

IN THIS CHAPTER

- » Discovering Italian you already know
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- » Introducing basic Italian pronunciation

Chapter **1**

Saying Italian Like It Is

You probably know that Italian is a Romance language, which means that Italian, just like Spanish, French, Portuguese, and some other languages, is a “child” of Latin. There was a time when Latin was the official language in a large part of Europe because the Romans ruled so much of the area. Before the Romans came, people spoke their own languages, and the mixture of these original tongues with Latin produced many of the languages and dialects still in use today.

If you know one of these Romance languages, you can often understand parts of another. But just as members of the same family can look very similar but have totally different personalities, so it is with these languages. People in different areas speak in very different ways due to historical or social reasons, and even though Italian is the official language, Italy has a rich variety of dialects. Some dialects differ so much from standard Italian that people from different regions can't understand each other.

Despite the number of different accents and dialects, you'll be happy to discover that everybody understands the Italian you speak and you'll understand theirs. (Italians don't usually speak in their dialect with people outside their region.) This chapter introduces you to the world of Italian.

You Already Know Some Italian!

Although Italians are very proud of their language, they have allowed some English words such as *gadget*, *jogging*, *weekend*, and *shock* to enter it. They often use the word *okay*, and since computers have entered their lives, they say “**clicare sul mouse**” (kleek-kah-reh soohl mouse) (*to click the mouse*). Finally, there’s **lo zapping** (loh zapping), which means continuously switching TV channels with the remote. These are only a few of the flood of English words that have entered the Italian language.

In the same way, many Italian words are known in English-speaking countries. Can you think of some? Consider the following words:

- » **pizza** (peet-tsah)
- » **pasta** (pah-stah)
- » **spaghetti** (spah-geht-tee)
- » **tortellini** (tohr-tehl-lee-nee)
- » **mozzarella** (moht-tsah-rehl-lah)
- » **espresso** (eh-sprehs-soh)
- » **cappuccino** (kahp-pooh-chee-noh)
- » **panino** (pah-nee-noh): For one sandwich: for two or more, the word is **panini** (pah-nee-nee)
- » **biscotti** (bee-skoht-tee) (cookies): One cookie is a **biscotto** (bee-skoht-toh)
- » **tiramisù** (tee-rah-mee-sooh)

Incidentally, did you know that tiramisù literally means *pull me up*? The name comes from the boost of energy you get from the strong Italian espresso and eggs in it. You may have heard words not directly related to food, such as the following:

- » **amore** (ah-moh-reh): This is the word for *love* that so many Italian songs talk about.
- » **avanti** (ah-vahn-tee): You use this word as *come in!*, *come on!*, or *get a move on!*
- » **bambino** (bahm-bee-noh): This means *child* or *boy*. The word for *girl* is **bambina** (bahm-bee-nah).
- » **bravo!** (brah-voh): Say this to a man. For a woman, use **brava!** (brah-vah), and for a group, **bravi!** (brah-vee) or **brave!** (brah-veh) if it’s all women.

- » **ciao!** (chow): **Ciao** means *hello* and *good-bye*.
- » **scusi** (skooh-zee): This word stands for *excuse me* and *sorry* and is addressed to persons you don't know or to whom you speak formally. You say "**scusa**" (skooh-zah) to people you know and to children.

You've heard at least some of these words, haven't you? This is just a little taste of all the various words and expressions you'll get to know in this book.

Cognates

In addition to the words that have crept into the language directly, Italian and English have many cognates. A *cognate* is a word in one language that has the same origin as a word in another one and may sound similar. The following words can give you an immediate sense of what cognates are:

- » **aeroporto** (ah-eh-roh-pohr-toh) (*airport*)
- » **attenzione** (aht-tehn-tsyoh-neh) (*attention*)
- » **comunicazione** (koh-mooh-nee-kah-tsyoh-neh) (*communication*)
- » **importante** (eem-pohr-tahn-teh) (*important*)
- » **incredibile** (een-kreh-dee-bee-leh) (*incredible*)

You understand much more Italian than you think you do. Italian and English are full of cognates. To demonstrate, read this little story with some Italian words and see how easy it is for you to understand.

