

The Latvian alphabet



The Latvian alphabet is based on our own Roman alphabet, but has several extra letters. This means that every word in Latvian can be spelled as it is pronounced.

The vowels have accents (macrons) over them when they are pronounced long. It's important to make a distinction between long and short vowels, as the length affects the meaning of a word in important ways.

Each letter to be introduced here with a sound-file, including a word containing (beginning with, if possible) the letter in question:

A Ā B C Č D Dz Dž E Ē F G Ģ H I Ī J K Ķ L Ļ M N Ņ O P R S Š T U Ū V Z Ž

You can also hear another regular and consistent thing about Latvian: the stress is also on the first syllable. Notice that some letters that we use in English are missing from the Latvian alphabet.

Now another thing that you need to know about Latvian is that all nouns, and the adjectives that agree with them, are either masculine or feminine. This is true of the names of places and people as well. **Rīga**, the capital of Latvia is a feminine word, ending in **-a**, and so is **Latvija**, the name of the country.

In Latvian the rule about spelling everything the way it is pronounced even applies to foreign names. Knowing what you know about the sounds and letters of Latvian and how they match, how would you spell your own name?

Every name has to clearly show its gender. There is a practical reason for this, which you'll see as you learn some more Latvian. But for now, before you learn to spell your name in Latvian, think about this: if you have an English name, you might have to adjust it. How do we say 'She is a beautiful girl' in Latvian?

(sound-file) **Viņa ir skaista meitene.**

The word-order is the same as in English, but we don't need an indefinite article, a word for 'a'. The endings **-a** and **-e** clearly show that the words **viņa**, **skaista** and **meitene** are feminine.

Now how do we say 'He is a nice boy' in Latvian?

(*sound-file*) **Viņš ir jauks puisis.**

The endings **-s** and **-š** clearly show that the words **viņš**, **jauks** and **puisis** are masculine. So, if you have a non-Latvian name and it doesn't end in any of these sounds, you have to make some adjustments. Suppose you are a girl called **Felicity George**. It isn't enough to just re-spell it:

Felisiti Džordž

- because a Latvian can't tell if you're a girl or a boy. You have to add an **-a**, and if your name already ends in a vowel other than **-a**, it will have to have a joining **-j-**:
- (*sound-file*) **Felisitija Džordža**

If you're a boy and your name is **Neil George**, it isn't enough to call yourself

Nīl Džordž

- you have to add the masculine **-s**:
- (*sound-file*) **Nīls Džordžs**

Now, see if you can work out who these famous and not so famous non-Latvians are, taken from the Latvian media:

Keitija Perija

Toms Krūzs

Eltons Džons

Vladimirs Putins

Karaliene Elizabete

Maikls Džeksons

Hilarija Klintone

Džordžs Litls

Deivids Klārks

Ratko Mladičs