How Latvian sounds Izruna

The trick: Latvian is read as it's written, and nothing is silent. Learn the marks and the few pairs below, and you can read any word aloud.

Letters	Sounds like	Example
a e i u	short and clipped: cup, bed, sit, put	**mamma / bet** mum / but
ā ē ī ū	the line on top means long: hold the sound twice as long	**māja / jūra** house / sea
a or ā	length changes the word, so take your time	**kazas / kāzas** goats / wedding
e, ē	sometimes as in bed, sometimes as a in cat: the spelling doesn't show which	**es / ēst** I / eat
o	in Latvian words a glide, oo-a; in borrowed words a plain o	**logs / opera** window / opera
ie	two vowels in one beat: ee-a	**piens / diena** milk / day
ai, ei, au	as in eye, day, now	**maize / meita** bread / daughter
ģ, ķ	a soft g and k with a little y in them: gy, ky	**ģimene / ķirsis** family / cherry
ļ, ņ	a soft l and n: lli in million, ny in canyon	**ļoti / ņemt** very / take
c	ts in cats, even at the start	**cilvēks / cik** person / how much
dz, dž	two letters, one sound: ds in kids, j in jam	**dziesma / džemperis** song / jumper
j	y in yes	**jā / jūs** yes / you all
r	a quick rolled r	**rīts / brālis** morning / brother
stress	almost always on the first syllable	**skolotājs / Latvija** SKO-lo-tājs / LAT-vi-ja

č · š · ž

a small v on top turns c, s, z into ch, sh, zh

čau hi · **šodien** today · **žurnāls** magazine

ģ · ķ · ļ · ņ

a little comma makes the letter soft

ģimene family · **ķirsis** cherry · **ļoti** very · **ņemt** take

Long or short: the line over ā, ē, ī and ū is not decoration. Kazas are goats, and kāzas is a wedding, so give a long vowel its full time.

Stress stays put: it falls on the first syllable in almost every word, so you can say a new word right away. Latvian also has tones, but you're understood long before you hear them.

Foreign names go Latvian: they're spelt as they sound and take an ending, so John is Džons and Paris is Parīze.

How words work Gramatika

No a, no the: Latvian has no articles, so māja is a house or the house. Describing words can do the job: liels galds is a big table, lielais galds is the big table.

Every noun is masculine or feminine

masculine

usually ends in -s, -š, -is or -us

galds, table
kaimiņš, neighbour
brālis, brother
tirgus, market

feminine

usually ends in -a or -e

mamma, mum
kafija, coffee
upe, river
ģimene, family

Mostly, not always: some -s words are feminine, like nakts, night, and sirds, heart. Puika, boy, is masculine with its -a. On the next pages the noun itself wears its gender colour, so you don't have to guess.

Endings change with the job in the sentence

kafija coffee: the dictionary form	Es dzeru kafiju. I drink coffee.	bez kafijas without coffee	ar kafiju with coffee

That's the case system: the start of the word stays, and only the end changes. Latvian has seven cases, counting the calling form below. Learn the dictionary form first; listening brings the rest.

Names change too

Jānis a man's name	Jāni! Jānis, when you call him	māmiņa mummy	māmiņ! mummy, when you call her

Calling someone: when you speak to a person, some words take a calling form. Names in -is drop the -s: Jānis, Jāni! Pet names in -iņa and -īte drop the last vowel: māmiņ! Most other names stay as they are: Anna!

Tu or jūs

Kā tev iet? tu: friends, family, kids, anyone your age	Kā jums iet? jūs: strangers, older people, at work; jūs is also more than one person

Verbs change with the person: būt, to be, and strādāt, to work

es esmu I am	tu esi you are (casual)	viņš, viņa ir he, she is	mēs esam we are	jūs esat you all are; polite you	viņi, viņas ir they are
strādāju I work	strādā you work (casual)	strādā he, she works	strādājam we work	strādājat you all work; polite you	strādā they work

Who's working? The ending often says it, so strādāju alone is I work. But strādā is you work, he works and they work, so keep tu, viņš or viņi with it. To say no, put ne in front, joined on: nestrādāju, I don't work. For būt: neesmu, neesi, nav.

The first 256 words Pirmie vārdi

How: learn five a day, then listen for them in Latvian films and series. *Pink italics* say how a word is used, not what it means.

Greetings and survival

Sveiki
hello *(to anyone; to one man sveiks, to one woman sveika)*

Čau
hi; also bye *(casual)*

Labdien
hello, good day *(the safe polite one)*

Labrīt
good morning

Labvakar
good evening

Ar labu nakti
good night

Uz redzēšanos
goodbye *(it means until seeing)*

Atā
bye *(casual)*

Tiksimies
see you *(it means we'll meet)*

Paldies
thank you

Liels paldies
thank you very much *(it means big thanks)*

Lūdzu
please; you're welcome; here you are

Atvainojiet
excuse me; sorry *(polite)*

Piedod
sorry *(casual)*

Jā
yes

Nē
no *(and ne is not)*

Kā iet?
how's it going?