It seems **impossibile** (eem-pohs-see-bee-leh) to him that he is now at the **aeroporto** (ah-eh-roh-pohr-toh) in Rome. When he goes out on the street, he first calls a **taxi** (tah-ksee). He opens his bag to see if he has the **medicine** (meh-dee-chee-neh) that the **dottore** (doht-toh-reh) prescribed for him. Going through this **terribile traffico** (tehr-ree-bee-leh *trahf*-fee-koh), he passes a **cattedrale** (kaht-teh-drah-leh), some **monumenti** (moh-nooh-mehn-tee), and many **palazzi** (pah-laht-see). He knows that this is going to be a **fantastico** (fahn-tah-stee-koh) journey.

Sounding Italian: The Essentials

Italian gives your tongue plenty of chances to do acrobatics — and that's part of the fun. The language introduces you to some new and exciting sounds. In this section, we walk you through some basic pronunciation guidelines to help you speak Italian like a native speaker.

Throughout this book, you find the pronunciation of Italian words in parentheses. The next few sections contain helpful hints on how to read and use these pronunciations — in other words, how to pronounce Italian words. Here's the deal: We need to agree on what letters stand for which sounds, so stick with this pronunciation code as you go through the book.

In the pronunciations, we separate the syllables with a hyphen, like this: **casa** (*kah-zah*) (*house*). The stressed syllable, that is, the part of the word where you place the emphasis is italicized. If you acquire the correct pronunciation, starting with the alphabet, you may even be able to forgo the pronunciation spelling provided, and read it like a real Italian.

The alphabet



PLAY THIS

What better way is there to start speaking a language than to familiarize yourself with its alphabet! Table 1-1 shows you all the letters as well as how each of them sounds. It's essential to learn how to pronounce the Italian alphabet so that you'll be able to pronounce all of the new words you will be learning. Listen to and repeat what you hear in Track 1 of the audio files as many times as you need to in order to get down the right sounds. In the long run, this will help you be understood when you communicate in Italian. Note that there are only 21 letters in the Italian alphabet: Missing are j, k, w, x, and y (which have crept into some Italian words).

TABLE 1-1

The Italian Alphabet (ahl-fah-beh-toh)

Letter	Pronunciation	Letter	Pronunciation
a	ah	b	bee
c	chee	d	dee
e	eh	f	<i>ehf-feh</i>
g	jee	h	<i>ahk-kah</i>
i	ee	j	ee <i>loohn-gah</i>
k	<i>kahp-pah</i>	l	<i>ehl-leh</i>
m	<i>ehm-meh</i>	n	<i>ehn-neh</i>
o	oh	p	pee
q	kooh	r	<i>ehr-reh</i>

Letter	Pronunciation	Letter	Pronunciation
s	<i>ehs-seh</i>	t	<i>tee</i>
u	<i>ooh</i>	v	<i>vooh</i>
w	<i>dohp-pyah-vooh</i>	x	<i>eeks</i>
y	<i>eep-see-lohn</i>	z	<i>dzeh-tah</i>

Vowels

We start with the tough ones: vowels. The sounds aren't that new, but the connection between the written letter and the actual pronunciation isn't quite the same as it is in English.

Italian has five written vowels: a, e, i, o, and u. The following sections tell you how to pronounce each of them.

The vowel “a”

In Italian, the letter **a** has just one pronunciation. It sounds like the **a** in the English word father. The Italian **a** is always pronounced this way.

To help you avoid slipping into the various **a** sounds used in English, we transcribe the Italian **a** as (ah) like in **casa**. Here are a few more examples:

- » **albero** (*ahl-beh-roh*) (*tree*)
- » **marmellata** (*mahr-mehl-lah-tah*) (*jam*)
- » **sale** (*sah-leh*) (*salt*)

The vowel “e”

Try to think of the sound in the English word let. This sound comes very close to the Italian **e**. In this book, we transcribe the **e** sound as (eh). For example:

- » **sole** (*soh-leh*) (*sun*)
- » **peso** (*peh-zoh*) (*weight*)
- » **bere** (*beh-reh*) (*to drink*)

The vowel “i”

The Italian **i** is simply pronounced (ee), as in the English word see. Here are some examples:

- » **cinema** (*chee-neh-mah*) (*cinema*)
- » **bimbo** (*beem-boh*) (*little boy*)
- » **vita** (*vee-tah*) (*life*)

The vowel “o”

The Italian **o** is pronounced as in the English (from the Italian) piano. We therefore list the pronunciation as (oh). Try it out on the following words:

- » **domani** (*doh-mah-nee*) (*tomorrow*)
- » **piccolo** (*peek-koh-loh*) (*little; small*)
- » **dolce** (*dohl-cheh*) (*sweet*)

