How Estonian sounds Hääldus

1 · read it out loud

The trick: Estonian is read as it's written. One letter, one sound, and every letter is said. Learn the rows below, and you can read any word aloud.

Letters	Sounds like	Example
a e i o u	short and clear: father, bed, see, hot, food	**ema / isa** mother / father
õ	the special Estonian vowel: a relaxed uh, with your lips spread	**õde / sõber** sister / friend
ä	a in cat	**mägi / päike** hill / sun
ö	like ur in British fur, lips rounded	**öö / köök** night / kitchen
ü	say ee, then round your lips	**üks / tüdruk** one / girl
aa, oo, uu	a double vowel is the same sound, held longer	**saal / kool** hall / school
ss, kk, tt	a double consonant is held a moment	**kass / kott** cat / bag
b, d, g	softer than English: no buzz and no puff of air	**tuba / kodu** room / home
ei, ai, au	two vowels glide together in one beat	**leib / laud** bread / table
j	y in yes	**jah / jook** yes / drink
h	a soft breath, said even inside a word	**hea / tahan** good / I want
r	rolled or tapped with the tip of the tongue	**raha / tere** money / hello
š, ž, f, z	š is sh, ž is the s in pleasure: only in borrowed words	**šokolaad / žürii** chocolate / jury
stress	on the first syllable, in almost every word	**tere / esmaspäev** TE-re / ES-mas-päev

õ

the Estonian vowel: a relaxed uh, lips spread, not rounded

õde sister · **sõber** friend · **õhtu** evening

koli · kooli

double letters are long: hold the sound

koli junk · **kooli** to school · **kas** a question word · **kass** cat

Three lengths, honestly: Estonian sounds can be short, long or extra long. The spelling shows two of them: one letter is short, two are long. The extra long one comes with listening, and you're understood without it.

Stress is easy: almost always on the first syllable: TE-re, PA-lun, ES-mas-päev. A few words break the rule, like aitäh, said ai-TÄH. And there's no gender to learn.

How words work Grammatika

No gender, no a or the: Estonian is related to Finnish, and like it has no masculine or feminine and no word for a or the. maja is a house or the house. And tema, or ta, is he and she: one word for both.

Endings do the work of little words

Where English puts in, from or into before the word, Estonian adds an ending to it.

Ending	Example	Means
	maja	a house, the house
-d	majad	houses
-s	majas	in the house
-st	majast	from the house, out of it
-sse	majasse or majja	into the house: both are right
-ga	emaga	with mum

Try it: kool, a school: koolis, at school; koolist, from school; kooli, to school. Many words add a vowel before the ending, like the i in koolis: learn it with each word.

Verbs change for each person: olema, to be, and elama, to live

ma olen I am	sa oled you are	ta on he, she is	me oleme we are	te olete you all are	nad on they are
elan I live	elad you live	elab he, she lives	elame we live	elate you all live	elavad they live

The ending says who: -n is I, -d is you, -b is he or she, so ma is often left out: Elan Tallinnas. I live in Tallinn. And on is both is and are: ta on, he is; nad on, they are.

ei

one word for not, for every person

ma ei tea I don't know · **sa ei tea** you don't know · **nad ei tea** they don't know

Put ei before the verb and drop its ending: tean, I know, becomes ei tea. Ei ole, is not, is often said pole.

Sina or teie

Kuidas sul läheb? sina: friends, family, kids, anyone your age	Kuidas teil läheb? teie: more than one person; Teie to one person is polite

No future tense: the present does the job, and a time word says when. Homme lähen poodi. Tomorrow I'm going to the shop.

The first 228 words Esimesed sõnad

How: learn five a day, then listen for them in Estonian films and series. *Pink italics* say how a word is used, not what it means. **Orange** is an ending stuck to the word.

