Getting Started on Ancient Greek: A Short Guide for Beginners

Originally prepared for Open University students by Jeremy Taylor, with the help of the Reading Classical Greek: Language and Literature *module team*

Revised by Christine Plastow, James Robson and Naoko Yamagata

This publication is adapted from the study materials for the Open University course A275 *Reading Classical Greek: language and literature*. Details of this and other Open University modules can be obtained from the Student Registration and Enquiry Service, The Open University, PO Box 197, Milton Keynes MK7 6BJ, United Kingdom (tel. +44 (0)845 300 60 90; email general-enquiries@open.ac.uk).

Alternatively, you may visit the Open University website at www.open.ac.uk where you can learn more about the wide range of courses and packs offered at all levels by The Open University.

The Open University
Walton Hall, Milton Keynes
MK7 6AA

Edited and designed by The Open University.

Introduction

Welcome to the study of ancient Greek.

This booklet is designed for anyone new to the study of the ancient Greek language and aims to introduces you to its alphabet, pronunciation and structure in a manageable and guided way. You should allow up to 10 hours to study these materials, especially if you are new to language learning. We recommend that you break this study time up into smaller sessions of 1–2 hours over the course of several days.

While these study materials are designed to be self-contained, if you do own a Greek textbook, you may find it useful to have this to hand. For one of the recommended activities, you will also need internet access.

There are four sections to these materials:

Answers to all the activities can be found at the back of this booklet (pp. 31-33).

Studying Ancient greek

Why learn ancient Greek? You will have your own reasons, which perhaps include some of the following. You may wish to get to grips with a particular author or text – a play by Sophocles or Euripides, an Aristophanic comedy, the philosophy of Plato and Aristotle, Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, the work of the historians Herodotus and Thucydides, or the books of the New Testament. These are just a few of the writings which still attract readers today, to say nothing of less familiar but no less interesting authors, and the enormous quantity of Greek carved on stone, scratched on pottery or written on papyrus.

Figure 1: An ostrakon bearing the name 'Cimon son of Miltiades', Kerameikos Museum, Athens. Photo: © James Robson/The Open University. Pieces of inscribed pottery such as these were used to vote for the ostracism of prominent citizens at the Athenian Assembly. If over 6000 votes were cast in any one year, the man whose name appeared on the most ostraka was banished from Athens for ten years – a fate which befell Cimon in 461 BCE.

The Greek language was spoken wherever Greek communities settled and flourished, which includes the area covered by modern Greece, but also parts of modern Turkey, Sicily, Southern Italy, and North Africa. Greek extended its reach still further after the conquests of Alexander the Great (356–23 BCE),[1] when it became the language of culture and administration across the Eastern Mediterranean and beyond, a role it continued to play within the Roman Empire. In the Byzantine period (478–1453 CE), it metamorphosed into medieval Greek, becoming the language you can hear in Greece and Cyprus today. Knowledge of ancient Greek therefore equips you to study the ancient world across three continents and a time span of more than 1500 years.

[1] CE (Common Era) and BCE (Before the Common Era) are used here instead of AD and BC.

Introducing the Greek language

A bird's eye view

As a central aim of learning Greek is to be able to read ancient Greek texts, it makes sense to begin by looking more closely at what this involves. What differentiates a veteran reader of Greek from a beginner? What does a skilled reader know and what abilities do they bring to a text when reading? What knowledge and expertise will *you* need to develop in order to read Greek with accuracy, fluency, understanding and enjoyment?

The areas of language study which are especially relevant to the study of Greek are outlined for you on the 'language map' (Figure 2). As you look at the map, don't worry if you find one or two details unclear at this stage. All the central points will be introduced more thoroughly later, and it is only through experience of reading – of which you will gain plenty of practice – that you can really begin to absorb them. Nevertheless, we feel that it is important to provide you with a thumbnail sketch of the reading process now as a preview of what you will be learning. You can refer back to this map at subsequent points in your studies to compare your own experience of reading with the model laid out in the diagram, and to determine for yourself any areas which need special attention.

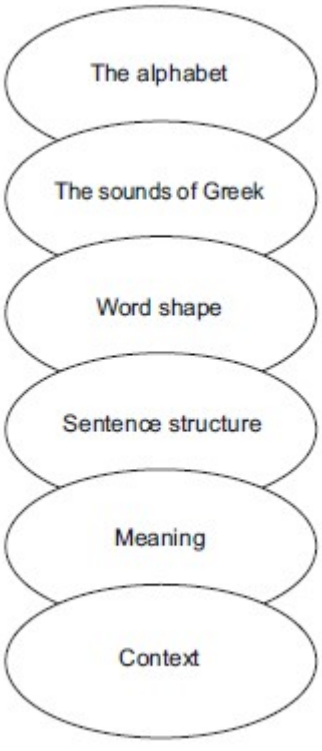


Figure 2: Language Map

The alphabet

Even a cursory glance at a piece of Greek shows that the Greek alphabet is different from the Roman alphabet with which English is written. Your first task

will be to learn the 24 letters of the Greek alphabet (which is an ancestor of the Roman) and a handful of other markings needed for reading and writing Greek. You should aim to acquire a good working knowledge of the Greek letters while you study these introductory materials. You will use them constantly whenever you read and write Greek, so there will be plenty of opportunity to get used to the alphabet as you learn the language . But the sooner you master the alphabet, the sooner you can progress to the study of other areas of the language.

The sounds of Greek

Hand in hand with the alphabet, you must learn how to pronounce the sounds of Greek. The key here is to acquire a reliable, working pronunciation that allows you to enunciate Greek words with confidence. Without this ability, reading will be frustratingly slow and you will find it difficult to get to grips with the meaning of what you read. Of course, in the early stages reading may be a painstaking process, and you should not be surprised to find yourself piecing together individual words one letter at a time. But it is important to move beyond this stage fairly rapidly in order to tackle larger blocks of Greek.

Another reason to emphasise the sounds of Greek is that ancient Greek was primarily a language to be spoken and heard rather than written and read. Many of the great works of literature were performed in front of an audience, including Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, tragic and comic plays, and the speeches of the Greek orators. Even works of history and philosophy go to great lengths to simulate the spoken word by incorporating speech and dialogue. Speaking Greek gives you a chance to capture some of these sounds and rhythms which saturated the Greek world. For this reason, we recommend that you read aloud whenever you have the opportunity.

As you work through these materials, you will acquire the basics of Greek pronunciation and learn the alphabet. As your studies of ancient Greek progress, you will, of course, have further opportunities to practise and consolidate your pronunciation.

