The Arabic letters الحروف

Right to left: Arabic is written and read from right to left, and the letters in a word join up, like handwriting. There are no capital letters. **Romanization on this sheet:** long vowels are doubled (aa, ii, uu), a dot under a letter (ḥ ṣ ḍ ṭ ẓ) marks a deep sound, ʿ is the letter ʿayn and ' is a catch in the throat.

The 28 letters, in alphabet order

1 ا **alif** **aa** a long aa; also holds a hamza	2 ب **baa'** **b** b as in bed	3 ت **taa'** **t** t as in ten	4 ث **thaa'** **th** th as in think	5 ج **jiim** **j** j as in jam; g in Egypt	6 ح **ḥaa'** **ḥ** a strong, breathy h	7 خ **khaa'** **kh** ch in Scottish loch
8 د **daal** **d** d as in dog	9 ذ **dhaal** **dh** th as in this	10 ر **raa'** **r** a tapped or rolled r	11 ز **zaay** **z** z as in zoo	12 س **siin** **s** s as in sun	13 ش **shiin** **sh** sh as in shop	14 ص **ṣaad** **ṣ** a deep, heavy s
15 ض **ḍaad** **ḍ** a deep, heavy d	16 ط **ṭaa'** **ṭ** a deep, heavy t	17 ظ **ẓaa'** **ẓ** a deep, heavy th as in this	18 ع **ʿayn** **ʿ** a squeeze in the throat	19 غ **ghayn** **gh** a gargled r, as in French	20 ف **faa'** **f** f as in fun	21 ق **qaaf** **q** a k from deep in the throat
22 ك **kaaf** **k** k as in kite	23 ل **laam** **l** l as in let	24 م **miim** **m** m as in man	25 ن **nuun** **n** n as in no	26 ه **haa'** **h** h as in hat, even at the end	27 و **waaw** **w, uu** w; also a long uu	28 ي **yaa'** **y, ii** y; also a long ii

Dots matter: ب ت ث share one shape, and only the dots tell them apart. So do ج ح خ, د ذ, ر ز, س ش, ص ض, ط ظ and ع غ.

Sounds English doesn't have

Letter	How to say it	Example
ح	breathe out hard from deep in your throat, as if fogging up glasses. Not a plain h	حب ḥubb love
خ	a scrape at the back of the mouth, the ch in loch	خبز khubz bread
ع	squeeze your throat a little and let the vowel out. It takes time; listening helps most	عين ʿayn eye
غ	the same place as kh, with your voice on: close to the French r	غداء ghadaa' lunch
ق	a k pulled far back, near the throat. Many dialects say it as ' or g	قلب qalb heart
ص ض ط ظ	s, d, t and th with the tongue low and the mouth full, so the vowels around them sound darker	سيف / صيف sayf / ṣayf summer / sword
ء	hamza: the little catch in the middle of uh-oh	سؤال su'aal question

Be gentle with yourself: these take weeks of listening, not one evening. If ح comes out as h and ع as a pause at first, people will still understand you.

Letters change shape أشكال الحروف

One letter, up to four shapes: a letter looks a little different at the start, in the middle and at the end of a word, because it joins its neighbours. The core shape stays, so you'll soon see it.

Eight letters in every position

Letter	Alone	Start	Middle	End	In a word
baa'	ب	بـ	ـبـ	ـب	باب baab door
taa'	ت	تـ	ـتـ	ـت	بيت bayt house
jiim	ج	جـ	ـجـ	ـج	دجاج dajaaj chicken
ʿayn	ع	عـ	ـعـ	ـع	ساعة saaʿa hour; a watch
haa'	ه	هـ	ـهـ	ـه	شهر shahr month
kaaf	ك	كـ	ـكـ	ـك	كتاب kitaab book
laam	ل	لـ	ـلـ	ـل	ليل layl night
miim	م	مـ	ـمـ	ـم	قلم qalam pen

Six letters never join forward

ا د ذ ر ز و join the letter before them, but never the one after, so a small gap follows them. In ورد ward, roses, no letter touches. In مدرسة madrasa, school, there's a gap after د and after ر.

ل and ا make one shape

when laam meets alif, the two merge into one: لا laa, no; سلام salaam, peace. It's still two letters, l and aa.

