

Chapter 1

Russian in a Nutshell

In This Chapter

- ▶ Approaching the Russian alphabet
 - ▶ Looking at grammar in a new light
 - ▶ Getting started with some useful words and expressions
 - ▶ Putting Russian to use in common social situations
 - ▶ Taking Russian on the road
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Russian has a reputation for being a difficult language. Is it? We would say *different* is a better word to describe the experience of studying Russian. Russian actually is a distant cousin of English: They both belong to a huge Indo-European family of languages — unlike, say, Arabic, Chinese, or Japanese, which belong to completely different language family clans.

This chapter provides you with a taste of Russian; get ready to study this fascinating language!

Discovering How Easy the Russian Alphabet Really Is

If you were to ask people on the street what they think the most difficult thing about learning Russian is, most of them (slightly taken aback by your question) would likely say “The alphabet!”

But we’re here to tell you that nothing could be farther from the truth: The Russian alphabet is perhaps the easiest part of learning Russian. In fact, you may be surprised to hear that most people are able to start reading Russian in several hours! That’s how easy the Russian alphabet is!

Don’t believe us? Consider this: The Russian alphabet, often called the *Cyrillic* alphabet, was named after a 9th century Byzantine monk named Cyril, who

developed it with the help of his brother, Methodius. (Please don't ask us why Methodius's name wasn't added to the name of the alphabet: Life isn't fair.) Cyril and Methodius wanted to translate the Bible into one of the Slavic languages spoken by the Eastern European pagan tribes, because the brothers were planning to convert those tribes to Christianity. These languages had never been written down before. When the brothers were creating their alphabet, they borrowed quite a few letters from the Latin alphabet to indicate the sounds produced by the tribes. Luckily for those tribes (and for anyone studying Russian), a lot of the borrowed letters sound the same in Russian as they do in any Latin-based alphabet (like English).

Are you ready to jump in and start reading Russian? Chapter 2 shows you how to sound out the letters of the Russian alphabet.

Tackling Basic Grammar

In addition to the alphabet, grammar is responsible for earning Russian its reputation for being a difficult language. Don't worry, though! Chapter 3 makes your transition from English grammar to Russian grammar as smooth as possible. We give you the scoop on Russian nouns, pronouns, adjectives, verbs, adverbs, and sentence construction.



One benefit of Russian: Compared to English, which enforces the strictest order of words on its speakers, Russian allows a completely free, almost anarchic order of words. For example, in the sentence “The dog chased the boy,” the Russian words for *boy* and *dog* can switch places and the sentence will still mean “The dog chased the boy.”

But to fully enjoy this freedom of word order, Russians had to pay a dear price: six grammatical cases (nominative, genitive, accusative, dative, instrumental, and prepositional), which anybody who speaks Russian has to constantly juggle in order to create sentences that make sense. Don't let this fact, however, intimidate you. With the guidelines we provide in Chapter 3, you'll have a handle on cases in no time.

Easing into Common Expressions

In Chapter 4, we present numerous basic Russian expressions that enable you to start speaking Russian immediately (and politely). Here are just a few of the easiest, shortest ones:

- ✔ **Привет!** (pree-vyeht!) (*Hi!*)
- ✔ **Как дела?** (kahk dee-lah?) (*How are you?*)
- ✔ **Пока!** (pah-kah!) (*Bye!*)
- ✔ **Спасибо!** (spuh-see-bah!) (*Thank you!*)
- ✔ **Понятно!** (pah-pyat-nah!) (*I see!*)
- ✔ **Да.** (dah.) (*Yes.*)
- ✔ **Да-да-да!** (dah-dah-dah!) (*Yes-yes-yes!*) The repetition makes your *yes* stronger.
- ✔ **Нет.** (nyeht.) (*No.*)
- ✔ **Нет-нет-нет!** (nyeht-nyeht-nyeht!) (*No-no-no!*) You guessed it —this expression makes your *no* stronger.
- ✔ **Простите!** (prahs-tee-tee!) or **Извините!** (eez-vee-nee-tee!) (*Sorry!*) This word is a bit longer than its English counterpart, but it comes in handy for acknowledging the blunders you may make as a beginning Russian speaker.
- ✔ **Ой!** (ohy!) (*Oh!*) This term serves to express a wide range of emotions, such as fear, surprise, delight, anger, and many more.
- ✔ **Ай!** (ahy!) (*Ah!*) Use this expression in place of **Ой** if you prefer, or just for the sake of variety.