Word shape

This is an important area where Greek differs significantly from English. There are, however, some situations where it is possible to observe a similar use of word shape in the English language. Consider the following pair of sentences:

> He chases her.
>
> She chases him.

In the first sentence, the *subject* of the verb 'chases' (i.e. the person or thing who 'chases') is 'he'. The *object* of the verb (i.e. the person or thing on the receiving end of 'chases') is 'her'. In the second sentence, the roles are reversed, and this reversal is marked not just by a change in the position of the words, but also by a change in the *shape* of the word: 'her' becomes 'she'; 'he' becomes 'him'. This is because English personal pronouns (I, s/he, we and they) contain traces of an

older stage in the development of the language, where words changed shape according to their role in the sentence. Most of these changes no longer occur in English, which uses word *order* rather than word *shape* to indicate subjects and objects.

Exercise 1

Swap the subjects and objects in the following sentences and note how the word shape has to change. The first sentence has been completed for you.

He chases her	→	She	chases	him
I chase them	→	_____	chase	_____
We chase you	→	_____	chase	_____

(You will find the answer to this and the other exercises at the back of this booklet.)

Changes of word shape (usually the *ending* of a word) are far more common in Greek than English, and provide essential clues for unravelling the meaning of a text. You will therefore need to become familiar with a large number of endings during your studies. This will involve a certain amount of learning by rote, but as you learn, keep in mind the following point:

- **Key point**: The purpose of learning word endings is not simply to be able to 'spot' different types of ending, but to use them to grasp the meaning of what you read. Memorizing word shapes should not therefore be thought of as an end in itself, but as a tool – and an indispensable one at that – for reading and understanding Greek.

Much of your study of Ancient Greek will inevitably be taken up with exercises and activities to help you consolidate your understanding of this important area. You might be interested to know that the technical term for 'word shape' is 'morphology'. This is derived from the Greek words *morphē* (μορφή – shape) and *logos* (λόγος – word); *logos* is also used in English words to indicate a field of study, such as psychology or sociology.

Sentence structure

Words are the building blocks of language, but building blocks are not enough on their own. A speaker must also know how to combine words into larger units such as phrases, clauses and sentences. Fortunately, languages are quite systematic about what is possible here, which means that sentence structure can be captured in a set of rules, many of which are similar across a range of languages.

You are already familiar with sentence structure from your knowledge of English, perhaps to a greater extent than you think. Consider the following two words:

She likes

If these words appeared on the printed page, you could probably make the following observations:

- The words don't form a complete sentence.
- The missing ingredient is a reference to the person or thing that 'she' likes. The sentence could therefore continue with a noun (for example, she likes chocolate) or a 'noun phrase', i.e. a group of words playing the role of a noun (she likes drinking tea).
- The appearance of a subject (she) and a verb (likes) rules out some possible continuations. The next word, for instance, cannot be another subject (she likes he).

What lies behind these observations? At the heart of this particular example is a simple pattern – subject + verb + object (or, to give it its full name, 'direct object') – and this pattern is a good example of a common type of 'clause'. (As we shall see, there are other types of clause in English and Greek, but subject + verb + object is as good a place as any to start.) You will have met this pattern countless times before, without necessarily being aware of it. Familiarity with this, and a small number of other 'clause patterns' is important when tackling Greek, because although the order of words may differ between Greek and English, the elements that make up sentences will be similar. This booklet includes advice and activities on clause patterns, and how to turn them to your advantage when reading.

The technical term for sentence structure is 'syntax', from the Greek word *syntaxis* (σύνταξις), the literal meaning of which is 'putting together'. It is syntax that gives language its flexibility and elasticity, and allows the formation of long, complex sentences out of smaller, simpler units.

The study of word shape (*morphology*) and sentence structure (*syntax*) are together traditionally known as 'grammar'.

Meaning

Meaning gives language its purpose. Whereas syntax is concerned with the relationship between the individual elements within a sentence, meaning reaches from the sentence to the world outside. It is meaning that allows us to do things with words – to describe, to inform, to question, to instruct, to warn, to inspire, to persuade, to amuse, to irritate – the list could be drawn out almost indefinitely. Understanding meaning is the goal of reading.

Newcomers to language study often associate the study of meaning with the study of vocabulary, i.e. with the meaning of individual words. There is some truth to this, because vocabulary occupies an important place in language learning. Nevertheless, it is worth bearing in mind that things other than words may also have meaning:

- Parts of words can have their own identifiable meaning, such as the prefix 'un' in the English words 'undone', 'undressed', 'unlucky', or the suffix 'able' in the words 'reliable', 'breakable', 'doable'.

- Units larger than words can have meaning. The English sentences 'The dog chases the cat' and 'The cat chases the dog' contain the same words but have two different, indeed opposite, meanings.
- It is also possible to apply the idea of meaning to even larger chunks of text, such as entire poems or plays. To talk of meaning in this sense might seem fuzzy and imprecise, and perhaps rather subjective. Nevertheless, what a poem or play meant to its author, to its original audience, and to its subsequent readership (including readers today) is of fundamental importance for the study of Greek, because it is through meaning in this sense that the language retains its value and endures as something worth transmitting from one generation to the next.

You may have come across the term 'semantics' to describe the study of meaning. It is derived from a Greek verb *sēmainō* (σημαίνω), meaning to 'show' or 'point'.

Context

Meaning also depends upon context, much of which tends to be implicit, rather than stated directly. If I say to you, 'The door is open', I am, on the face of it, describing the state of the door. But if it is snowing outside and you have just entered the house, we both know that I am, in fact, not describing the door but asking you to shut it. My statement depends upon a network of assumptions about the appropriate state of doors in freezing weather which do not need to be spelt out.

Contexts come in a variety of shapes and sizes. The context on which the previous example depends might be described as a universal, common-sense understanding of the world around us. But contexts can equally well be more historically or culturally specific. This means that any prior knowledge of the classical world is potentially relevant when reading Greek – knowledge of mythology, history, religion, literature, geography, or something more particular, such as the role of the chorus in a Greek tragedy, the archaeology of a Greek house, or the conventions of a Socratic argument. Any aspect of Greek life and culture is potentially relevant for understanding a Greek text in all its dimensions; or in other words, the study of Greek civilization and Greek language should ideally be mutually reinforcing.

The systematic study of meaning in context is (roughly speaking) the area of language study known as 'pragmatics': this is not a term you need to know, although at some point in your study of Greek you will inevitably encounter the Greek work from which this word derives: *pragma* (πρᾶγμα), meaning a 'deed' or 'action'. The term 'pragmatics' serves as a useful reminder that language is meant to be used, and that usage always takes place within some context.

