

Introduction to Gaelic Orthography

Disclaimer

This is a rough guide to reading Gaelic from the printed page. It does not take all possibilities into account, or provide guidance to dialectic variations or irregular pronunciation. It does not describe the method of producing sounds which are not present in English. It is not a substitute for instruction by a fluent or native speaker. Each letter is only described where it behaves very differently from English.

Vowels

Generally like romance language vowels. Accents double vowel length and in the case of “ò” change the quality from closed to open.

- a) Broad – they cause consonants in contact with them to make their broad sound
 - i) a or à
 - ii) o or ò or ó
 - iii) u or ù
- b) Slender – they cause consonants in contact with them to make their slender sound
 - i) i or ì
 - ii) e or è
- c) Vowel harmony: What happens if there is a broad vowel on one side of a consonant and a slender on the other? Which one wins?

Cant happen. Gaelic has a rule against it. If there is a broad vowel on one side of a consonant, there has to be a broad vowel on the other side. Likewise with slender.
- d) Vowel combinations:
 - i) “ao” makes a sound similar to “ö” in German or “fleur” in French.
 - ii) Two broad vowels – pronounce both clearly
 - iii) One broad and one slender vowel – pronounce the first vowel clearly and de-emphasize the second

Consonants

There are 12 consonants in the Gaelic alphabet. Many make different sounds based on whether they are in contact with slender or broad vowels, and whether or not they have had an “h” inserted after them (lenited). There are also two consonant combinations that behave unexpectedly.

- i) B
 - (1) Lenited “v”
- ii) C
 - (1) Slender & Broad “k”
 - (2) Lenited—not in English
- iii) D
 - (1) Slender “j”
 - (2) Lenited slender “y”
 - (3) Lenited broad—not in English
- iv) F
 - (1) Lenited – usually silent, if not “h”
- v) G
 - (1) Lenited slender “y”
 - (2) Lenited broad—not in English
- vi) L
 - (1) Slender “l” as the first in “little”
 - (2) Broad “l” as “although” or “wool”
 - (3) Double “ly” or “l”
- vii) M
 - (1) Lenited “v”
- viii) N
 - (1) Double “ny” similar to ñ in Spanish
- ix) P
 - (1) Lenited “f”
- x) R
 - (1) Slender initial “r” rolled
 - (2) Slender medial or terminal “th”
 - (3) Broad & Double “r” rolled
- xi) S
 - (1) Slender “sh”
 - (2) Lenited “h”
- xii) T
 - (1) Slender “ch”
 - (2) Lenited “h”
- xiii) CHD
 - (1) Lenited C as in ii(2) followed by a “k”
- xiv) RD and RT
 - (1) “rsd” and “rst”—“s” is an artifact of rolled “r” contacting a “t”