

Conversational
ITALIAN
for Travelers

Just the Important Phrases

(with Restaurant Vocabulary and Idiomatic Expressions)

Kathryn Occhipinti


Stella *Lucente*

Conversational Italian for Travelers Just the Important Phrases
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The Italian Alphabet

The Italian alphabet has only 21 letters but there are names in Italian for all of the Latin letters, including those traditionally described as foreign to Italian. The letters that are foreign to Italian are listed in parentheses and are included together with the Italian alphabet given below. The written form of each letter's name in Italian and the phonetic pronunciation are listed in separate columns.

Letter	Italian Name	Phonetic Pronunciation	Letter	Italian Name	Phonetic Pronunciation
a	a	ah	q	cu	koo
b	bi	bee	r	èrre	ehr-reh
c	ci	chee	s	èsse	es-seh
d	di	dee	t	ti	tee
e	é	eh	u	u	oo
f	èffe	ehf-feh	v	vu/vi	voo/vee
g	gi	jee	(w)	doppia vu	doh-pee-ah voo
h	àcca	ah-kah	(x)	ics	eeks
i	i	ee	(y)	ipsilon	eep-see- lohn
(j)	i lunga	ee loon- gah		i greca	ee greh-ka
(k)	càppa	kahp-pah	z	zèta	zeh-tah
l	èlle	ehl-leh			
m	èmme	ehm-meh			
n	ènne	ehn-neh			
o	ò	oh			
p	pi	pee			

The Italian Sound Combinations

Here is the Italian alphabet again, with an example word in Italian to represent how each written letter should sound, as well as an example of an English word that has an equivalent sound. If the sounds are identical in Italian and English, no explanation is given. Multiple examples will be given for a letter if the pronunciation can vary. Italian is one of the most phonetic (and beautiful) languages spoken, and a little time spent learning how to pronounce the letter combinations will make learning the language much easier!

Letters(s)	Italian Pronunciation	English Pronunciation Equivalent	
a	cane	father	ah sound
b	bene	bell	
ca/co/cu	casa	cat	hard c sound
ci	ciao	cheese	soft ch with long ee sound
ce	cena	cheddar	soft ch with short e sound
chi	chi	key	hard c with long ee sound
che	che	kennel	hard c with short e sound
d	dado	dad	
e	era	bet	eh sound
e	vedi	bait	ay sound
f	farfalla	fan	
ga/go/gu	gusto	good	hard g sound
gi	giro	jeer	soft j with long ee sound

The Italian Sound Combinations (cont'd)

Letters(s)	Italian Pronunciation	English Pronunciation Equivalent	
ge	gettare	jet	soft j with short e sound
gli	figlio	million	"gli" is a unique Italian sound similar to the "lli" in million, pronounced like mil-lyee-on*
gn	signora	onion	sounds like the letter combination ni in onion
h	--	--	h is not pronounced in Italian
i	vita	meet	long ee sound
l	luna	love	
m	mamma	mother	
n	non	no	
o	sole	soap	oh sound
o	modo	law	aw sound

*To form the sound that corresponds to the letter combination **gli** in Italian, place the tip of your tongue behind your upper teeth. Then, raise the back part of your tongue to the palate and roll your tongue forward to form the guttural "gl" sound that is a part of this combination. Finish with the "yee" sound. By listening, you will note the word **gli (the)** stresses the guttural sound, but when the letters **gli** are placed in the middle of a word, such as with **figlio (son)**, the "yee" part of the **gli** sound is stressed.

The Italian Sound Combinations (cont'd)

Letters(s)	Italian Pronunciation	English Pronunciation Equivalent	
p	pasta	pasta	
qu	quanto	quest	qu together makes the kw sound
r	Roma	---	r is always trilled in Italian
s	rosa	nose	soft s
ss	rossa	toss	hard s
sch	schivo	skeet	s + chi makes hard skey sound
sche	schema	skill	s + che makes hard shek sound
sci	sciare	shield	soft sh sound with long ee sound
sce	scemo	shed	soft sh sound with short e sound
t	tu	to	
u	uva	boot	oo sound
v	vincere	vine	
z	zero	zero	soft z
zz	pizza	pizza	hard z, like tz sound

General Pronunciation and Stress for Italian Words

The Italian language is a phonetic language, so each letter in an Italian word needs to be pronounced to create the final sound. If two vowels are written next to each other, both are pronounced but the sound is a combined sound (referred to as a diphthong). There are many pronunciation rules, but the easiest thing to remember is just to pronounce what you see!

Most Italian words will be stressed on the second to last syllable, which is easy to remember if the word contains only three syllables—just stress the syllable in the middle of the word. In general, a syllable in Italian is usually made up of a vowel or a consonant group with its vowel. The word **ragazzo**, for instance, which means **boy**, will place the stress on the /ga/ sound.

ragazzo ra/GAZ/zo

There are many exceptions to this rule, however, and the first syllable is stressed instead in many cases for words with three syllables, while the second syllable is often stressed in words with four syllables, as below:

sabato SA/ba/to
domenica do/ME/ni/ca

A vowel alone can also form a complete syllable. **Abito** (**I live**), is a verb with three syllables where the first syllable, which happens to be the vowel /a/, is stressed.

abito A/bi/to

In the few cases where the very last syllable is stressed, the vowel at the end of the word will be given a grave (̀) accent. For example, the Italian word for **city**, which is **città**.

Meeting and Greeting

In Italian, as in English, there are many ways to greet people, and different expressions will be used depending on the situation and how well the individuals know one another. Italian society has become overall less formal. Many easy-going, familiar, and slang expressions are now commonly used, not only between friends and family, but even between acquaintances, although polite forms of address are still important to know.

Listed below are some of the most common ways to greet people. **“Buon giorno”** can be used to mean **“good morning”** or **“hello”** later in the day, when greeting both family members at home and shop owners at the piazza. This phrase can also be used in more formal situations with its literal translation, which is, **“Good day.”**

There are at least as many ways to say “good bye” as there are to say “hello,” as noted below. Notice that the word **ciao** is unique, since it can be used as both an informal **“hi”** as well as a quick way to say **“good bye.”** **Ciao** is used frequently throughout Italy today with family and friends.

- Buon giorno.*** Good morning. (lit. Good day.)
 used all day into evening
- Buona sera.*** Good evening.
 early nighttime salutation
- Buona notte.*** Good night.
 used when leaving/at bedtime
- Buona giornata.** (Have a) good day.
 to wish someone a nice (entire) day
- Ciao.** Hi. / Bye.
 informal greeting family/friends

Meeting and Greeting (cont'd)

Salve. Hello. — both familiar and polite

Ci vediamo! (Until) we see each other (again)!

..... for family or for a friend you

..... hope to see again soon

Arrivederci. Good bye.

..... familiar and polite

Arrivederla. Good bye.

..... polite, with respect

ArrivederLa. Good bye.

..... formal written form

Come va? How (is it) go(ing)?

..... a slang greeting used often

Ciao bella! Hey, beautiful girl!

Ciao bello! Hey handsome!

..... for someone you know (well)

A dopo! (See you) later!

..... good bye between friends

A più tardi! (See you) later!

..... good bye between friends

A presto! (See you) soon!

..... good bye between friends

Use these phrases to agree with what someone is saying:

Si. Yes.

Certo. Of course.

D'accordo. I agree.

Penso di sì. I think so.

Capisco. / Ho capito.

I understand. / I understood.