And something to forget …

Finally, there is one aspect of language that has been deliberately excluded from the language map, something you will need to forget or to 'unlearn'. If English is

your main or only language, you will have formed a habit of expecting words to appear in a certain order, with a subject followed by a verb followed by a direct object (as in the example 'the dog chases the cat' above). In English, it is word order that indicates who is doing what to whom.

In Greek, the subject, direct object and much else besides are indicated by *word shape* not word order. Word order in Greek is more flexible than English and getting to grips with this fact is one of the challenges of learning the language (or for that matter other 'inflected' languages like Latin). But it can be exhilarating once you get the hang of it, and it can enrich your understanding of English as well as Greek. Some students take to this instantly, others require more practice.

This has been a rapid tour through the elements of reading Greek. You might find it useful to refer back to the language map later in your studies to see how it corresponds to your own experience of reading Greek.

Letters, words and sounds

The alphabet

The Greek language predates the Greek alphabet by many centuries, although in the absence of written evidence it is difficult to pinpoint its true age with precision. One point that can be made with certainty is that Greek has the longest attested history of any European language still spoken today. Modern Greek differs in some respects from its ancient counterpart, but it is recognisably the same language. It is much harder to detect continuities between Modern English and Old English, even though the interval between them is considerably shorter (around 900 years).

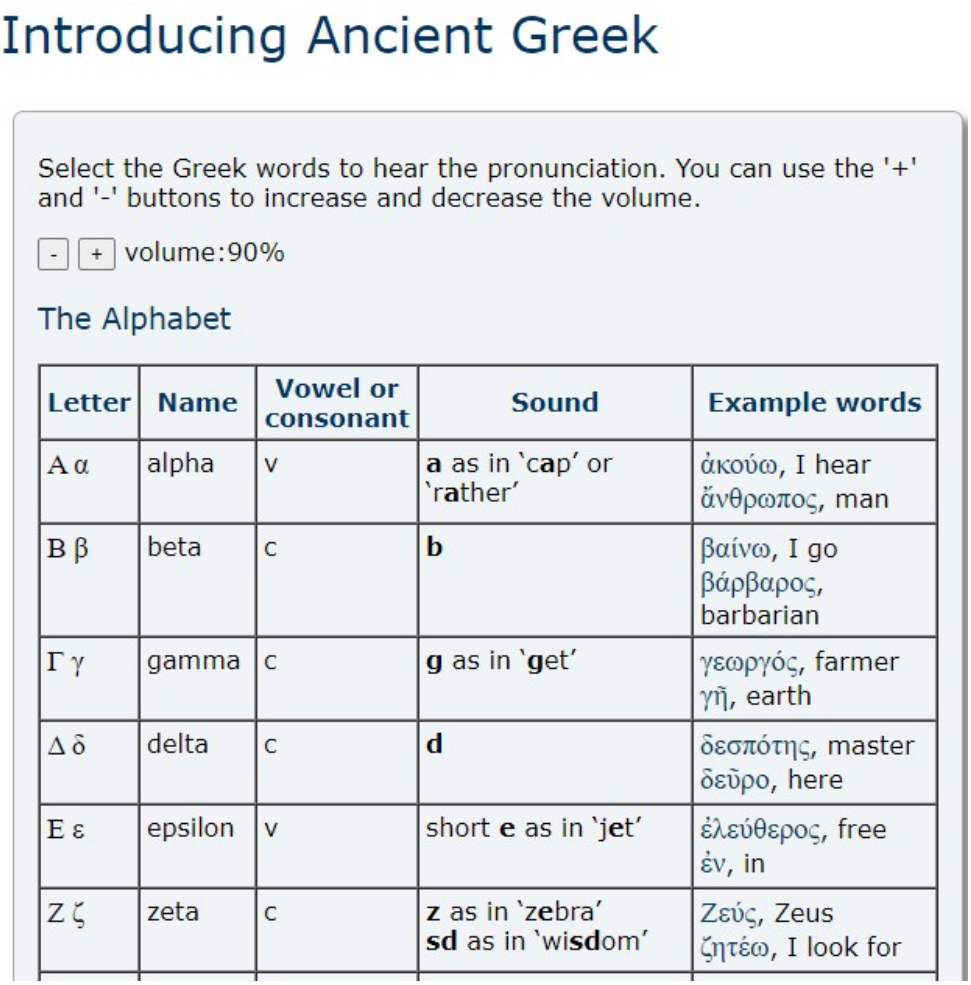
The earliest surviving examples of the Greek alphabet date to the eighth century BCE, and although it is possible that the alphabet is older than this, most scholars consider it to be an eighth-century invention. It was based on the Phoenician script (the forerunner of the Hebrew alphabet), but with some changes and simplifications. The major Greek innovation was the inclusion of letters to mark the sound of vowels. The resulting 24 letters are still in use today in Greece and Cyprus and form the basis of the Roman alphabet with which you are already familiar. Your first task is to master this alphabet, together with a few extra markings needed to represent ancient Greek in written form.

Activity

Visit the *Introducing Classical Greek* website (http://www.open.ac.uk/Arts/greek/) so that you can begin to familiarize yourself with the Greek alphabet and the pronunciation of the language. It tests your ability to recognise the individual letters, to place them in sequence, and to use them in combination to form words. (There is also a section entitled 'How sentences work' which provides a preview of material covered in the next section, 'From words to sentences'.)

Try to put aside time for **at least two sessions** of **20–30 minutes each** to use this site before you move on to the next section and then come back to the site to consolidate your knowledge for one or two more sessions over the next week. Using this site 'little and often' should help reinforce your learning and build your confidence with the letters and sounds of ancient Greek.

Alternatively, if you have a Greek textbook to hand, you might choose to use this to study the Greek alphabet. (If you own a copy of *Reading Greek* textbooks, for example, the guide to the pronunciation is in *Reading Greek G&E*, pp. 1-3) Again, you should aim to spend **at least two sessions of 20-30 minutes** on the alphabet before moving on to the next section.



Introducing Ancient Greek

Select the Greek words to hear the pronunciation. You can use the '+' and '-' buttons to increase and decrease the volume.

