ر	ر	Cannot attach a letter after it.	
ز	ز	Cannot attach a letter after it.	



س	س	سد	سد
ش	ش	شد	شد
ص	ص	صد	صد
ض	ض	ضد	ضد
ط	ط	ط	ط
ظ	ظ	ظ	ظ
ع	ع	ع	ع
غ	غ	غ	غ
ف	ف	ف	ف
ق	ق	قا	قا
ك	ك	كا	كا
ل	ل	لا	لا
م	م	م	م
ن	ن	نا	نا
ه	ه	ه	ه
و	و	Cannot attach a letter after it.	
ي	ي	يا	يا



In addition, there are some combinations of letters which join together in special ways. It is recommended that the student just pick these combinations up as he or she progresses. The only one to bear in mind at this stage is a ﻝ followed by an ﻻ:

<b>Isolated Form</b>	<b>Final Form</b> (A letter attached before it only)	<b>Medial Form</b> (Letters attached on both sides)	<b>Initial Form</b> (A letter attached after it only)
ﻝ	ﻝ	Cannot attach a letter after it.	



### 3 The Vowels and the Sukūn

#### A The Short Vowels and the Sukūn

In English, we use the five vowels *a, e, i, o* and *u* after the consonants to show what sound each consonant should make (e.g. 'ma', 'me', 'mo').

In Arabic, we use diacritical marks in place of vowels. These are signs made above and below the letters. The three short Arabic vowels are shown in the table below:

Vowel	Example	Transliteration	English word which begins with this sound
ḍammah (ضَمَّةٌ): ُ	فُ	fu	foot
fatḥah (فَتْحَةٌ): َ	رَ	ra	run
kasrah (كَسْرَةٌ): ِ	بِ	bi	bit

Letters in English may be unvowelled, i.e. have no vowel sound immediately after them, such as the *n*, the *s* and the *c* in the word 'fantastic'. In Arabic, we show this using a diacritical mark called a *sukūn* (سُكُونٌ) above the unvowelled letter: ْ .

Example	Transliteration
قُلْ	qul
هَلْ	hal
مِنْ	min

#### B Long Vowels

A long vowel is just a lengthened vowel sound. In English, we usually form long vowels by using a double-vowel, e.g. 'fool' and 'weep'. Long vowels in Arabic are formed in the following manner:

- ُو (i.e. any letter which has a ḍammah, followed by a ُو with a sukūn)



- اُ and اِ (i.e. any letter which has a fathah, followed by an ا or an ي with a sukūn)
- يِ (i.e. any letter which has a kasrah, followed by a ي with a sukūn)

As such, the letters و , ا and ي are said to 'correspond' with the vowels ḍammah, fathah and kasrah respectively.

Consider the examples in the table below:

Long Vowel	Example	Transliteration	English word which begins with this sound
وُ	شُو	shū	shoot
أُ	هَأُ	hā	heart
يِ	فِي	fī	feet

In a few words, we use the sign ُ above a letter to indicate a long fathah vowel, in place of اُ , such as above the م in رَحْمَنُ *Gracious* (instead of رَحْمَانُ).

When a hamzah is followed by an ا , we write it as آ , such as in the word قُرْآنُ *Quran*. This sign above the ا is called a *maddah* (مَدَّة).

## C Diphthongs

Diphthongs are combinations of two vowels in a single syllable, as in the words 'coin', and 'loud'. In Arabic, there are two diphthongs, which are formed in the following manner:

Diphthong	Example	Transliteration	English word which begins with this sound
وِ	لَوِ	law	lonely
يِ	وَيِ	way	wait

## D Shaddah / Tashdīd

Many vowelised letters in Arabic have a ّ sign with their vowels. This is called a *shaddah* (شَدَّة), or



*tashdīd* (تَشْدِيدٌ). It indicates a double-letter, the first of which has a sukūn, and the second has whatever vowel appears with the shaddah.

Consider the examples in the table below. Note that where we have a kasrah, it is written beneath the shaddah (rather than beneath the letter, as is usually the case).

Example	What the <u>shaddah</u> indicates	Transliteration
جَدُّكَ	جَدُّدُكَ	jadduka
عَلَّمَ	عَلَّلَمَ	ʿallama
قُتِلَ	قُتِّلَ	quttila

## E Tanwīn / Nunation

The ends of some Arabic words take two vowel markers (e.g. a double-kasrah: ِِ). This is known as *tanwīn* (تَنْوِينٌ), or nunation. It indicates a final *n* sound after the vowel.