Mani sauc ...
my name is ... *(it means they call me)*

Prieks iepazīties
nice to meet you

Es nesaprotu
I don't understand

Es nezinu
I don't know

Priekā!
cheers! *(it means to joy)*

Labu apetīti!
enjoy your meal!

Question words

kas
who; also what

kur
where

no kurienes
where from

kad
when

kāpēc
why

kā
how

cik
how much, how many

kurš
which

vai
or; at the start it makes a yes or no question *(Vai tu esi šeit? Are you here?)*

Cik maksā?
how much is it?

Me and you

es
I

tu
you *(casual)*

viņš / viņa
he / she

mēs
we

jūs
you all; also the polite you

viņi / viņas
they *(men or mixed / women)*

mans / mana
my *(m word / f word)*

tavs / tava
your *(casual)*

jūsu
your *(polite, or you all; it never changes)*

šis / šī
this *(m word / f word)*

tas / tā
that *(m word / f word)*

Little words

un
and

bet
but

arī
also, too

ļoti
very

daudz
a lot, many

mazliet
a little

tikai
only, just

jau
already

vēl
still, yet, more

šeit
here *(also te)*

tur
there

ar
with

bez
without

jo
because

varbūt
maybe

Lūdzu does a lot: it's please when you ask: Vienu kafiju, lūdzu. It's you're welcome after paldies. And it's here you are, as you hand something over.

Three hellos: čau is the casual hi between friends, and it also means bye. Sveiki works with anyone, and with a group. Labdien is the safe polite one.

People and time Cilvēki un laiks

Family

mamma
mum

tētis
dad

tēvs
father

brālis
brother

māsa
sister

dēls
son

meita
daughter

vecmāmiņa
grandma

vectētiņš
grandpa

tēvocis
uncle

tante
aunt

vecāki
parents *(plural)*

ģimene
family

People

cilvēks
person *(cilvēki, people)*

vīrietis
man

vīrs
husband

sieviete
woman

sieva
wife

bērns
child *(bērni, children)*

puika
boy *(masculine, despite the -a)*

meitene
girl

draugs
friend *(a man)*; also boyfriend

draudzene
friend *(a woman)*; also girlfriend

kaimiņš
neighbour

ārsts
doctor *(a woman: ārste)*

skolotājs
teacher *(a woman: skolotāja)*

Things

telefons
phone

grāmata
book

nauda
money

atslēga
key

mašīna
car

logs
window

durvis
door *(always plural)*

biļete
ticket

When

šodien
today

rīt
tomorrow

vakar
yesterday

tagad
now

vēlāk
later

vienmēr
always

nekad
never

rīts
morning

vakars
evening

nakts
night *(feminine, despite the -s)*

diena
day

stunda
hour

laiks
time; also the weather

nedēļa
week

mēnesis
month

gads
year

Days of the week

pirmdiena
Monday *(it means first day)*

otrdiena
Tuesday *(second day)*

trešdiena
Wednesday *(third day)*

ceturtdiena
Thursday *(fourth day)*

piektdiena
Friday *(fifth day)*

sestdiena
Saturday *(sixth day)*

svētdiena
Sunday *(it means holy day)*

Getting around

autobuss
bus

vilciens
train

stacija
station

lidosta
airport *(it means flying harbour)*

pa kreisi / pa labi
to the left / to the right

Numbers

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
nulle	viens	divi	trīs	četri	pieci	seši	septiņi	astoņi	deviņi	desmit	vienpadsmit	divpadsmit

13	20	21	30	50	100	1,000
trīspadsmit	divdesmit	divdesmit viens	trīsdesmit	piecdesmit	simts	tūkstotis

Numbers build up: 11 to 19 end in -padsmit: vienpadsmit, divpadsmit, trīspadsmit. The tens end in -desmit: divdesmit is 20, and divdesmit viens is 21. Most numbers have a feminine form too: viena kafija, divas kafijas.

Days are small: days and months take no capital letter: pirmdiena, janvāris. On Monday is pirmdien.