- + volume:90%

The Alphabet

Letter	Name	Vowel or consonant	Sound	Example words
Α α	alpha	v	**a** as in 'c**a**p' or 'r**a**ther'	ἀκούω, I hear ἄνθρωπος, man
Β β	beta	c	**b**	βαίνω, I go βάρβαρος, barbarian
Γ γ	gamma	c	**g** as in '**g**et'	γεωργός, farmer γῆ, earth
Δ δ	delta	c	**d**	δεσπότης, master δεῦρο, here
Ε ε	epsilon	v	short **e** as in 'j**e**t'	ἐλεύθερος, free ἐν, in
Ζ ζ	zeta	c	**z** as in 'z**e**bra' **sd** as in 'wi**sd**om'	Ζεύς, Zeus ζητέω, I look for

Figure 3: Screenshot of Introducing Classical Greek (http://www.open.ac.uk/Arts/greek/)

Don't feel your pronunciation of Greek has to be perfect straightaway! We will come back to the sounds of Greek in the next section and your confidence with the letters and sounds of Greek will only continue to increase the more you study.

Activities

Once you are ready, complete the following exercises which will help you to think about the Greek alphabet in more detail. (You can find the answers to the exercises at the back of this guide.)

Exercise 2

Many Greek letters have English counterparts; for example, alpha (α) is the ancestor of the letter 'a'. Using the table overleaf, review the alphabet, and jot down any Greek letters which have no obvious counterpart in English.

letter	name		letter	name		letter	name
Α α	alpha		Ι ι	iota		Ρ ρ	rho
Β β	beta		Κ κ	kappa		Σ σ ς	sigma
Γ γ	gamma		Λ λ	lambda		Τ τ	tau
Δ δ	delta		Μ μ	mu		Υ υ	upsilon
Ε ε	epsilon		Ν ν	nu		Φ φ	phi
Ζ ζ	zeta		Ξ ξ	xi		Χ χ	khi
Η η	eta		Ο ο	omicron		Ψ ψ	psi
Θ θ	theta		Π π	pi		Ω ω	omega

Figure 4: The Greek alphabet, showing capitals and lower case

Exercise 3

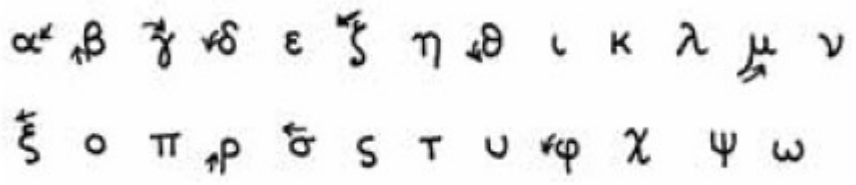
Note down any Greek letters which appear to you to resemble English letters, but represent a different sound in Greek. One example would be the Greek letter ϱ (rho), which looks more like the English letter 'p'. Consider capital letters as well as lower case.

Exercise 4

Based on your expectations of the English alphabet, are there any letters in the Greek alphabet which seem to you to be in an unexpected position? These letters are worth noting, as they might cause problems initially when looking up items in alphabetically ordered vocabulary lists.

Forming the letters

When writing Greek letters by hand, don't worry about recreating all the flourishes of the printed versions. If you look closely you will see that printed letters in English often contain extra trimmings that are not normally reproduced in handwriting. Concentrate on the essentials of each letter form, as illustrated below, and aim for clarity and ease of writing.



Activity

Using the guide above, write out each lower-case letter of the alphabet several times on a sheet of paper. Note that arrows are included for some letters to indicate where you should start forming it.

Once you have done this, use Figure 4 and try to write out the capitals at least twice, too (these appear on the left-hand side of each blue column).

There are a few extra points to keep in mind when combining letters to form words.

Capital letters

Proper nouns, i.e. the names of people, places or unique things, start with a capital in both Greek and English.

> Alex, Greece, The Houses of Parliament
> Σωκράτης (Socrates), Ἀθῆναι (Athens), ὁ Παρθενών (the Parthenon)

But note that Greek does not use capitals at the start of a sentence.

Final sigma

Sigma at the end of a word is written ς, otherwise σ:

> σοφός (sophos) – 'wise'

Iota subscript

Iota (ι) after a lower case eta (η) or omega (ω) is written *underneath* the letter: ῃ, ῳ. It is also sometimes written under the letter α (alpha): ᾳ. This represents the traces of an original iota sound attached to some words, which eventually became so weak that it was retained only in the spelling.

- **Key point**: When writing Greek, always include the iota subscript where needed. Omitting it is the equivalent of a spelling mistake.

Breathings

Every word beginning with a vowel (α, ε, η, ι, ο, υ, ω) or rho (ρ) has a mark above it known as a 'breathing'. A 'rough' breathing (the Greeks called it 'shaggy' or 'hairy') indicates that the word is pronounced with an initial 'h' sound. Thus the word for a 'road' is:

> ὁδός (pronounced 'hodos')

A 'smooth' breathing, written as a mirror image of a rough breathing, indicates the absence of an 'h' sound, as in the word for a 'threshold':

> ὀδός (pronounced 'odos')

When the initial letter is a capital, the breathing appears to the left of the letter rather than above it:

Ἁλικαρνασσός	(the city of) Halikarnassos
Ἀλεξάνδρεια	(the city of) Alexandria

If a word starts with a diphthong (i.e. two vowels pronounced as a single sound, such as αι, οι, ου, ευ), the breathing appears above the second letter:

Εὐριπίδης	Euripides
οἰκία	house

- **Key point**: Always include breathings when writing Greek. They affect the pronunciation of a word and omitting them is the equivalent of a spelling mistake.

Note that words beginning with upsilon (υ) or rho (ρ) always take a rough breathing, thus:

ῥόδον (*rhodon*)	rose
ὑπέρ (*hyper*)	over

English words beginning 'rh-' ('rhythm', 'rhododendron') and 'hy-' ('hypochondria', 'hydroelectric') tend to originate from a Greek word starting with ῥ or ὑ.

Punctuation

Greek is punctuated using full stops (.) and commas (,), as in English. A Greek question mark looks like an English semicolon (;) and a raised dot (·) is used as a colon or semicolon. The raised dot is relatively uncommon in the initial passages of Greek you will be reading, but you will encounter the question mark in the first reading and frequently thereafter.

τίς; (*tis*)	who?
ποῦ; (*pou*)	where?

Accents

The three accents of ancient Greek, the acute (´), grave (`) and circumflex (~) were devised in antiquity, probably around 200 BCE at the great library of Alexandria, to help readers pronounce Greek with the correct melodic 'pitch', i.e. with a rising or falling tone on particular syllables. Since English syllables are pronounced with stress (i.e. a greater or lesser degree of emphasis) rather than pitch, accents are difficult for native English speakers to use as intended, and are usually the preserve of more advanced readers (for whom they are of considerable interest).