In the examples below, note the way in which the ḍammah tanwīn is written: ُُ. Also, note that when a word ends with a faḥah tanwīn, we add a final ِ to the word<sup>1</sup>, which can usually just be ignored (but see the next section).

Example	Transliteration
عِلْمٌ	ʿilmun
عِلْمًا	ʿilman
عِلْمِ	ʿilmin

## F Pausing when Speaking or Reading Aloud

When speaking Arabic or reading it out loud, we usually don't pronounce the last short vowel or tanwīn of the word we stop at. For example, we would read aloud the sentence جَلَسَ عَلَيَّ جِمَارٌ *He sat on a donkey*, as جَلَسَ عَلَيَّ جِمَارٌ. In other words, we ignore the tanwīn on the final letter ر, and treat it as if it had a sukūn.

<sup>1</sup> This is further discussed in the course *Basic Arabic Grammar - Part A* (TAS004A).



The exception to this is when the final word ends in ة, i.e. a fathah tanwīn. In this case we read it with the *long* fathah sound: ā. For example, we would read the sentence بَعْتُ كِتَابًا *I sold a book*, as بَعْتُ كِتَابًا .



## 4 The Two Hamzahs

There are two types of hamzahs in Arabic; the *permanent hamzah* (هَمْزَةُ الْفُطْحِ) and the *connecting hamzah* (هَمْزَةُ الْوَصْلِ).

### A The Permanent Hamzah

The permanent hamzah can be written in a number of ways:

- It can 'sit' above the ا , و or ي (i.e. أ , ؤ and ئ - note that we remove the two dots from the ي when the hamzah is sitting on it);
- It can sit beneath the ا (i.e. إ);
- It can sit 'on the line' - in other words neither above nor beneath another letter (i.e. ء).

The correct way to write the hamzah in any given word will depend on its position within that word, and the vowels before it and on it.

#### The Beginning of a Word

At the beginning of a word, the hamzah sits above the ا if it takes a ḍammah or a fathāh, and below the ا if it takes a kasrah:

Word	Transliteration
أُمُّ	`ummun
أَخٌ	`akhun
إِنْ	`in

#### The End of Word

At the end of a word, the hamzah sits on the letter which corresponds (see §3B) to the short vowel immediately before it. If there is a sukūn or a long vowel immediately before the hamzah, then it sits on the line.



Word	Transliteration
جَرَوْا	jaru`a
يَقْرَأُ	yaqra`u
مُلِيَ	muli`a
جُزْءٌ	juz`un
بِنَاءٌ	binā`un

### The Middle of a Word

In the middle of a word, we need to consider (i) the long or short vowel immediately before the hamzah, and (ii) the vowel on the hamzah itself. We then apply the following rules in the following order:

1. If either (i) *or* (ii) is a kasrah, then the hamzah sits on a ي , otherwise go to Rule 2 below;
2. If either (i) *or* (ii) is a dammah, then the hamzah sits on a و , otherwise go to Rule 3 below;
3. If either (i) *or* (ii) is a fathah, then the hamzah sits on an ا , unless it occurs after an اُ , in which case go to Rule 3.a below:
  - 3.a The hamzah sits on the line.

One must apply the above rules in the correct order. So, for example, if Rule 1 applies, then we don't need to worry about Rules 2 and 3.

There are a few exceptions to the above rules, which the student should learn as he or she progresses.



Rule	Word	Transliteration
1	سُئِلَ	su`ila
2	بُؤْسَ	ba`usa
3	شَأْمَ	sha`ama
3.a	يَتَسَاءَلُونَ	yatasā`alūna

## B The Connecting Hamzah

This is only ever used at the start of a few words (and therefore always sits above or below an ا). For example, the word *اسْمٌ* *name* starts with a connecting hamzah.

We only pronounce the connecting hamzah when the word in which it occurs is at the start of a sentence (or a pronouncement). To show this, we don't usually write the hamzah - we just write the vowel that it takes above or below the ا, e.g. *اسْمٌ*.

You should note that whenever a word appears to begin with ا, it is in fact beginning with a connecting hamzah, which is invisibly sitting above or below the ا.

When the word which starts with a connecting hamzah occurs in the middle of a sentence (or pronouncement, in spoken Arabic), the hamzah is totally ignored. To indicate this, we can use the symbol ˆ above the ا, e.g. *اسْمٌ*. More often, we just show the ا by itself: *اسْمٌ*. So we would read the sentence *نَعْرِفُ اسْمَ بَلَدِهَا* *We know the name of her city*, as *نَعْرِفُ سِمَ بَلَدِهَا*, as if the ا weren't there.



