How Swahili sounds Sauti za Kiswahili

The trick: Swahili is read the way it's written: every letter is said, the five vowels never change, and the stress falls on the beat before last. There is no q or x, and c only comes in ch. This sheet uses standard Swahili, Kiswahili sanifu.

Letters	Sounds like	Example
a e i o u	a in father, e in bed, i in ski, o in lot, u in rule	**habari / kesho** news / tomorrow
aa, ee, oo	two vowels together: say both, one beat each	**saa / mzee** hour, clock / elder
ch	the ch in chin	**chai / chakula** tea / food
j	the j in jam	**jina / jana** name / yesterday
ny	one sound, like the ny in canyon	**nyumba / nyama** house / meat
ng'	the ng in singer, even at the start of a word	**ng'ombe** cow
ng	the ng in finger: n, then a hard g	**ngoma / nguo** drum / clothes
dh, th	dh is the th in this; th is the th in think	**dhahabu / thelathini** gold / thirty
gh	a g from the back of the throat, like a French r	**lugha / ghali** language / expensive
mb, nd, nz	at the start of a word, said in one go	**mbwa / ndizi** dog / banana
m + consonant	an m on its own is a whole beat: m-tu, m-to-to	**mtu / mtoto** person / child
r, l	r is a quick tap, as in Spanish; l as in English	**rafiki / leo** friend / today
sh, w, y	as in English: sh in shop, w in wet, y in yes	**shule / watu** school / people
no silent letters	every letter is said, the last e too	**karibu / pole** welcome / sorry
stress	on the beat before last; see the rule below	**habari / asante** ha-BA-ri / a-SAN-te

ng' · ng

singer or finger: the mark tells you which

ng'ombe cow, as in singer · **nguo** clothes, as in finger

a e i o u

five clear vowels, stress on the beat before last

habari ha-BA-ri · **asante** a-SAN-te · **chakula** cha-KU-la

Why ng' has a mark: the apostrophe changes the sound and the word. Ng'ombe, cow, starts with the ng of singer, with no g after it. Without the mark, as in ngoma, drum, you say the ng of finger, n and then a g.

Where the stress goes: almost always on the beat before last: ki-TA-bu, book. Add an ending and the stress moves with it: NYU-mba, house; nyu-MBA-ni, at home. An m before a consonant is a beat of its own: M-tu, person; m-TO-to, child.

Borrowed words: Swahili grew up on the coast of East Africa and took words from the people who traded there: kitabu, book, comes from Arabic; meza, table, from Portuguese; shule, school, from German; and baiskeli, bicycle, from English.

How words work Sarufi

No word for a or the: kitabu is a book, the book, or just book. Instead, every noun belongs to a family, or class, and its start shows one or many: kitabu, book; vitabu, books.

Nouns come in families, each with its own colour

m- / wa-
people

mtu, watu, person
mtoto, watoto, child
mke, wake, wife

m- / mi-
trees and many things

mti, miti, tree
mkono, mikono, hand
mji, miji, town

ki- / vi-
things and languages

kitabu, vitabu, book
kiti, viti, chair
chakula, vyakula, food

ji- / ma-
fruit and much else

jina, majina, name
jicho, macho, eye
tunda, matunda, fruit

n-
same for one and many

nyumba, house
ndizi, banana
chai, tea

The start echoes: words that go with a noun copy its family start, so you can hear what belongs together. Animals and some people words, like simba, lion, and rafiki, friend, look like the n- family but often take the people echo: simba mkubwa, a big lion. U- words like usiku, night, are a smaller family; on the next pages they stay black.

mtoto mzuri
a good child

watoto wazuri
good children

kitabu kizuri
a good book

vitabu vizuri
good books

jina zuri
a nice name

nyumba nzuri
a nice house

A verb is built from pieces: who + when + the verb, soma, read

ninasoma	unasoma	anasoma	tunasoma	mnasoma	wanasoma
I am reading	you are reading	he, she is reading	we are reading	you all are reading	they are reading

The middle piece says when

ninasoma
-na-: I'm reading now

nilisoma
-li-: I read, in the past

nitasoma
-ta-: I will read

nimesoma
-me-: I've read, just done

Saying no: a new start, and the last a turns into i

sisomi	husomi	hasomi	hatusomi	hamsomi	hawasomi
I don't read	you don't read	he, she doesn't read	we don't read	you all don't read	they don't read

Me and you: mimi, I; wewe, you, one person; yeye, he or she, one word for both; sisi, we; ninyi, you all; wao, they. The first piece of the verb already says who, so mimi and wewe are only for weight.