The vowel “u”

The Italian **u** sounds always like the English (ooh), as in zoo. Therefore, we use (ooh) to transcribe the Italian u. Here are some sample words:

- » **tu** (*tooh*) (*you*)
- » **luna** (*looh-nah*) (*moon*)
- » **frutta** (*frooht-tah*) (*fruit*)

Pronunciation peculiarities

You’ll come across some sounds and spellings that aren’t so familiar, for example:

- » oi as in oink: **noi** (*noi*) (*we*)
- » ahy as in ice: **dai** (*dahy*) (*you give*)
- » ey as in aid: **lei** (*ley*) (*she*)
- » yeh as in yes: **grazie** (*grah-tsyeh*) (*thank you*)

Consonants

Italian has the same consonants that English does. You pronounce most of them the same way in Italian as you pronounce them in English, but others have noteworthy differences. We start with the easy ones and look at those that are pronounced identically:

- » **b**: As in **bene** (*beh-neh*) (*well*)
- » **d**: As in **dare** (*dah-reh*) (*to give*)
- » **f**: As in **fare** (*fah-reh*) (*to make*)
- » **l**: As in **ladro** (*lah-droh*) (*thief*)
- » **m**: As in **madre** (*mah-dreh*) (*mother*)
- » **n**: As in **no** (*noh*) (*no*)
- » **p**: As in **padre** (*pah-dreh*) (*father*)
- » **t**: As in **treno** (*treh-noh*) (*train*)



TIP

Make certain to exaggerate the t when it's doubled, like in the word **spaghetti** (*spah-geht-tee*) as in the last name Getty.

- » **v**: As in **vino** (*vee-noh*) (*wine*)

Finally, some consonants that aren't part of the Italian alphabet except in foreign words have entered the language such as the following:

- » **j**: It appears mostly in foreign words such as *jogging* and *jeans* where it keeps the same original English pronunciation like the **j** in *jeep*.
- » **k**: Like **j**, it appears mostly in foreign words; you find it in words like *okay*, *ketchup*, and *kiwi*.
- » **w**: As with **j** and **k**, it appears in foreign words — often from English words — like *whisky*, *windsurf*, and *wafer*.
- » **x**: It doesn't really exist in Italian, with the difference that the few words derive mostly from Greek. Examples include **xenofobia** (*kseh-noh-foh-bee-ah*) (*xenophobia*) and **xilofono** (*ksee-loh-foh-noh*) (*xylophone*).
- » **y**: The letter y normally appears only in foreign words, like *yogurt*, *hobby*, and *yacht*.

The consonant “c”



REMEMBER

- » The Italian **c** has two sounds, depending on which letter follows it:
- » **Hard c:** When **c** is followed by **a**, **o**, **u**, or any consonant, you pronounce it as in the English word *cat*. We transcribe this as (k). Examples include **casa**, **colpa** (*kohl-pah*) (*guilt*), and **cuore** (*kwoh-reh*) (*heart*).

To obtain the “k” sound before **e** and **i**, you must put an **h** between the **c** and the **e** or the **c** and the **i**. Examples include **che** (*keh*) (*what*), **Chianti** (*kyan-tee*) (a type of Italian red wine), and **Pinocchio** (*pee-nohk-kyoh*) (*Pinocchio*).

- » **Soft c:** When **c** is followed by **e** or **i**, you pronounce it as you do the first and last sound in the English word *church*; therefore, we give you the pronunciation (ch). Examples include **cena** (*cheh-nah*) (*dinner*), **città** (*cheet-tah*) (*city*), and **certo** (*chehr-toh*) (*certainly*).



REMEMBER

To obtain the “ch” sound before **a**, **o**, or **u**, you have to insert an **i**. This **i**, however, serves only to create the “ch” sound; you don’t pronounce it. Examples include **ciambella** (*chahm-behl-lah*) (*donut*), **cioccolata** (*chok-koh-lah-tah*) (*chocolate*), and **ciuccio** (*chooch-choh*) (*baby’s pacifier*).

This pronunciation scheme might seem terribly complicated, but in the end, it’s not that difficult. Here another way to think about it — a little memory aid:

Follow this pattern:

C + i, e = pronounced like “ch”

C + h, a, o, u, any other consonant = pronounced like “k”

The consonant “g”



REMEMBER

- » The Italian **g** follows the same pattern as the letter **c**. Therefore, we present it the same way:
- » **Hard g:** When **g** is followed by **a**, **o**, **u**, or any consonant, you pronounce it as you pronounce the **g** in the English word *good*. We transcribe this pronunciation as (g). Examples include **gamba** (*gahm-bah*) (*leg*), **gomma** (*gohm-mah*) (*rubber*), and **guerra** (*gwehr-rah*) (*war*).