Food, places, verbs Ēst, iet, darīt

Food and drink

ūdens
water

kafija
coffee

tēja
tea

piens
milk

alus
beer

vīns
wine

maize
bread

rupjmaize
dark rye bread, eaten every day

siers
cheese

gaļa
meat

zivs
fish *(feminine, despite the -s)*

zupa
soup

ābols
apple

kartupelis
potato

pelēkie zirņi
grey peas with bacon, a classic *(plural)*

pīrāgs
a little bun filled with bacon and onion

biezpiens
curd cheese, a bit like cottage cheese

maizes zupa
bread soup: a sweet pudding made from rye bread

skābais krējums
sour cream, on almost everything

brokastis
breakfast *(always plural)*

pusdienas
lunch *(always plural)*

vakariņas
dinner *(always plural)*

Es esmu izsalcis
I'm hungry *(a woman says izsalkusi)*

Rēķinu, lūdzu
the bill, please

Places

māja
house, home

darbs
work, job

skola
school

veikals
shop

tirgus
market

restorāns
restaurant

kafejnīca
café

slimnīca
hospital

pilsēta
town, city

ciems
village

iela
street

tualete
toilet *(signs say WC)*

pils
castle *(feminine, despite the -s)*

ezers
lake

jūra
sea

mežs
forest

Latvija
Latvia *(latviski, in Latvian)*

Rīga
Riga, the capital

Verbs: dictionary / es form

būt / esmu
be

iet / eju
go *(on foot)*

braukt / braucu
go *(by car, bus or train)*

ēst / ēdu
eat

dzert / dzeru
drink

redzēt / redzu
see

skatīties / skatos
watch, look

strādāt / strādāju
work

darīt / daru
do, make

gulēt / guļu
sleep

runāt / runāju
speak, talk

saprast / saprotu
understand

zināt / zinu
know *(a fact)*

gribēt / gribu
want

mīlēt / mīlu
love

lasīt / lasu
read

rakstīt / rakstu
write

dzīvot / dzīvoju
live

pirkt / pērku
buy

gaidīt / gaidu
wait

Describing words

labs / slikts
good / bad

liels / mazs
big / small

karsts / auksts
hot / cold

jauns / vecs
new *(also young)* / old

dārgs / lēts
expensive *(also dear)* / cheap

viegls / grūts
easy *(also light)* / hard

skaists
beautiful

garšīgs
tasty

noguris
tired *(a woman says nogurusi)*

Two forms: the dictionary form ends in -t. For I, the verb ends in -u: ēdu, gribu, strādāju. Some change inside, like pirkt, pērku: learn both forms together.

No verb for have: Latvian says to me is. Man ir kaķis, I have a cat. Man nav laika, I have no time.

Describing words agree: the list shows the masculine form. With a feminine word: laba kafija, dārga kafija, liela iela.

Show words Vārdi no seriāliem

Reactions

Oho!
wow! *(surprise)*

Tiešām?
really?

Lieliski!
great! excellent!

Forši!
cool! *(casual)*

Labi
OK, good, fine

Nu
well... *(a pause word, see below)*

Nekas
never mind, it's nothing *(it means nothing)*

Urā!
hooray!

Ai!
ouch! *(pain)*

Protams
of course

Skaidrs
sure, got it *(it means clear)*

Ejam!
let's go!

Muļķības!
nonsense!

Apsveicu!
congratulations!

The big scenes

Es tevi mīlu
I love you

Man tevis pietrūkst
I miss you

Liec mani mierā
leave me alone *(it means leave me in peace)*

Uzmanīgi!
careful! watch out!

Pietiek!
enough!

Palīgā!
help!

Kas notika?
what happened?

Viss būs labi
everything will be all right

Neuztraucies
don't worry

Pagaidi!
wait!

Ko tu dari?
what are you doing?

What to call people

mīļais / mīļā
darling *(to a man / to a woman)*

saulīt
sunshine, sweetie *(it means little sun)*

zaķīt
bunny, sweetie *(it means little hare)*

kungs / kundze
Mr / Ms, after the surname: Bērziņa kungs, Mr Bērziņš

Nu, the pause word: you'll hear it all the time, at the start of a thought. Nu, labi. Well, OK. Nu, ko darīsim? Well, what shall we do?

Calling forms: saulīt and zaķīt are calling forms, like māmiņ! on page 2: sweet names drop their last vowel when you speak to someone. Labrīt, saulīt! Morning, sunshine!

Swear words are strong: Latvian has strong swear words, and you'll hear them in films and series. They hit harder than the subtitles show: recognise them, but don't say them. Ai and oho are fine in front of anyone.

Practice Vingrinājumi

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

Questions: put vai in front, and the rest stays the same: Tu runā angliski. Vai tu runā angliski? Do you speak English?

Saying no: ne joins the verb: Es dzeru kafiju. Es nedzeru kafiju. I don't drink coffee. And ir becomes nav: Viņš nav mājās. He isn't at home.

Read these sentences

1. Sveiki, es esmu Līga.
   Hi, I'm Līga.

2. Kā tevi sauc?
   What's your name?

3. Atvainojiet, kur ir tualete?
   Excuse me, where is the toilet?

4. Cik maksā biļete?
   How much is the ticket?

5. Vienu kafiju, lūdzu.
   One coffee, please.

6. Es mazliet runāju latviski.
   I speak a little Latvian.

7. Šodien ir ļoti auksts laiks.
   It's very cold today.

8. Rīt mēs braucam uz Rīgu.
   Tomorrow we're going to Riga.

9. Pīrāgi ir ļoti garšīgi!
   The pīrāgi are really tasty!

10. Nekas, mums ir laiks.
    Never mind, we have time.

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