To be: ni means am, is or are, and never changes: Mimi ni mwalimu, I'm a teacher. Si means am not, isn't or aren't: Yeye si mwalimu, she isn't a teacher. For where, use -ko: Uko wapi? Where are you? Niko hapa. I'm here.

Hello is a question, built from the no starts: Hujambo? means you have no trouble? and the answer Sijambo means I have no trouble. To a group: Hamjambo? and they answer Hatujambo. Habari? asks for the news, and the answer is nzuri, good, even on a bad day; the real news comes after.

The first 260 words Maneno ya kwanza

How: learn five a day and say them out loud. *Pink italics* say how a word is used, not what it means.

Greetings and survival

Hujambo?
hello, how are you? *(it means you have no trouble?)*

Sijambo
I'm fine *(it means I have no trouble)*

Hamjambo?
hello, to more than one

Hatujambo
we're fine *(the answer)*

Habari?
how are things? *(it means news?)*

Nzuri
good, fine *(the usual answer)*

Habari za asubuhi?
good morning *(it means news of the morning?)*

Shikamoo
hello to an older person, with respect

Marahaba
the older person's answer

Karibu
welcome, come in; also you're welcome

Asante
thank you

Tafadhali
please

Samahani
excuse me, sorry

Pole
sorry, said to someone who is hurt or tired

Kwa heri
goodbye *(to one person)*

Kwa herini
goodbye *(to more than one)*

Tutaonana
see you *(it means we will see each other)*

Jina lako ni nani?
what's your name?

Jina langu ni ...
my name is ...

Unazungumza Kiswahili?
do you speak Swahili?

Sielewi
I don't understand

Sijui
I don't know

Question words

nani?
who?

nini?
what? *(Unataka nini? What do you want?)*

wapi?
where? *(Uko wapi? Where are you?)*

lini?
when?

kwa nini?
why? *(it means for what)*

vipi?
how? *(also hi, how's it going?)*

-ngapi?
how many? *(watoto wangapi? how many children?)*

bei gani?
how much? *(it means what price?)*

je
starts a yes or no question *(Je, uko tayari? Are you ready?)*

Me and you

mimi
I, me

wewe
you *(one person)*

yeye
he or she: one word for both

sisi
we, us

ninyi
you all

wao
they, them

-angu
my *(jina langu, my name; nyumba yangu, my house)*

-ako
your, one person *(jina lako, your name)*

-ake
his, her *(mama yake, his or her mum)*

huyu / yule
this / that, for a person *(mtu huyu, this person)*

Little words

na
and; also with *(na rafiki, with a friend)*

lakini
but

au
or

ndiyo
yes

hapana
no

si
isn't, aren't *(Mimi si mwalimu, I'm not a teacher)*

sana
very, a lot *(asante sana, thanks a lot)*

kidogo
a little

pia
also, too

tu
only, just *(moja tu, just one)*

sawa
OK, fine; also the same

hapa / pale
here / there

kwa
by, with, for *(kwa basi, by bus)*

bila
without

kwa sababu
because

labda
maybe

A word with a hyphen takes a start: -angu, my, becomes langu with jina, name, and yangu with nyumba, house: it copies the family of the noun, as on page 2.

