

The Estonian language – alphabet and pronunciation

Estonian is one of the smaller languages of Europe, with just under a million speakers in the Republic of Estonia itself – located in north-eastern Europe, by the Baltic Sea, between the Gulf of Finland and Latvia. [*map here*]

It is also spoken by emigrant Estonian communities in Sweden, the USA, Canada, Australia and also the UK. Some of these emigrant communities are older-established ones, but many foreign-born Estonians are descended from people who fled the country during its occupation by the Soviet Union (1940-1991). Estonia has been an independent republic since 1991, but before that it enjoyed one other period of independence (like the other Baltic states of Latvia and Lithuania), between the two World Wars, from 1918 to 1940. [*flag and coat of arms here*]

Although the language might look and sound completely alien to speakers of English and most other European languages, it actually hides many layers of loan-words laid down by the country's previous occupiers – the most important being German and Swedish. If you come to know Estonian better, you might learn to recognise these extra layers. The vocabulary of a language gives away the secrets of its history, the influences on it, but the sound system might serve to hide those influences. That is certainly true of Estonian. This language is one of the West Finnic branch of the Finno-Ugrian language family, and so its only major close relative is Finnish. In Europe it is more distantly related to Hungarian, and to some of the minority languages spoken in Russia.

Let's introduce the sounds and letters of Estonian. Luckily these amount to pretty much the same thing, as Estonian is written more or less just as it is spoken.

Vowels can be short or long, and when they are long they are written double. There are nine vowels in Estonian: [*use sound-clips at appropriate places after each example, triggered by moving the cursor*]

a short as in **kala** 'fish', long as in **saab** '(he/she) gets'

e short as in **vesi** 'water', long as in **leek** 'flame'

i short as in **ring** 'circle', long as in **hiir** 'mouse'

o short as in **morss** 'juice drink', long as in **nool** 'arrow'

u short as in **kuld** 'gold', long as in **suu** 'mouth'

õ short as in **sõna** 'word', long as in **mõõk** 'sword'

ä short as in **käsi** 'hand' long as in **räägin** '(I) speak'

ö short as in **kõha** 'cough', long as in **sööb** '(he/she) eats'

ü short as in **lühike** 'short', long as in **süü** 'cause, blame'

The consonants are also pronounced and written short and long. (There is also an extra degree of *spoken* length, which you can learn later as you come to practice the language.)

Although all the consonants of the Roman alphabet are recognised by Estonians and used in foreign words, not all of them are used in native words. Here are the consonants that are.

Some of these words you will recognise from the list of words in the vowel examples above:

b as in **saab**

d as in **saad** '(you) get'

g as in **mägi**

h as in **köha**

j as in **jalg** 'leg', long in **majja** 'into the house'

k as in **kala**, long in **nokk** 'beak'

l as in **lühike**, long in **sulle** 'to you'

m as in **maa** 'land, earth', long in **samm** 'step'

n as in **nool**, long in **sinna** 'to there'

p in **pool** 'half', long in **sepp** 'smith'

r in **ring** (and notice how the **ng** is pronounced as two separate sounds), long in **surra** 'to die'

s in **saab**, long in **kass** 'cat'

t in **tere!** 'hi! hello!', long in **nutta** 'to weep'

v in **vesi**

Notice how the stress always falls on the first syllable in Estonian.