Three more to know: ة is a ه with two dots, only at the end. It says a, and most feminine words end in it: غرفة ghurfa, room. ى is a ي with no dots, only at the end, and says aa: على ʿalaa, on. ء, hamza, is the catch in uh-oh. It sits alone or on a seat, أ إ ؤ ئ: أنا ana, I; مساء masaa', evening.

Short vowels are marks, usually left out

بَ	بِ	بُ	بْ	بّ
ba	**bi**	**bu**	**b**	**bb**
fatḥa	**kasra**	**ḍamma**	**sukuun**	**shadda**
a short a	a short i	a short u	no vowel	say it twice

You learn words by shape: long vowels are letters (ا و ي), but a, i and u are small marks above or below, and subtitles, signs and books leave them out. So كتب can be كَتَبَ kataba, he wrote, or كُتُب kutub, books. Context tells you which. Children's books, the Quran and learners' texts keep the marks.

How words work القواعد

No word for a: كتاب kitaab is a book, or just book. To say the, add ال al- to the front, joined to the word.

The: al-, and the sun letters

القمر al-qamar the moon: al- stays	الكتاب al-kitaab the book	الشمس ash-shams the sun: al- becomes ash-	الرجل ar-rajul the man: al- becomes ar-

Sun letters: before these 14, the l of al- turns into the next sound, but you still write the ل: ت ث د ذ ر ز س ش ص ض ط ظ ل ن. The other letters are moon letters, and al- stays al-. After a vowel, the a of al- drops: مع السلامة maʿa s-salaama, goodbye.

Masculine and feminine

masculine	feminine
no special ending	most end in ة, said a
طالب ṭaalib, student	طالبة ṭaaliba, student
معلم muʿallim, teacher	معلمة muʿallima, teacher
كبير kabiir, big	كبيرة kabiira, big

Describing words come after, and match: بيت كبير bayt kabiir, a big house; مدينة كبيرة madiina kabiira, a big city. A few feminine words have no ة: أم umm, mother; شمس shams, sun.

I, you, he, she, we

أنا ana I	أنتَ anta you (to a man)	أنتِ anti you (to a woman)	هو huwa he	هي hiya she	نحن naḥnu we

No is or are

أنا طالب. ana ṭaalib. I'm a student.	هي معلمة. hiya muʿallima. She's a teacher.	البيت كبير. al-bayt kabiir. The house is big.

Watch the al-: البيت الكبير al-bayt al-kabiir with al- twice is the big house. البيت كبير al-bayt kabiir with one al- is a sentence: the house is big.

Questions and no: start with هل hal for a yes or no question: هل أنت طالب؟ hal anta ṭaalib? Are you a student? Put لا laa before a verb for not: لا أعرف laa aʿrif, I don't know. Written Arabic often puts the verb first: ذهب الولد dhahaba l-walad, the boy went.

The first 171 words كلمات

How: learn five a day, then listen for them in shows. *(Notes in brackets)* say how a word is used.

Greetings and survival

السلام عليكم as-salaamu ʿalaykum
hello *(it means peace be upon you)*

وعليكم السلام wa-ʿalaykum as-salaam
the reply: and upon you peace

مرحبا marḥaban
hello, hi

أهلا وسهلا ahlan wa-sahlan
welcome

صباح الخير ṣabaaḥ al-khayr
good morning

صباح النور ṣabaaḥ an-nuur
the reply *(it means morning of light)*

مساء الخير masaa' al-khayr
good evening

مع السلامة maʿa s-salaama
goodbye *(go safely)*

شكرا shukran
thank you

شكرا جزيلا shukran jaziilan
thank you very much

عفوا ʿafwan
you're welcome; also excuse me

من فضلك min faḍlak
please *(to a woman: min faḍlik)*

آسف aasif
sorry *(a woman says aasifa)*

نعم naʿam
yes

لا laa
no

كيف الحال؟ kayfa l-ḥaal?
how are you? how's it going?