People and time Watu na wakati

Family

mama
mother, mum

baba
father, dad

mtoto, watoto
child

kaka
brother

dada
sister

mume, waume
husband

mke, wake
wife

bibi
grandmother; also lady

babu
grandfather

mjomba, wajomba
uncle, mum's brother

shangazi
aunt, dad's sister

familia
family

People

mtu, watu
person

mwanamume, wanaume
man

mwanamke, wanawake
woman

mvulana, wavulana
boy

msichana, wasichana
girl

rafiki
friend

mwalimu, walimu
teacher

daktari, madaktari
doctor

mwanafunzi, wanafunzi
student, pupil

mzee, wazee
elder, old person *(a word of respect)*

Things

kitabu, vitabu
book

pesa
money

simu
phone

nguo
clothes

mlango, milango
door

dirisha, madirisha
window

meza
table

kiti, viti
chair

kitanda, vitanda
bed

When

leo
today

kesho
tomorrow

jana
yesterday

sasa
now

baadaye
later

siku
day

mwezi, miezi
month; also moon

mwaka, miaka
year

saa
hour; also clock, watch

asubuhi
morning

mchana
daytime, afternoon

jioni
evening

usiku
night

Saa ngapi?
what time is it? *(it means how many hours?)*

Weather

jua
sun

mvua
rain

wingu, mawingu
cloud

Kuna joto
it's hot *(it means there is heat)*

Mvua inanyesha
it's raining

masika
the long rains

Getting around

barabara
road

njia
way, path

gari, magari
car

basi, mabasi
bus

ndege
plane; also bird

baiskeli
bicycle

kushoto / kulia
left / right

moja kwa moja
straight on

karibu / mbali
near / far

Numbers

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	20
moja	mbili	tatu	nne	tano	sita	saba	nane	tisa	kumi	kumi na moja	kumi na mbili	ishirini

21	30	40	50	60	70	80	90	100	1,000
ishirini na moja	thelathini	arobaini	hamsini	sitini	sabini	themanini	tisini	mia moja	elfu moja

Counting: the number goes after the noun. One to five and eight copy its family: watu wawili, two people; vitabu vitatu, three books. Six, seven, nine and ten never change: watu sita, six people.

Swahili time: the clock starts at sunrise, so saa moja, hour one, is seven in the morning, and saa sita, hour six, is noon. Take six off the English time, or add six.

Food, places, verbs Kula, kunywa, kusoma

Food and drink

maji
water

chai
tea

kahawa
coffee

maziwa
milk

chakula, vyakula
food

mkate, mikate
bread

nyama
meat

samaki
fish

yai, mayai
egg

ndizi
banana

tunda, matunda
fruit

embe, maembe
mango

mboga
vegetables

mchele
rice *(cooked rice is wali)*

ugali
stiff maize porridge, the everyday staple

chumvi
salt

kifungua kinywa
breakfast *(it means the mouth-opener)*

Nina njaa
I'm hungry *(it means I have hunger)*

Nina kiu
I'm thirsty

Places

nyumba
house

nyumbani
at home

shule
school

duka, maduka
shop

soko, masoko
market

mji, miji
town, city

kijiji, vijiji
village

nchi
country

hoteli
hotel; also a café or small restaurant

hospitali
hospital

choo, vyoo
toilet

benki
bank

bahari
sea

ziwa, maziwa
lake

mto, mito
river

mlima, milima
mountain

kisiwa, visiwa
island

lugha
language

Kiswahili
Swahili, the language *(Ki- names a language)*

Verbs, in the to form

kuwa
be

kuwa na
have *(it means be with)*

kwenda
go

kuja
come

kula
eat

kunywa
drink

kuona
see

kufanya
do, make

kusema
say

kuzungumza
talk, speak

kufanya kazi
work *(it means do work)*

kulala
sleep; also lie down

kuelewa
understand

kujua
know

kununua
buy

kusoma
read; also study

kuandika
write

kujifunza
learn *(it means teach yourself)*

kuishi
live

kupenda
love, like

kutaka
want

kuweza
can, be able

kusaidia
help

Describing words

-zuri / -baya
good, nice / bad

-kubwa / -dogo
big / small

-refu / -fupi
long, tall / short

-pya
new *(kitabu kipya, a new book)*

-ingi / -chache
many / few *(watu wengi, many people)*

ghali / rahisi
expensive / cheap; rahisi is also easy

safi / -chafu
clean / dirty

-tamu
sweet, tasty *(chakula kitamu, tasty food)*

-gumu
hard, difficult

The to form: kusoma is to read: ku- and the verb. Drop ku- and add the pieces from page 2: ninasoma, I'm reading. Short verbs keep it: kula, to eat, gives ninakula, I'm eating.