Nevertheless, as almost all ancient Greek is printed with accents (including the Greek in most textbooks) it is worth familiarising yourself with their appearance on the printed page. More experienced readers of Greek are recommended to dip into accentuation at some point in their studies. Practices vary, but beginners are often not required to use them when writing Greek.

- **Key point**: There are a small number of instances where an accent provides a valuable clue to the meaning of a word. These will be indicated on a case-by-case basis, and you should commit them to memory. Thus τίς is 'who?' but τις is 'someone'.

Modern Greek is no longer spoken with a pitch accent (although other languages are, such as Norwegian and Japanese).

Long vowels

In discussions of grammar you will sometimes see the vowels α, ι, and υ marked with a 'macron' (ᾱ, ῑ, ῡ) to indicate that they are to be pronounced long (approximating to the southern English pronunciation of 'car', 'bead' or 'boot') rather than short ('cap', 'bin', 'put').[2] The macron is an aid to pronunciation, and you should not reproduce it when writing. Curiously the Greek alphabet contains letters for long e (η) and o (ω), but not for long α, ι or υ. But note the following clues: an iota subscript (ᾳ) always indicates that a vowel is long, as does a circumflex (ᾶ, ῖ, ῦ).

[2] Ancient Greek υ (upsilon) was in fact pronounced like the French 'u' or German 'ü', with the lips rounded as if to make the English 'oo' sound (as in 'hoop'), while sounding the English 'ee' (as in 'sheep').

Activities

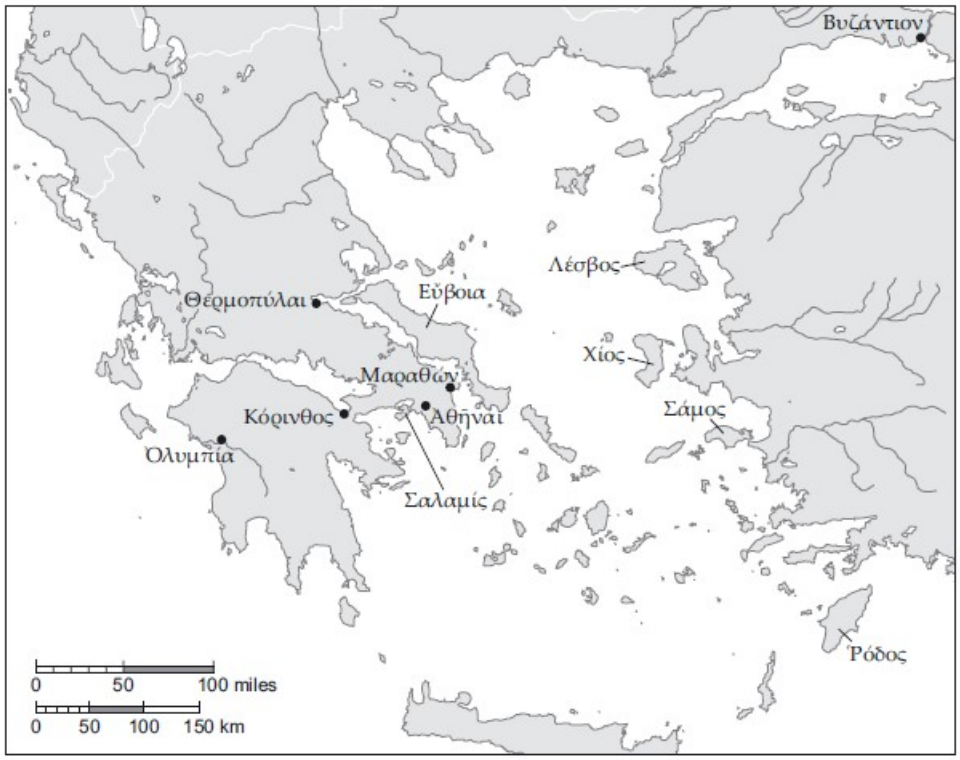


Figure 4: Map of the Aegean with place names in Classical Greek

Activity

Find the place names listed below on the map (Figure 4):

Athēnai (= Athens)	Marathōn
Byzantion (= Byzantium)	Olympia
Khios	Rhodos (= Rhodes)
Korinthos (= Corinth)	Salamis
Euboia	Samos
Lesbos	Thermopylai

Note that when Greek words are transliterated into English, ‘ē’ represents eta, ‘ō’ omega, ‘y’ upsilon and ‘kh’ khi. But upsilon in a diphthong is represented ‘u’.

Exercise 5

Convert the following names of five famous Greeks, one Roman and a Persian King from upper to lower case, preserving the initial capital letter.

ΌΜΗΡΟΣ	ΠΕΡΙΚΛΗΣ

ΞΕΡΞΗΣ ΠΛΑΤΩΝ

ἈΡΙΣΤΟΦΑΝΗΣ ἸΟΥΛΙΟΣ ΚΑΙΣΑΡ

ΣΩΚΡΑΤΗΣ

(NB that when Greek words are written in capitals breathing marks are not normally used, but they appear in this exercise for guidance.)

The sounds of Greek: Pronunciation

Greek was a living language, and as such its pronunciation would have varied according to geographical location and time period. Modern scholars have a good understanding of the pronunciation practised in Athens in the fifth century BCE, however, based on a long process of reconstruction using ancient Greek evidence in combination with modern linguistics (see the box below).

Nevertheless, bear in mind that your main goal should be to pronounce Greek clearly and with confidence, in a way that allows you to read with fluency and to gain some appreciation for the sounds of a literature that was composed for the ear as much as the eye. You may, therefore, on occasion wish to sacrifice accuracy for pragmatism. This is especially true in the case of the letters theta (θ), phi (φ), and chi (χ), the correct pronunciation of which can be troublesome for English speakers:

- Theta should strictly be pronounced as a 't' sound, followed by the blowing of an 'h'. But you will generally hear it pronounced by English speakers as 'th' (as in 'theatre').[3]
- Phi should be pronounced as a 'p' sound, also followed by 'h'. Again, you will generally hear it pronounced like an English 'f' sound.[4]

(In fact θ and φ were pronounced like English 'th' and 'f' at some point *after* the fifth century BCE – as they are in modern Greek – although when this change occurred is a matter of debate.)

- Chi was similarly pronounced as 'k' followd by 'h'. You can either try to pronounce as an explosive k, or like ch in loch.[5]
- Zeta is properly pronounced like the 's' + 'd' sounds in the phrase 'it i**s** **d**one'. However, many English speakers simply pronounce it like the 'z' in 'zoo'

[3] The difference between the pronunciation of θ and τ was roughly the same as the different 't' sounds in '**t**op' and 's**t**op' – that is to say, a difference that most English speakers find very subtle indeed.