Counting on Numbers, Times, and Measurements

Even if you were bad at math in high school, don't underestimate the importance of numbers, times, and measurements while learning a new language (including Russian). Just think about the activities you can then perform: using currency, calculating prices, exchanging phone numbers, setting meeting times, making sense of addresses and zip codes, and a lot more. So, don't even think about missing Chapter 5 — it brings you up to speed on all these topics.



In the meantime, you can start using Russian numbers by counting on both hands:

- ✔ **один** (ah-deen) (*one*)
- ✔ **два** (dvah) (*two*)

- ✓ три (tree) (*three*)
- ✓ четыре (chee-ti-ree) (*four*)
- ✓ пять (pyat') (*five*)
- ✓ шесть (shehst') (*six*)
- ✓ семь (syehm') (*seven*)
- ✓ восемь (voh-seem') (*eight*)
- ✓ девять (dyeh-veet') (*nine*)
- ✓ десять (dyeh-seet') (*ten*)

Speaking Russian around the House



A great way to practice Russian is to wander around your home! Each time you enter a room, recall its name in Russian:

- ✓ кухня (koohkh-nyeh) (*kitchen*)
- ✓ столовая (stah-loh-vuh-yeh) (*dining room*)
- ✓ гостиная (gahs-tee-nuh-yeh) (*living room*)
- ✓ спальня (spahl'-nyeh) (*bedroom*)
- ✓ туалет (tooh-uh-lyeht) (*bathroom*)
- ✓ гараж (guh-rahsh) (*garage*)

Chapter 6 introduces you to Russian words for common rooms, household items, and regular everyday activities, such as eating, drinking, sleeping, and doing chores.

Using Russian in Social Scenarios

After practicing Russian at home, you can take it outside. Part II comes in handy in a lot of life scenarios: making small talk with new acquaintances, asking for directions, eating out and shopping, going out on the town, communicating and handling routine tasks at work, and enjoying hobbies. The following sections give you a sense of what to expect.

Starting conversations

If you want to learn a new language, making small talk is a valuable skill to have. Chapter 7 helps you initiate conversations with folks in Russian. You find out how to state where you're from, talk about your nationality and ethnicity, give your age, and discuss your family.

You'll also be armed with a battery of questions that are great ice-breakers, such as the following:

Откуда вы? (aht-kooh-duh vi?) (*Where are you from?*)

Сколько вам лет? (skohl'-kah vahm lyeht?) (*How old are you?*)

У вас большая семья? (ooh vahs bahl'-shah-yeh seem'-ya?) (*Do you have a big family?*)

Кто вы по-профессии? (ktoh vi pah-prah-fyeh-see-ee?) (*What do you do?*)

Finding your way around



Asking for directions is what tourists in all countries of the world do. If you're in Russia (or traveling in any new place where Russian is the main language), it doesn't hurt to carry a map with you at all times, just in case. That way if you ask passers-by for directions, they can explain which way to go by just pointing it out to you on the map. But first you need to attract a passer-by's attention. The best way to do this is to say the following: **Извините, где . . . ?** (eez-vee-nee-tee, gdyeh. . . ?) (*Excuse me, where is. . . ?*) plus the place you're looking for in the nominative case. For full details on asking for (and understanding) directions, see Chapter 8.

Eating out and buying food



A fun (and satisfying!) activity for practicing your Russian is going out to eat. At a Russian restaurant or café, you may discover that the names of dishes on the menu are translated into English followed by very flowery explanations; the wait staff usually understands English, as long as it covers the menu. When placing an order, you can just point to the item you want. You can also add the following phrase, just to show off your Russian: **Я буду . . .** (ya booh-doo . . .) (*I will have . . .*) followed by the name of the item in the accusative case.

