

Pronunciation Hand-out

Vowels in Italian are short and very clear cut.

a, i, and u are always pronounced in the same way.

e and **o** can have an open and a closed sound that may vary from one part of Italy to another. Don't worry about it, most Italians can't tell the difference!

As a general rule in Italian consonants are pronounced clearly and distinctly. Each letter is always pronounced, except for “**h**” which is always silent.

Consonants are pronounced very much as in English with a few exceptions, mostly to make up for the sounds of the 5 missing letters:

C a) Before a, o, u and h “c” is pronounced like the English k. casa (home/house) /'kasa/

b) Before e and i “c” is pronounced like the ch in church. ciao /tʃao/

G a) Before a, o, u and h “g” is pronounced like the English g in good. gatto (cat) /'gatto/

b) Before e and i “g” is pronounced like the English j in just. gelato (ice-cream) /dʒe'lato/

H is always silent. Examples: ho (pronounced “o”)

Q is pronounced like the English qu in quest. quattro (4) /'kwattro/

R is trilled, pronounced with one flip of the tongue against the gums of the upper teeth. rosso (red) /'rosso/

S a) Before vowels and c, f, p, q, s, t, is pronounced like the s in sun. Sole (sun) /'sole/

b) In all other cases and between 2 vowels, is like the s in rose. rosa (rose) /'rɔza/

Z can be pronounced like ds in beds, or like ts in bets. zucchero (sugar) /'tsukkero/, zanzara (mosquito) /dzan'dzara/

Double consonants have a sound which is similar to that of the single consonant but longer. If you think of music, imagine that each consonant corresponds to a single "beat" in the musical bar of a sentence. In Italian, a double consonant is assigned two "beats".

Gl sounds like the “ll” in the word “million”. aglio (garlic) /a'λλio/

Gn sounds like the “n” in “canyon”. gnocchi (Italian potato dumplings) /'ɲɔkki/

Sc sound very similar to “sh” as in “shampoo” pesce (fish) /'peʃʃe/

Sch becomes “sk” following the rule that a “c+h” sounds like a “k”. pesche (peaches) /'peske/

Most common pronunciation mistakes and how to avoid them

- 1. Not pronouncing the letters clearly.** Native English speakers are, usually, unaccustomed to the big, round, vowel sounds that are common in Italian. Remember to open wide and enunciate clearly.
- 2. Double consonants.** Being able to pronounce double consonants correctly, and to “hear” the difference, is imperative. The Italian language doesn't waste letters; as a phonetic language it is spoken the way it is written. So if a word contains double consonants, both are pronounced. Try pronouncing the consonant twice or holding it for an extra beat.
- 3. The dreaded "gli".** The letter combination “gli” is usually the most difficult to pronounce for a non-native. When I ask a student to pronounce words such as figlio, aglio and gli, often the first reaction is a look of bewilderment: the dreaded "gli" again! Perhaps the most effective way to learn how to pronounce "gli" is to listen and repeat it until it becomes second nature. Remember even Michelangelo was once a beginner!
- 4. Stress.** The only time when Italians actually write an accent, is when the stress falls on the last letter. Such as in words like città (city) or caffè (coffee). Too frequently, non-native speakers ignore the accent. Always take note of a written accent at the end of a word, and beware of the difference in meaning between words such as e (and) and è (is). The only difference is in that accent! Unfortunately there are no clearcut rules for where the stress falls when an accent is not written.
- 5. It's brus-KET-ta not bru-SH-etta.** This is a tricky one, as it is pronounced exactly the opposite than in English. Remember that the Italian alphabet does not have a letter “k” and to produce that sound Italians use the letter “c” in conjunction with a “h”. “ch” always = “k”!
- 6. Espresso or Espresso?** An “espresso” is a very strong coffee loved by Italians. An “expresso” is a fast train! If you order an “expresso” at the bar ... you could get some bewildered stares.
- 7. Cane or carne?** We always pronounce all the letters in Italian, except “h” which is always silent. Miss one letter and you could be eating a dog (cane) instead of the meat you ordered (carne)!