[4] The difference between φ and π is roughly that between the different 'p' sounds in '**p**ot' and 's**p**ot'.

[5] The difference between κ and χ is roughly that between the different 'k' sounds in '**k**ip' and 's**k**ip'.

If you have already acquired a different pronunciation of ancient Greek, perhaps from previous study, you may choose not to change it at this stage. The choice is yours, but if you stick to your own pronunciation you should nevertheless work through the activities below and make yourself aware of any major points of difference. You should also be aware that the pronunciation of ancient Greek varies somewhat amongst English speakers, with some prouncing ancient Greek in a more authentic way than others! Don't worry too much about getting it 'right' – but do try to develop a consistent approach that you feel comfortable with. And do make an effort to read Greek aloud at this early stage: your language learning will progress that much faster once you can hear the words in your head.

Reconstructing the pronunciation of ancient Greek

Can we really know how ancient Greek was pronounced? Is it possible to reconstruct the pronunciation of a language without access to native speakers?

Although absolute certainty is impossible, we are nevertheless able to reconstruct the pronunciation of ancient Greek with a fair degree of confidence using ancient evidence in combination with principles drawn from linguistics. That process of reconstruction began in the medieval period, as scholars became dissatisfied with the variety of scholarly pronunciations audible throughout Europe, each one influenced by the local language of the speaker.

Here are some of the main types of evidence on which the reconstruction is based:

- The testimony of Greek writers – one Greek grammarian stated explicitly that the letter zeta was pronounced as a combination of 's' followed by 'd'; another speaks of the tongue 'beating the air' in the pronunciation of rho, implying that it was 'trilled' as in Italian (unlike the 'r' sound of southern English).
- The representation of Greek words in other languages – especially Latin, where, for instance, we find the letter φ rendered not as 'f' but as 'p' or 'ph'.
- Changes in spellings – these can provide valuable evidence for the way pronunciation changes over time and the processes by which the modern pronunciation developed from the ancient. Common spelling mistakes (on stone or papyrus) can also provide useful clues in the hands of an expert.
- Wordplay, including puns and onomatopoeia – there was much learned discussion in the Renaissance concerning the bleating of sheep (which Greek authors represented as βῆ βῆ), the barking of dogs (αὖ, αὖ) and the sound of cuckoos (κόκκυ).

Any scraps of information about pronunciation must be interpreted carefully, with reference to all the available evidence and within a proper linguistic framework. Even then, the results should be regarded as provisional and open to modification in the light of new information. Nevertheless, there is a wide measure of agreement among scholars over the pronunciation of classical Greek, at least in its essentials, and it is this that lies behind the pronunciation suggested.

Pronunciation activities

Activity

Practise pronouncing the place names listed on the map (Figure 4) in the activity above.

Ἀθῆναι, Βυζάντιον, Χίος, Κόρινθος, Εὔβοια, Λέσβος, Μαραθών, Ὀλυμπία, Ῥόδος, Σαλαμίς, Σάμος, Θερμοπύλαι

Activity

Practise pronouncing the names of the people mentioned in the activity above.

Ὅμηρος, Ξέρξης, Περικλῆς, Ἀριστοφάνης, Σωκράτης, Πλάτων, Ἰούλιος Καῖσαρ.

Stress

We have mentioned already that Greek accents indicate a melodic pitch rather than stress. In practice, however, English speakers will find it almost impossible *not* to emphasise at least one of the syllables in a Greek word. There is little consistency across the English-speaking world on how to achieve this, but most attempts fall into one of two categories, though you may also encounter a mixture of the two.

Option 1: Place the stress on the syllables which contain either an acute accent (´) or circumflex (˜):

θεός	the*os* (‘god’)
θάλαττα	*tha*latta (‘sea’)
πλοῖον	*ploi*on (‘ship’)
Ἀθῆναι	A*thē*nai (‘Athens’)

Option 2: Apply the stress according to the following rules (which English speakers often find themselves applying almost automatically):

For words of two syllables, place the stress on the first syllable.

θεός	*the*os (‘god’)

For words of more than two syllables, stress the second syllable from the end if it contains a long vowel (η or ω, or a long α, ι or υ), a diphthong, or a short vowel followed by two consonants.

Ἀθῆναι	A*thē*nai ('Athens')
Εὔβοια	Eu*boi*a (the island of 'Euboea')
θάλαττα	tha*lat*ta ('sea')

Otherwise, stress the third syllable from the end.

Παρθενών	*Par*thenon

The second option is the traditional method, at least in Great Britain, although it is really a method for pronouncing *Latin*, and has lost some of its attraction now that the study of Greek is no longer routinely preceded by the study of Latin.

At the time of writing there are signs of a shift in favour of the first option, the advantage of which is that it brings the reader closer to the pitch accent of Greek, and can be used later as a springboard for learning Greek accents more thoroughly, if you choose to do so.

You should adopt the method that allows you to read Greek with the maximum fluency, but be prepared to meet either (or a combination of both!) when you listen to other speakers.

Reading and writing practice

Exercise 6

The family tree of Atreus (Figure 5) forms a murderous backdrop to Greek mythology and the plays of the Greek tragedians. Write the names of each family member in Greek on the blank tree provided. Remember to include breathings where necessary.

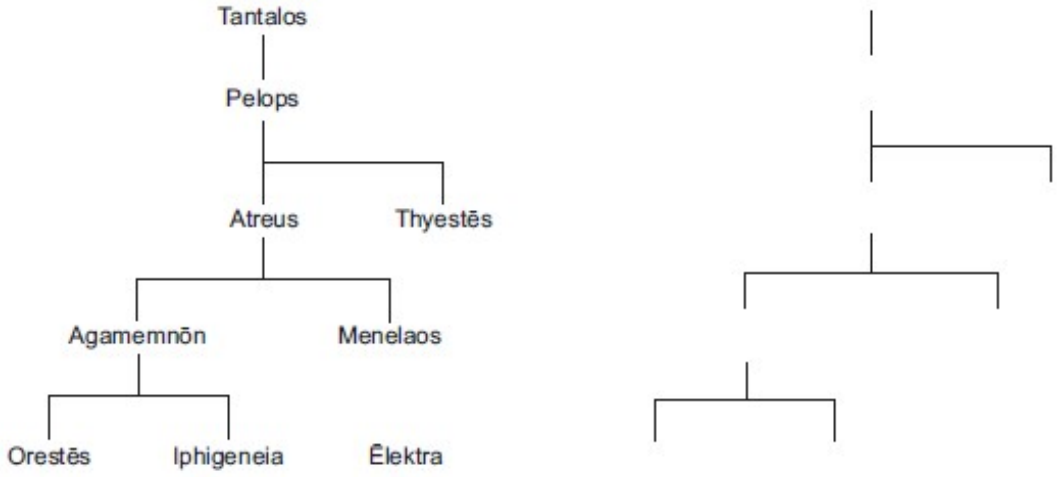


Figure 5: Family tree of the house of Atreus

Exercise 7

Complete the table by copying the Greek names of the twelve Olympian gods, providing a transliteration and the name of the God. While you should aim to write out the breathings at the beginning of some of these names (i.e. ᾽ and ῾), you do not need to copy the accents (i.e. ´ and `). One row has been completed for you.

