

How to Read Korean: The Ultimate Guide to Hangeul Pronunciation and Syllable Structure

Master the Korean Alphabet Essentials for Beginners

Welcome to your first step in learning Korean! To speak and read Korean fluently, you need to understand two foundational pillars: the **sound system** (Vowels & Consonants) and the **syllable structure**. This comprehensive guide will help you master the mechanics of Hangeul.

1. Understanding the Korean Sound System: Vowels and Consonants

A. Basic Vowels (기본 모음)

Korean basic vowels are structured systematically based on tongue position (Front, Central, Back) and tongue height (High, Mid, Low).

Height / Position	Front	Central	Back
High (고모음)	ㅣ [i]	ㅡ [u]	ㅓ [u]
Mid (중모음)	ㅔ [e] / ㅖ [ɛ]	ㅚ [ø] / ㅜ [ʌ]	ㅛ [o]
Low (저모음)	-	ㅑ [a]	-

B. Consonants (자음)

Korean consonants are characterized by their **place of articulation** (where the sound is made) and **manner of articulation** (how air flows, grouped into Lax, Tense, and Aspirated sounds).

Manners / Places	Bilabial (Lips)	Alveolar (Tongue tip)	Alveo-palatal	Velar (Back)	Glottal (Throat)
Plosives (Stops) • Lax • Tense • Aspirated	ㅂ [p/b] ㅃ [p'] ㅍ [p ^h]	ㄷ [t/d] ㄸ [t'] ㅌ [t ^h]	-	ㄱ [k/g] ㄲ [k'] ㅋ [k ^h]	-
Affricates • Lax / Tense / Asp.	-	-	ㅈ [tʃ] / ㅉ [tʃ'] / ㅊ [tʃ ^h]	-	-
Fricatives • Lax / Tense	-	ㅅ [s] / ㅆ [s']	-	-	ㅎ [h]
Nasals (Voiced)	ㅁ [m]	ㄴ [n]	-	ㅇ [ŋ] (final)	-
Lateral (Voiced)	-	ㄹ [l/r]	-	-	-

2. How Korean Syllable Blocks Work: 4 Structuring Rules

Unlike English, which is written in a continuous horizontal line, Korean letters are clustered into **syllable blocks**. The blocks change shape depending on whether the vowel is vertical (ㅏ, ㅑ, ㅣ) or horizontal (ㅓ, ㅕ, ㅗ).

① Vowel Only (모음만으로)

When a syllable consists of a vowel sound alone, a silent placeholder consonant 'ㅇ' (**ieung**) must be written before or above the vowel. It carries no sound value at the beginning of a syllable.

- 아 [a]
- 아이 [a-i] (Child)
- 여우 [yeo-u] (Fox)

② Consonant + Vowel (자음 + 모음)

When a consonant meets a vowel, the vowel is written to the **right** (vertical vowels) or **below** the consonant (horizontal vowels).

- **가구** [ga-gu] (Furniture) — ㄱ is left of ㅏ, and above ㅜ.
- **나비** [na-bi] (Butterfly)
- **사자** [sa-ja] (Lion)

③ Vowel + Final Consonant (모음 + 받침)

When a syllable starts with a vowel sound but ends with a consonant, the placeholder 'ㅇ' takes the initial position, and the final consonant—called **Batchim (받침)**—is placed at the bottom.

- **알** [al] (Egg)
- **약** [yak] (Medicine)
- **옷** [ot] (Clothes)

④ Consonant + Vowel + Final Consonant (자음 + 모음 + 받침)

A full block combining an initial consonant, a vowel, and a Batchim at the bottom.

- **산** [san] (Mountain): ㅅ (Consonant) + ㅏ (Vowel) + ㄴ (Batchim)
- **집** [jip] (House)
- **꽃** [kkot] (Flower)

3. Mastering Batchim: The 7 Core Rules of Korean Final Consonants

In written Korean, all basic consonants can be used as a final consonant (Batchim). However, when speaking, they are simplified into only **7 representative sounds**.

Written Batchim	Phonetic Value	Pronunciation Description & Examples
ㄱ, ㅋ, ㆁ	[k]	Unreleased 'k' sound. 부엌 → [부억] (Kitchen) 닦다 → [닥다] (To wipe)
ㄴ	[n]	Clear 'n' sound. 신문 → [신문] (Newspaper) 산 → [산] (Mountain)
ㄷ, ㅌ, ㅍ, ㅊ, ㅌ, ㅍ, ㅎ	[t]	Unreleased 't' sound. 옷 → [올] (Clothes) 낮 → [냇] (Daytime) 있다 → [인다]
ㄹ	[l]	Soft 'l' sound at the end of syllables. 딸 → [딸] (Daughter) 얼굴 → [얼굴] (Face)
ㅁ	[m]	Clear 'm' sound with closed lips. 감 → [감] (Persimmon) 임금 → [임금] (King)
ㅂ, ㅍ	[p]	Unreleased 'p' sound. 밥 → [밥] (Rice) 숲 → [습] (Forest)
ㅇ	[ŋ]	'ng' sound (like the end of "sing"). 강 → [강] (River) 아리랑 → [아리랑]

Study Tip for Learners

When downloading this guide, practice reading aloud and tracing the blocks. Pay close attention to how the written **Batchim** converts to its representative sound during actual conversation!