Greetings and survival

Tere
hello, hi *(with anyone, any time)*

Tere hommikust
good morning

Tere õhtust
good evening

Head ööd
good night

Head aega
goodbye *(it means good time)*

Nägemist
bye *(short for nägemiseni)*

Tšau
hi; also bye *(casual)*

Aitäh
thanks *(said ai-TÄH)*

Tänan
thank you *(a little more formal)*

Palun
please; you're welcome; here you are

Vabandust
sorry; excuse me

Kuidas läheb?
how's it going?

Hästi, aitäh
fine, thanks

Minu nimi on ...
my name is ...

Meeldiv tutvuda
nice to meet you

Ma ei saa aru
I don't understand

Ma ei tea
I don't know

Head isu!
enjoy your meal!

Terviseks!
cheers! *(it means to health)*

Question words

mis
what

kes
who

kus
where

kuhu
where to

kust
where from

millal
when

miks
why

kuidas
how

kui palju
how much, how many

kas
starts a yes or no question *(Kas sa tuled? Are you coming?)*

Me and you

mina, ma
I *(ma is the short form)*

sina, sa
you *(casual)*

tema, ta
he and she: one word

meie, me
we

teie, te
you all; Teie is the polite you

nemad, nad
they

minu / sinu
my / your *(short: mu, su)*

see / too
this, it / that

Little words

ja
and

aga
but

või
or; also butter

ka
also, too

väga
very

palju
a lot, many

natuke
a little

ainult
only, just

juba
already

veel
still; more

siin
here

seal
there

ilma
without

sest
because

võib-olla
maybe

Palun does a lot: it's please when you ask: Üks kohv, palun. It's you're welcome after aitäh. And it's here you are, as you hand something over.

Two ways to say thanks: aitäh is the everyday one, fine with anyone. Tänan, I thank, sounds a little more formal.

People and time Inimesed ja aeg

Family

ema
mother, mum

isa
father, dad

vend
brother

õde
sister

poeg
son

tütar
daughter

vanemad
parents

vanaema
grandmother *(it means old mother)*

vanaisa
grandfather

tädi
aunt

onu
uncle

pere
family

mees
man; husband

naine
woman; wife

laps
child *(lapsed, children)*

People

inimene
person *(inimesed, people)*

poiss
boy

tüdruk
girl

sõbranna
friend *(a woman)*

õpetaja
teacher

arst
doctor

naaber
neighbour

Things

telefon
phone

raha
money

võti
key

auto
car

raamat
book

pilet
ticket

uks
door

aken
window

When

täna
today

homme
tomorrow

eile
yesterday

nüüd
now

hiljem
later

alati
always

hommik
morning

päev
day

õhtu
evening

öö
night

tund
hour

nädal
week

kuu
month; also moon

aasta
year

kell
clock; o'clock *(kell kolm, three o'clock)*

Days of the week

esmaspäev
Monday *(it means first day)*

teisipäev
Tuesday *(second day)*

kolmapäev
Wednesday *(third day)*

neljapäev
Thursday *(fourth day)*

reede
Friday

laupäev
Saturday

pühapäev
Sunday *(it means holy day)*

Numbers

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
null	üks	kaks	kolm	neli	viis	kuus	seitse	kaheksa	üheksa	kümme	üksteist	kaksteist

13	20	21	30	50	100	1,000
kolmteist	kakskümmend	kakskümmend üks	kolmkümmend	viiskümmend	sada	tuhat

Numbers build up: 20 is kakskümmend, two tens. Add the units after it: kakskümmend üks is 21. From 11 to 19 add -teist: kolmteist is 13. Long, but regular.

Days are small: days and months take no capital letter: esmaspäev, jaanuar. On Monday is esmaspäeval.