You can discover more Russian to use while eating out and buying food at a market in Chapter 9.

Going shopping



To indicate that they want to buy an item, Russians use a language structure that, in a way, reflects the shortages in merchandise they experienced in Soviet times: **У вас есть. . . ?** (ooh vahs yehst'. . . ?) (*Do you have. . . ?*) plus the name of the item in the nominative case.

A couple of Russian phrases are especially useful when you go shopping. To ask how much something costs, use the phrase **СКОЛЬКО СТОИТ . . . ?** (*skohl'-kah stoh-eet. . . ?*) (*How much does . . . cost?*), inserting the name of the item in the nominative case, if you're buying one thing. If you're buying more than one thing, ask **СКОЛЬКО СТОЯТ . . . ?** (*skohl'-kah stoh-eet. . . ?*) (*How much do . . . cost?*), using the word for the items in the nominative plural form.

Chapter 10 features a lot more shopping vocabulary and phrases for getting help, trying on clothes, asking for specific colors, and paying for the merchandise you buy.

Exploring entertainment opportunities

Exploring new places and meeting new people are always fun. When you head out on the town, you may choose from a variety of activities; for instance, you may decide to check out a museum, a movie, or a play.



Seeing a classical Russian ballet, either in the newly renovated Bolshoy Theater in Moscow or the Mariinsky Theater in St. Petersburg, is a must for any self-respecting tourist in Russia.

Going out on the town often involves making plans, buying tickets, and finding the correct seating. Chapter 11 helps you navigate all these tasks in Russian.

Doing business and communicating

If you're planning a business trip to Russia or need to speak to Russian colleagues in your home office, you should definitely go over Chapter 12. There you find common words and phrases used in an office setting. In addition, you find guidance to help you master the art of telephone conversations in Russian — and don't forget about using computers and sending correspondence!

Enjoying sports, hobbies, recreation, and more

Hobbies can take many forms, and you may want to share information about yours with friends and acquaintances in Russian. For example:



- ✔ If you're a sports fan, you better know how to talk about your favorite sports in Russian. (Also, prepare to be converted into a soccer or hockey fan — these are Russians' two most favorite games.)
- ✔ Russians are avid readers and, for the most part, very well-read individuals. So if you're speaking Russian, be prepared to say at least something about books and literature genres you like or dislike.

Beware: Saying "I don't read much" can earn you a tarnished reputation.
- ✔ If you happen to be in Russia in summer, late spring, or early autumn, don't miss the experience of going to a country house on a weekend. You'll never forget it.

Flip to Chapter 13 for more about hobbies and the great outdoors.

Getting a Handle on Travel Topics

After you've had time to practice Russian at home, you may consider traveling to Russia. Be sure to acquaint yourself with the following tasks in Russian:

- ✔ **Preparing for a trip:** Planning a trip is an enjoyable part of the travel process, and we let you enjoy it to the fullest with phrases and words you need to decide where you want to go, book your trip, and pack. All this info and more is in Chapter 14.
- ✔ **Making sense of money:** Financial matters can be very confusing when you travel to a different country. That's because you deal with foreign currency while performing such everyday transactions as getting money out of an ATM, using your credit card, and paying with cash. Chapter 15 provides plenty of guidance on how to manage your money and perform financial transactions.
- ✔ **Getting around with local transportation:** Clearly, expertise in using various types of public transportation is an important skill a traveler should have. Dealing with public transportation isn't as easy as it may

seem if you're speaking a new language! Don't panic, though; just turn to Chapter 16 for help.

✓ **Securing a place to stay:** Hotels, as you know, can be good, bad, or ugly. To avoid the latter, we provide you with essential questions you may want to ask before buying into a deal. Chapter 17 provides Russian vocabulary that helps you make hotel reservations, check in, resolve issues, and pay your bill.



✓ **Taking action during emergencies:** We hope you won't need any of the expressions we provide in Chapter 18 during your trip. But it's always a good idea to plan for emergencies. Here's one word that lets others know you need help: **Помогите!** (pah-mah-gee-tee!) (*Help!*) — don't forget it!