To obtain the “g” sound before **e** or **i**, you must put an **h** between the letter **g** and the **e** or **g** and **i**. Examples include **spaghetti** (*spah-geht-tee*) (*spaghetti*), **ghiaccio** (*gyahch-choh*) (*ice*), and **funghi** (*foohn-gee*) (*mushrooms*).

- » **Soft g:** When **g** is followed by **e** or **i**, you pronounce it as you do the first sound in the English word *job*; therefore, we give you the pronunciation as (j). Examples include **gentile** (*jehn-tee-leh*) (*kind*), **gita** (*jee-tah*) (*day trip*), and **gelato** (*jeh-lah-toh*) (*ice cream*).



REMEMBER

To obtain the “j” sound before **a**, **o**, or **u**, you have to insert an **i**. The **i** serves only to indicate the proper sound; you don’t pronounce it. Examples include **giacca** (*jahk-kah*) (*jacket*), **gioco** (*joh-koh*) (*game*), and **giudice** (*jooh-dee-cheh*) (*judge*).

Here’s another little pattern to help you remember these pronunciations:

g + i, e = pronounced like “j”

g + h, a, o, u, any other consonant = pronounced like “g”

The consonant “h”

The consonant **h** has only one function: namely, to change the sound of **c** and **g** before the vowels **e** and **i**. It also appears in foreign words such as *hotel*, *hamburger*, and *hobby*, and in some forms of the conjugated verb **avere** (*ah-veh-reh*) (*to have*), but it’s always silent.

The consonant “q”

The consonant **q** exists only in combination with **u** followed by another vowel; that is, you always find **qu**. The **q** is pronounced like a hard **k**, and **qu** sounds like (kw), as in the English word *quick*. Examples include **quattro** (*kwaht-troh*) (*four*), **questo** (*kweh-stoh*) (*this*), and **quadro** (*kwah-droh*) (*picture, painting*).

The consonant “r”

The Italian **r** isn’t pronounced at the back of the mouth like in English but rolled or trilled at the *alveolar ridge* — the area right behind your front teeth. It takes practice. In the beginning, you may find this pronunciation tricky, but practice makes perfect!

Here are some words to help you practice:

- » **radio** (*rah-dyoh*) (*radio*)
- » **per favore** (*pehr fah-voh-reh*) (*please*)
- » **prego** (*preh-goh*) (*you’re welcome*)

The consonant “s”

The Italian **s** is sometimes pronounced like the English **s**, as in *so*. In this case, we give you the pronunciation as (s). Examples include **pasta** (*pah-stah*) (*pasta*) and **solo** (*soh-loh*) (*only*). In other cases, it’s pronounced like the English **z**, as in *zero*;

in these cases, we list the pronunciation as (z). Examples include **chiesa** (*kyeh-zah*) (*church*), and **gelosia** (*jeh-loh-zee-ah*) (*jealousy*). The pronunciation depends on its position within a word and the surrounding letters. But don't worry too much — you'll naturally pick up the difference as you acquire more words and hear them spoken.

The consonant “z”

A single **z** is pronounced (dz) — the sound is very similar to the English **z** in *zoo*, with a **d** added at the beginning, as in **zanzara** (*dzahn-dzah-rah*) (*mosquito*). Just try it. When the **z** is doubled, you pronounce it more sharply, like (t-ts), as in **tazza** (*taht-tsah*) (*cup; mug*). Furthermore, when **z** is followed by the letter **i**, it also has a ts sound, like in the word **nazione** (*nah-tsyoh-neh*) (*nation*).

Double consonants

When you encounter double consonants in Italian, you have to pronounce each instance of the consonant or lengthen the sound. The difficult part is that there's no pause between the consonants.