Food, places, verbs Toit, kohad, tegusõnad

Food and drink

vesi
water

kohv
coffee

tee
tea; also road

piim
milk

õlu
beer

toit
food

leib
dark rye bread, on the table every day

juust
cheese

kana
chicken

kala
fish

muna
egg

kartul
potato

õun
apple

kama
a roasted flour mix, stirred into kefir

verivorst
blood sausage, a Christmas food

hommikusöök
breakfast

lõuna
lunch; also noon and south

õhtusöök
dinner

Mul on kõht tühi
I'm hungry *(it means my stomach is empty)*

Arve, palun
the bill, please

Places

maja
house

kodu
home *(kodus, at home)*

pood
shop

kool
school

töö
work, job

restoran
restaurant

kohvik
café

tualett
toilet *(signs say WC)*

linn
town, city

küla
village

tänav
street

saun
sauna, a big part of Estonian life

meri
sea

järv
lake

mets
forest

Eesti
Estonia *(eesti keel, Estonian)*

Tallinn
Tallinn, the capital

Verbs: dictionary / I do it

olema / olen
be

tulema / tulen
come

minema / lähen
go

sööma / söön
eat

jooma / joon
drink

nägema / näen
see

tegema / teen
do, make

magama / magan
sleep

rääkima / räägin
speak, talk

teadma / tean
know *(a fact)*

tahtma / tahan
want

saama / saan
get; can

armastama / armastan
love

elama / elan
live

ostma / ostan
buy

õppima / õpin
learn, study

lugema / loen
read

vaatama / vaatan
watch, look

Describing words

hea / halb
good / bad

suur / väike
big / small

kuum / külm
hot / cold

uus / vana
new / old

kallis / odav
expensive / cheap

lihtne / raske
easy / hard; raske is also heavy

rõõmus / kurb
happy / sad

väsinud
tired

ilus
beautiful

tore
nice, great

Two forms: the dictionary form ends in -ma. The mina form, I do it, ends in **-n**: elan, I live; söön, I eat. Some change a little inside, like minema, lähen: learn both forms together.

Describing words take endings too: they match the noun: suur maja, a big house; suures majas, in a big house.

Show words Sõnad sarjadest

Reactions

Jah / Jaa
yes / yeah

Ei
no; not

Tõesti?
really?

Lahe!
cool!

Vau!
wow!

Oi!
oh! *(surprise)*

Ahaa
I see, aha

Kõik on hästi
everything's fine

Pole viga
not bad; no problem *(it means there's no fault)*

Muidugi
of course

Tubli!
well done! good job!

Ole nüüd!
oh, come on!

Mis toimub?
what's going on?

The big scenes

Ma armastan sind
I love you

Ma igatsen sind
I miss you

Jäta mind rahule
leave me alone

Appi!
help!

Ettevaatust!
careful! watch out!

Lõpeta!
stop it!

Oota!
wait!

Mis juhtus?
what happened?

Ära muretse
don't worry

Ära mine!
don't go!

Kõik saab korda
everything will be all right

What to call people

kallis
darling, dear *(it also means expensive)*

sõber
friend; also mate, buddy

kullake
sweetie, honey *(it means little gold)*

härra / proua
Mr / Mrs; also sir / madam

Pole is ei ole, is not: you'll hear it all the time. Pole viga, not bad, no problem. Pole aega, there's no time. Pole tähtis, it doesn't matter.

Swear words are strong: Estonian has some strong swear words, and you'll hear them in films and series. Recognise them, but don't say them. Oi and ole nüüd are the mild ones, fine in front of anyone.

Practice Harjutus

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

Questions: put kas in front, and the rest stays the same: Sa räägid inglise keelt. Kas sa räägid inglise keelt? Do you speak English?

Saying no: put ei before the verb and drop its ending: Ma ei joo kohvi. I don't drink coffee.

Read these sentences

1. Tere, mina olen Kati.
   Hi, I'm Kati.

2. Mis su nimi on?
   What's your name?

3. Vabandust, kus on tualett?
   Excuse me, where is the toilet?

4. Kui palju see maksab?
   How much does this cost?

5. Üks kohv, palun.
   One coffee, please.

6. Ma räägin natuke eesti keelt.
   I speak a little Estonian.

7. Täna on väga külm.
   It's very cold today.

8. Homme lähen sauna.
   Tomorrow I'm going to the sauna.

9. See leib on väga hea!
   This bread is really good!

10. Pole viga, meil on aega.
    No problem, we have time.

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