	Greek	**transliteration**	**English name**	**role**
Ζεύς				father of the gods
Ἥρα				wife and sister of Zeus
Δημήτηρ				goddess of grain and agriculture
Ἀφροδίτη				goddess of love and beauty
Ἀπόλλων	Ἀπολλων	Apollōn	Apollo	god of the lyre, prophecy, medicine
Ἄρης				god of war
Ἄρτεμις				goddess of the hunt and childbirth
Ἀθήνη				goddess of wisdom and war
Διόνυσος				god of the grape and wine
Ἥφαιστος				god of fire and blacksmiths
Ἑρμῆς				the messenger god
Ποσειδῶν				god of the sea

Letters, words and sounds: summary

STUDY TIP – Keeping track of your progress

At the end of sections of work, we have provided a checklist of the major learning points covered so far, which you should use to keep track of your progress. Throughout your studies you may wish to refer back to earlier checklists to see how well you remember the material. Although some points are likely to have slipped from memory, others may well have become second nature after a few weeks of further study and practice.

Checklist

In this section you have met:

- the 24 letters of the Greek alphabet, lower and upper case
- other markings: breathings (rough and smooth), iota subscript and punctuation
- accents (you should be able to recognise an acute, grave and circumflex)
- the pronunciation of the Greek letters, individually and in combination (e.g. as diphthongs or double consonants).

From words to sentences

If language consisted of nothing more than words, then learning to read would simply be a matter of learning vocabulary, and a dictionary would be the only tool required to read a foreign language. The areas covered by the 'language map' you looked at in the previous section should dispel that idea.

Consider the following sentences:

> The cat chases the dog.
>
> The dog chases the cat.

These two sentences are composed of the same words, but their meanings are diametrically opposed. There must therefore be more to meaning than just words. There is, and it is called sentence structure (or, more formally, 'syntax'). This is something that we briefly mentioned in the 'bird's eye view' of language in the previous section. Let us now take a brief look at syntax in more detail.

Syntax concerns the rules for combining words into larger groups such as phrases, clauses, and sentences. Although the number of potential combinations of words in any language is infinite, the good news is that the rules of combination are limited, and there are resemblances across languages. An awareness of these resemblances is an important tool when making the transition from reading English to reading Greek.

We will concentrate on the 'clause' because every sentence contains at least one clause. Most clauses fit into a small number of patterns which are similar in Greek and English.

The first pattern we shall look at is the most useful to keep in mind when reading Greek. It is: **subject + verb + direct object**:

> The dog (subject) chases (verb) the cat (direct object).
>
> The chef (subject) boils (verb) the milk (direct object).
>
> The crocodile (subject) consumes (verb) the man (direct object).

The verb describes an action ('chases', 'boils', 'consumes') or a state. The subject is the person or thing in charge of the verb ('the dog', 'the chef', 'the crocodile'). The direct object is the person or thing on the receiving end of the verb. Note that in these examples, all three elements are needed to form a complete clause. A competent reader would immediately notice that the following clauses were incomplete:

> the dog chases
>
> boils the milk
>
> the crocodile the man

The second clause pattern is similar to the first, but without the direct object, i.e. just: **subject + verb**.

The car (subject) skids (verb).

The plant (subject) dies (verb).

The sun (subject) rises (verb).

In this instance the clauses are complete without an object. In fact, there is no room for an object because the nature of the verb rules it out. Whereas you can chase something, you cannot 'die' or 'rise' anything.

It is always important to pay particular attention to the verb because of the influence it wields over the shape of the clause. Some verbs demand a direct object, as in 'The dog chases …', which raises the question, 'Chases what?' Verbs that take a direct object are called *transitive* verbs, so called because the action 'passes over' (Latin *transit*) to a direct object. Transitive verbs lie at the heart of 'subject + verb + direct object' sentences. *Intransitive* verbs, like 'die' or 'rise', do not require a direct object, and can form complete sentences with just a subject. They form the basis of 'subject + verb' sentences.

Some verbs can be used transitively or intransitively:

The water boils (intransitive use).

The chef boils the water (transitive use).

Here you must consider the context to determine the use. There is no ambiguity in practice, because in real life chefs cannot 'boil' (except perhaps metaphorically, if they are angry), but they can boil other objects, like liquids. As often, the issue is decided by background knowledge or common sense.

Note that clauses can be expanded without changing their basic pattern. For instance, 'The flower dies' could become:

The (purple) (poisonous) flower (from Patagonia) (with the pink spots) (rapidly) dies (in the heat).

The extra words and phrases inject plenty of extra meaning, but they do not alter its basic pattern. Cut out the extra words and the sentence remains intact; but remove the subject or verb and it is no longer complete. You might like to confirm this for yourself by striking out different parts of the sentence and rereading it.

You will learn more later about fleshing out a clause beyond its basic elements, although you might like to observe at this point that only three devices were used in the example: adjectives (purple, poisonous), adverbs (rapidly) and prepositional phrases (from Patagonia, with the pink spots, in the heat). You will be introduced to these devices later in your studies.

READING TIP

Inside even the longest, most tortuous sentence lies a simple pattern which includes at least a subject and a verb. This is a feature of language that you can turn to your advantage when reading Greek.

A sentence, by the way, can be defined as a unit of language which consists of one or more clause(s).

> The mouse eats the cheese (*one sentence, one clause*)
>
> The mouse eats the cheese and then the cat chases the mouse (*one sentence, two clauses*)

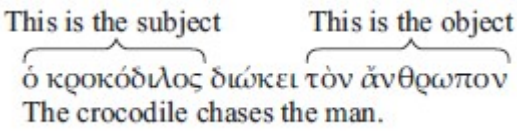
You will encounter different methods of combining clauses later on in your studies.