Doubling the consonant usually changes the meaning of the word. So, to make sure that your Italian is understandable, emphasize doubled consonants well. To make you pronounce words with double consonants correctly, we write the first consonant at the end of one syllable and the other one at the beginning of the following one, as in these examples:

- » **nono** (*noh-noh*) (*ninth*)
- » **nonno** (*nohn-noh*) (*grandfather*)
- » **capello** (*kah-pehl-loh*) (*a single strand of hair*)
- » **cappello** (*kahp-pehl-loh*) (*hat*)

Try it once again:

- » **bello** (*behl-loh*) (*beautiful*)
- » **caffè** (*kahf-feh*) (*coffee*)
- » **occhio** (*ohk-kyoh*) (*eye*)
- » **spiaggia** (*spyahj-jah*) (*beach*)

Consonant clusters

Certain consonant clusters have special sounds in Italian. Here they are:

- » **gn** is pronounced as the English “ny.” The sound is actually the same as in a Spanish word I’m sure you know: **señorita** (seh-nyoh-ree-tah) (*miss*), or better yet, an Italian word like **gnocchi** (nyohk-kee).
- » **gli**, when followed by “i,” is pronounced in somewhat like the **-ill** in the English word *million* in words like **gli** (lyee) (*the*) and **famiglia** (fah-mee-lyah) (*family*). Be careful not to pronounce it like the **gl** sound in *glue*.
- » **sc** follows the same rules of the soft and hard “c” from the previous section. It’s pronounced as in the English scooter when it comes before **a, o, u, h** or *any other consonant* — that is, as in **scala** (skah-lah) (*staircase/ladder*), **sconto** (skohn-toh) (*discount*), and **scuola** (skwoh-lah) (*school*). Before **e** and **i**, it’s pronounced like the *sh* in *cash*. Examples of this pronunciation include **scena** (sheh-nah) (*scene*), **discesa** (dee-sheh-zah) (*descent*), and **scimmia** (sheem-myah) (*monkey*).

Kickstarting your Italian with keywords

Every language has expressions that you use so often that they almost become routine. For example, when you give something to somebody and he or she says, “Thank you,” you automatically reply, “You’re welcome!” This type of popular expression is an inseparable part of every language. When you know these expressions and how to use them, you’re on the way to really speaking Italian.



PLAY THIS

The following are some of the most common popular expressions in Italian (Track 2):

- » **Buongiorno!** (bwohn-johr-noh) (*Good morning!*)
- » **Mi chiamo . . .** (mee kyah-moh) (*My name is . . .*)
- » **Non capisco!** (nohn kah-pee-skoh) (*I don’t understand!*)
- » **Parla inglese?** (pah-r lah een-gleh-zeh) (*Do you speak English?*)
- » **Come si dice . . . ?** (koh-meh see dee-cheh) (*How do you say . . . ?*)
- » **Cosa vuol dire . . . ?** (koh-zah vwohl dee-reh) (*What does . . . mean?*)
- » **Per favore/per piacere.** (pehr-fah-voh-reh/pehr pyah-cheh-reh) (*Please.*)
- » **Scusa!** (skooh-zah) (*Excuse me!*) (Informal)
- » **Scusi!** (skooh-zee) (*Excuse me!*) (Formal)

» **Mi dispiace!** (mee dee-*spyah*-cheh) (*I'm sorry!*)

» **Permesso?** (pehr-mehs-soh) (*May I pass/come in?*)

Italians use this expression when entering a room or when passing through a crowd.

» **Andiamo!** (ahn-dyah-moh) (*Let's go!*)

» **Va bene!** (vah beh-neh) (*Okay!*)

Stressing Words Properly

Stress is the audible emphasis that you place on a syllable when speaking. In every word, one syllable is stressed more than the others. (Just a reminder: In this book we *italicize* the stressed syllable.)

Some words give you a hint as to where to place the stress: They have an accent grave (`) or acute (´) above the last vowel. Here are some examples:

» **caffè** (kahf-*feh*) (*coffee*)

» **città** (cheet-*tah*) (*city*)

» **lunedì** (looh-neh-*dee*) (*Monday*)

» **perché** (pehr-*keh*) (*why*)

» **però** (peh-*roh*) (*but*)

» **università** (ooh-nee-vehr-see-*tah*) (*university*)

» **virtù** (veer-*tooh*) (*virtue*)

Written accents are used in Italian only if the accent is on the last vowel of the word. If there's no marked accent, it's not obvious which is the stressed syllable. A useful tip is that most Italian words have the stress on the next-to-last syllable.

» The accent tells you where to stress the word.

» Fortunately, only a few words are spelled the same way and only an accent distinguishes them. But this small difference can be a very important because the meaning of the word changes, as in the following example:

e (eh) (*and*) and **è** (eh) (*he/she/it is*) are distinguished only by the accent.



REMEMBER