بخير bi-khayr
fine, well

الحمد لله al-ḥamdu lillaah
thank God: the usual answer to how are you

تشرفنا tasharrafnaa
nice to meet you

لا أفهم laa afham
I don't understand

إن شاء الله in shaa' allaah
if God wills: said about any plan, by people of every faith; often hopefully, or a polite maybe

Question words

ماذا maadhaa
what

من man
who

أين ayna
where

متى mataa
when

لماذا limaadhaa
why

كيف kayfa
how

كم kam
how much, how many

أي ayy
which

هل hal
starts a yes or no question

Little words

و wa
and *(it joins the next word:* وأنا wa-ana, *and me)*

أو aw
or

لكن laakin
but

في fii
in

على ʿalaa
on

مع maʿa
with

هنا hunaa
here

هناك hunaaka
there

جدا jiddan
very *(after the word)*

قليلا qaliilan
a little

كثيرا kathiiran
a lot

الآن al-aan
now

أيضا ayḍan
also, too

لأن li-anna
because

هذه / هذا haadhaa / haadhihi
this *(for a masculine / feminine word)*

Family

أب ab
father

أم umm
mother

بابا baabaa
dad

ماما maamaa
mum

أخ akh
brother

أخت ukht
sister

ابن ibn
son

بنت bint
daughter; also girl

جد jadd
grandfather

جدة jadda
grandmother

زوج zawj
husband

زوجة zawja
wife

عائلة ʿaa'ila
family

أولاد awlaad
children, kids

Numbers

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
•	١	٢	٣	٤	٥	٦	٧	٨	٩	١٠
صفر	واحد	اثنان	ثلاثة	أربعة	خمسة	ستة	سبعة	ثمانية	تسعة	عشرة
ṣifr	waaḥid	ithnaan	thalaatha	arbaʿa	khamsa	sitta	sabʿa	thamaaniya	tisʿa	ʿashara

Digits: Arabic has its own digits, and they run left to right, even inside Arabic text: ١• is 10, ٢٥ is 25. Many places use 1, 2, 3 too.

Watch out: ٥ is 5 and • is zero.

Food, places, verbs الطعام والأماكن

Verbs: dictionaries list a verb in its he-did-it form: كتب kataba means he wrote. That is the form here, with its plain meaning.

People

رجل rajul
man

امرأة imra'a
woman

ولد walad
boy

طفل ṭifl
child

صديق / صديقة ṣadiiq / ṣadiiqa
friend *(a man / a woman)*

معلم muʿallim
teacher

طبيب ṭabiib
doctor

Food and drink

ماء maa'
water

قهوة qahwa
coffee

شاي shaay
tea

حليب ḥaliib
milk

خبز khubz
bread

أرز aruzz
rice

لحم laḥm
meat

دجاج dajaaj
chicken

سمك samak
fish

خضار khuḍaar
vegetables

فواكه fawaakih
fruit

طعام ṭaʿaam
food

فطور fuṭuur
breakfast

عشاء ʿashaa'
dinner

حمص ḥummuṣ
hummus; also chickpeas

فلافل falaafil
falafel

لذيذ ladhiidh
delicious

جائع jaa'iʿ
hungry

عطشان ʿaṭshaan
thirsty

الحساب من فضلك al-ḥisaab min faḍlak
the bill, please

Places

بيت bayt
house, home

مدرسة madrasa
school

مكتب maktab
office; also desk

مطعم maṭʿam
restaurant

مقهى maqhaa
café

سوق suuq
market

مستشفى mustashfaa
hospital

فندق funduq
hotel

مطار maṭaar
airport

شارع shaariʿ
street

مدينة madiina
city

مسجد masjid
mosque

بحر baḥr
sea

حمام ḥammaam
bathroom, toilet

Verbs

كتب kataba
write

قرأ qara'a
read

أكل akala
eat

شرب shariba
drink

ذهب dhahaba
go

جاء jaa'a
come

نام naama
sleep

فهم fahima
understand

عرف ʿarafa
know

أحب aḥabba
love; also like

أراد araada
want

عمل ʿamila
work

رأى ra'aa
see

سمع samiʿa
hear

قال qaala
say

تكلم takallama
speak

ساعد saaʿada
help

اشترى ishtaraa
buy

Describing words

صغير / كبير kabiir / ṣaghiir
big / small

قديم / جديد jadiid / qadiim
new / old

بارد / حار ḥaarr / baarid
hot / cold

صعب / سهل sahl / ṣaʿb
easy / hard

بعيد / قريب qariib / baʿiid
near / far

جيد jayyid
good

جميل jamiil
beautiful

سعيد saʿiid
happy

حزين ḥaziin
sad

تعبان taʿbaan
tired

مشغول mashghuul
busy

For a woman, add ة**:** سعيد saʿiid, سعيدة saʿiida, happy; تعبان taʿbaan, تعبانة taʿbaana, tired. Describing words do the same after a feminine word: مدينة جميلة madiina jamiila, a beautiful city.