## 5 Elision

Some combinations of consonants are difficult to say, so we leave out some of the sounds. For example, when we say the phrase 'next day', we usually leave out the final *t* of the first word, as if it were 'nex day'. This is called elision: the *t* is elided into the *d* because it is too difficult to pronounce both of them together.

The same principle applies in Arabic, particularly in the Arabic of the Qur`ān and ḥadīth literature. Elision can occur between two letters if the first has a sukūn, and the second is vowelled. If it is difficult to pronounce the two letters together, then the first is elided into the second. To show this, the first letter loses its diacritical mark (it becomes 'silent', like the *t* in the above example, and so is ignored) and second takes a shaddah.

Consider the examples below, which are all taken from the Qur`ān. You can see the vowels on each phrase before and after elision.

Letters which are elided	Before Elision	After Elision
ن elides into ر	مِنْ رَرِّهِمْ	مِنْ رَرِّهِمْ
ن elides into ل	مِنْ لُدَّتَا	مِنْ لُدَّتَا
د elides into ت	عَبْدَتُهُمْ	عَبْدَتُهُمْ
ذ elides into ظ	إِذْ ظَلَمْتُمْ	إِذْ ظَلَمْتُمْ
All letters elide into themselves	لَكُمْ مَا كَسَبْتُمْ	لَكُمْ مَا كَسَبْتُمْ

The complete rules for how letters elide are studied as part of the subject called *tajwīd*, and will not be dealt with here.

### A The Sun and Moon Letters

The word for 'the' in Arabic is *أل*. When we want say 'the boy', for example, we take the word for boy, *وَلَدٌ*, and attach *أل* to the beginning: *أَلْوَلَدٌ*.

However, when *أل* is attached to words beginning with certain letters, known as the Sun Letters, we have to elide the *ل* into the sun letter with which the word begins. For the rest of the letters in



the alphabet we don't elide the ل ; these are called the Moon Letters.

Moon Letters	Example	Transliteration
ء	الْأَنْعَامُ	al-anʿām
ب	الْبَقَرَةُ	al-baqarah
ج	الْجَاثِيَةُ	al-jāthiyah
ح	الْحِجْرُ	al-ḥijr
خ	الْخَاسِرُونَ	al-khāsirūn
ع	الْعَنْكَبُوتُ	al-ʿankabūt
غ	الْغَاشِيَةُ	al-ghāshiyah
ف	الْفُرْقَانُ	al-furqān
ق	الْقَصَصُ	al-qasaṣ
ك	الْكَهْفُ	al-kahf
م	الْمَائِدَةُ	al-mā'idah
ه	الْهُمَزَةُ	al-humazah
و	الْوَاقِعَةُ	al-wāqifah
ي	الْيَقِينُ	al-yaqīn

Sun Letters	Example	Transliteration
ت	التَّوْبَةُ	at-tawbah
ث	التَّائِبُ	ath-thāqib
د	الدُّخَانُ	ad-dukhān
ذ	الذَّارِيَاتُ	adh-dhāriyāt



ر	الرَّعْدُ	ar-raʿd
ز	الرُّمُرُ	az-zumar
س	السَّجْدَةُ	as-sajdah
ش	الشُّعْرَاءُ	ash-shuʿarā`
ص	الصَّافَّاتُ	aṣ-ṣāffāt
ض	الضُّحَى	aḍ-ḍuḥā
ط	الطُّورُ	aṭ-ṭūr
ظ	الظَّالِمُونَ	aẓ-ẓālimūna
ل	اللَّهَبُ	al-lahab
ن	النِّسَاءُ	an-nisā`

Note that **أَلْ** begins with a connecting hamzah. So if the **أَلْ** is attached to a sun letter and occurs in the middle of a sentence, it means we ignore both the hamzah (as it is a connecting hamzah), and the **ل**, (as it is elided into the sun letter), e.g. **جَلَسَ تَحْتَ الشَّجَرَةِ** *he sat under **the tree***.



## Appendix A

ا	ب	ت	ث	ج
ح	خ	د	ذ	ر
ز	س	ش	ص	ض
ط	ظ	ع	ف	ق
ك	ل	م	ن	هـ
و	ي	هـ	هـ	هـ
	ح			

This course covers most of the rules a beginner needs to correctly read and pronounce any Arabic script. It is intended as an introduction to the course *Basic Arabic Grammar*.