Describing words copy the family and come after the noun: kitabu kikubwa, a big book; vitabu vikubwa, big books. Words without a hyphen, like ghali and safi, never change.

Show words Misemo na methali

Sayings and proverbs

Hakuna matata
no worries *(it means there are no problems)*

Pole pole
slowly, take it easy

Haraka haraka haina baraka
hurry, hurry has no blessing: more haste, less speed

Haba na haba hujaza kibaba
little by little fills the measure

Karibu sana
you're very welcome; do come in

Asante sana
thank you very much

Mambo? Poa!
hi! cool! *(the easy greeting between friends)*

Hakuna shida
no problem

Hodi?
anyone home? *(said at the door; the answer is karibu)*

Bahati njema
good luck

Safari njema
have a good journey *(safari just means journey)*

Lala salama
sleep well *(it means sleep safely)*

Kila la heri
all the best

Heri ya siku ya kuzaliwa
happy birthday *(it means happiness of the day of being born)*

Reactions

Kweli?
really? is that true?

Kabisa!
absolutely!

Hongera!
congratulations! well done!

Safi!
great! *(it means clean)*

Ajabu!
amazing!

Kumbe!
oh, so that's it! *(a surprise)*

Lo!
wow! oh!

Haiwezekani!
impossible! no way!

Basi!
enough! that's it! *(also well then)*

The big scenes

Nakupenda
I love you

Angalia!
look! watch out!

Kimbia!
run!

Haraka!
quick! hurry!

Njoo hapa!
come here!

Twende!
let's go!

Msaada!
help!

Nini kimetokea?
what happened?

Usiogope
don't be afraid

Nyamaza!
be quiet!

Tulia!
calm down!

What to call people

bwana
sir, Mr *(Bwana Juma)*

bi
Ms, Mrs *(Bi Amina)*

mpenzi wangu
my love, darling

rafiki yangu
my friend

ndugu yangu
my brother, my sister; also to a friend

jamani!
oh, everyone! *(to a group, or in surprise)*

You already know some Swahili: safari just means a journey, simba is a lion and rafiki a friend, which is where some names in The Lion King come from. Hakuna matata is real Swahili too.

Respect for elders: greet an older person with shikamoo, and they answer marahaba. Mzee, elder, is a word of respect, and mama and baba are polite ways to speak to any older woman or man.

Proverbs are everywhere: Swahili loves its methali, proverbs. You'll hear them in songs, at weddings and printed on kanga cloths: haraka haraka haina baraka, hurry, hurry has no blessing.

Practice Mazoezi

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

Questions: raise your voice at the end, or start with je: Je, unazungumza Kiswahili? Do you speak Swahili? Question words go at the end: Unaishi wapi? Where do you live?

Saying no: change the start and end in -i: Ninakunywa chai. Sinywi kahawa. I drink tea. I don't drink coffee.

Like and want: Ninapenda chai. I like tea. Ninataka maji. I want water.

Read these sentences

1. Hujambo! Jina langu ni Anna.
   Hello! My name is Anna.

2. Unaishi wapi? Ninaishi Nairobi.
   Where do you live? I live in Nairobi.

3. Samahani, duka liko wapi?
   Excuse me, where is the shop?

4. Ndizi hizi ni bei gani?
   How much are these bananas?

5. Maji, tafadhali.
   Some water, please.

6. Ninazungumza Kiswahili kidogo.
   I speak a little Swahili.

7. Leo kuna jua.
   It's sunny today (it means today there is sun).

8. Kesho tutaenda Mombasa.
   We're going to Mombasa tomorrow.

9. Chakula hiki ni kitamu sana!
   This food is very tasty!

10. Usijali, tuna muda.
    Don't worry, we have time.

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