Show words كلمات من المسلسلات

Reactions

يا الله yaa allaah!
oh God! *(surprise, worry, or hurry up)*

والله wallaahi
I swear; really? *(it means by God)*

يلا yallaa!
come on! let's go!

خلاص khalaaṣ!
enough! that's it; it's done

ماشي maashii
OK, fine *(Egypt and the Levant)*

طيب ṭayyib
OK, all right; also good, kind

يا سلام yaa salaam!
wow! how lovely! *(sometimes sarcastic)*

مستحيل mustaḥiil!
impossible! no way!

معقول؟ maʿquul?
really? can it be?

ما شاء الله maa shaa' allaah
wonderful! *(praise for something good)*

حرام ḥaraam!
what a shame! that's not fair *(it means forbidden)*

What to call people

حبيبي ḥabiibii
my love, my dear *(to a man)*; friends say it too

حبيبتي ḥabiibtii
my love, my dear *(to a woman)*

يا أخي yaa akhii
brother, man *(to a friend, or a stranger)*

يا أختي yaa ukhtii
sister *(to a woman, warmly)*

أستاذ ustaadh
sir *(polite to any man)*; also teacher

يا عمي yaa ʿammii
uncle: any older man

يا شباب yaa shabaab
guys! *(to a group)*

The big scenes

أحبك uḥibbuk
I love you *(same spelling to a man or a woman)*

اشتقت لك ishtaqtu lak
I missed you

لا تخف laa takhaf
don't be afraid

ساعدني saaʿidnii!
help me!

انتبه intabih!
watch out!

ماذا حدث؟ maadhaa ḥadath?
what happened?

People speak dialects: this sheet is Modern Standard Arabic, the Arabic of news, books and most subtitles. At home, people speak a dialect: Egyptian, Levantine (Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine), Gulf, or Maghrebi (Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia). Shows and films often use one, so a line can sound different from its subtitle. How are you? is إزيك؟ izzayyak? in Egypt, كيفك؟ kiifak? in the Levant, شلونك؟ shloonak? in the Gulf. Standard Arabic is understood everywhere.

Ya calls someone: يا yaa goes before a name or a word for a person: يا أحمد yaa aḥmad, hey Ahmad! You'll hear it in almost every scene.

Swear words are strong: Arabic has very strong swear words, and you'll hear them in fights on screen. They hit much harder than the subtitles show: recognise them, but don't say them. يا الله yaa allaah! and يا سلام yaa salaam! are the ones you can say in front of anyone.

Practice تمرين

How: cover the romanization and the grey lines with a strip of paper. Read the Arabic out loud, from right to left, then slide the paper down to check. Can you read every line without peeking? You've got it.

Find the shapes you know: there are no short vowels, so look for the words you know first: ال al-, أنا ana, من فضلك min faḍlak. The rest of the line falls into place around them.

Read these sentences

1. السلام عليكم، أنا سارة.
   as-salaamu ʿalaykum, ana saara.
   Hello, I'm Sara.

2. ما اسمك؟
   maa ismak?
   What's your name? (to a woman: ismik)

3. أنا من مصر.
   ana min miṣr.
   I'm from Egypt.

4. أين الحمام؟
   ayna l-ḥammaam?
   Where's the bathroom?

5. بكم هذا؟
   bikam haadhaa?
   How much is this?

6. أريد قهوة من فضلك.
   uriidu qahwa min faḍlak.
   A coffee, please. (it means I want coffee)

7. الطعام لذيذ جدا!
   aṭ-ṭaʿaam ladhiidh jiddan!
   The food is very tasty!

8. الجو حار اليوم.
   al-jaww ḥaarr al-yawm.
   It's hot today.

9. غدا أذهب إلى البحر.
   ghadan adhhabu ilaa l-baḥr.
   Tomorrow I'm going to the sea.

10. أتكلم العربية قليلا.
    atakallamu l-ʿarabiyya qaliilan.
    I speak a little Arabic.

Meet a word you don't know? In Kitsumi, hover any word in Arabic subtitles to see what it means.