Word shape not word order

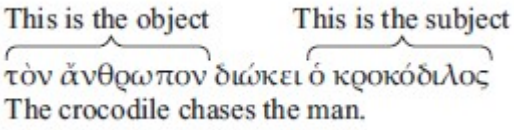
In English, subjects and objects are indicated by the position of the words in the sentences, i.e. by word order. The subject usually precedes the verb; the direct object follows it. This is why English is sometimes known as a 'Subject, verb, object' language, or an 'SVO' language. By changing the position of subject and object, you can radically alter the meaning of the sentence, as in the dog/cat example above.

In *inflected* languages like Greek, information about subjects and objects, and much else besides, is conveyed by word shape, and more specifically, by word endings.

Word endings are rather like signs attached to words with instructions on how to read them. One sign might say, 'This is the subject', another 'This is the object', and so on. Learning to read these signs fluently and naturally is an essential part of learning to read Greek.



The existence of these signs allows Greek word order to be more flexible than English. In Greek, the words could change position without changing the meaning. Languages without a fixed word order are sometimes known informally as 'scrambling' languages.



Despite the difference in word order, then, the meaning of these two sentences is essentially the same. The only difference is in the emphasis: Greek can choose to give 'the man', 'the crocodile' (or even the 'chases', for that matter) greater emphasis by placing it at a key point in the sentence (such as the beginning). To achieve even a halfway similar effect, English has to alter the structure of the sentence radically ('It's the *man* that the crocodile chases').

The key lesson here is that Greek nouns, adjectives and the definite article (i.e. the word 'the') vary their endings according to their role in the sentence. The grammatical way of talking about these endings is to say that a word is in a certain *case*.

When a noun is the subject, it is in the *nominative* case, like ὁ κροκόδιλος. When it is the direct object, it is in the *accusative* case, like τὸν κροκόδιλον. There are five cases in total, but to begin with you should concentrate on the nominative and the accusative.

Sentence fragments

So much for the theory. How can word shape be used when reading? Suppose you are faced with a sentence that begins with the name of a person called 'Zenothemis':

ὁ Ζηνόθεμις …

The first thing to notice is that the name, as often in Greek, is preceded by the definite article 'the'. Although this might seem odd, it is tremendously useful because the shape of the article 'ὁ' indicates that Zenothemis is in the nominative case, which is the case used to indicate the subject. You should therefore expect Zenothemis to be the subject of the clause and to be in charge of a verb. You can express this as follows:

Zenothemis verbs [direct object]

You could pronounce this 'Zenothemis *somethings something*' or 'Zenothemis *verbs* a *direct object*'. It is not clear yet what Zenothemis is doing (the verb), nor what he is doing it to (the direct object), or even if there is a direct object at all (the direct object has been placed in square brackets to indicate that it is optional). Nevertheless, based on an understanding of word shape and sentence structure, you can still form an expectation about the shape of the sentence and how it is likely to unfold.

Now consider a sentence beginning

τὸν Ζηνόθεμιν …

This time the article τόν is in the accusative case, which is used to mark a direct object. You should now expect Zenothemis to be on the receiving end of the verb, an expectation that can be expressed as follows:

subject verbs Zenothemis

or

something *somethings* Zenothemis

Because the subject and verb are unknown at this stage, you will need to reserve a couple of mental slots for them. To fill in the slots, you must read on. Perhaps the sentence continues:

τὸν Ζηνόθεμιν διώκει …

The verb ('chases') has now arrived, which allows expectations to be refined further:

subject chases Zenothemis

READING TIP

Extracting every drop of information from word shape is central to reading Greek. This is an area of language where English and Greek differ, and it is therefore likely to require time and practice to master. The exercises on sentence fragments are designed to put you in the right frame of mind for this important task.

Exercise 8

Try the following sentence fragments for yourself. Based on the words provided, write down your expectation of how each sentence will continue. Vocabulary is provided at the end of the exercise. There are two worked examples to help get you going.

ὁ ἄνθρωπος …

Answer: the man *verbs* [*direct object*]

φιλεῖ …

Answer: *subject* loves *direct object*

(Hint: ὁ indicates the subject of the clause; τόν the direct object)

1 τὸν Ἡγέστρατον …

2 ὁ Ἡγέστρατος …

3 διώκει …

4 τὸν Ἡγέστρατον φιλεῖ …

5 μένει …

Vocabulary (in alphabetical order):

διώκει	pursues
Ἡγέστρατος	Hegestratos (the name of a person)
μένει	waits
φιλεῖ	loves

As ever, you can check answers to exercises at the back of this booklet.

The definite article

You might have noticed that the names Ζηνόθεμις and Ἡγέστρατος also changed shape along with the definite article ('the'). In due course you will need to recognise the endings of nouns, but initially you will lean heavily on the shape of the article to determine the case of a noun. You should therefore start to learn its various forms now. You will also find that a thorough knowledge of the definite article will speed up the process of learning noun and adjective endings later on, because in many cases the endings resemble those of the article.

The nominative and accusative forms of the definite article set are out in the table below. (NB All the following Greek words mean 'the'.)

		singular	
	masculine	**feminine**	**neuter**
nominative	ὁ	ἡ	τό
accusative	τόν	τήν	τό

		plural	
	masculine	**feminine**	**neuter**
nominative	οἱ	αἱ	τά
accusative	τούς	τάς	τά

As you can see from this table, in addition to case, Greek nouns also have a *number* (singular or plural) and *gender* (masculine, feminine or neuter).

Number should be familiar to you from English, which uses word shape to distinguish between one of something ('book', 'man') and more than one ('books', 'men'). In Greek this distinction between *singular* and *plural* is reflected in the shape of the definite article as well as the noun:

ὁ ναύτης …

The sailor *verbs* [*direct object*]

οἱ ναῦται …

The sailors *verb* [*direct object*]

A further important concept to get to grips with when studying Greek is **gender**. Indeed, if Greek is the first foreign language you have undertaken, the concept of gender may take a while to get used to. All Greek nouns are assigned to one of three genders: *masculine*, *feminine* and *neuter*. Generally, the gender of a noun is not predictable and therefore has to be learnt: thus not only 'man' but also 'sky' is masculine; not only 'woman' but also 'land' is feminine; and 'fire' and 'temple' are neuter. Unlike the case or number of a noun, the gender of a noun never changes. Importantly, though, the shape of the definite article also changes according to gender:

ὁ Ἡγέστρατος …
Hegestratos *verbs* [*direct object*]

ἡ γυνή …
the woman *verbs* [*direct object*]

τὴν γυναῖκα …[6]
subject verbs the woman

You will have plenty of opportunity to observe the definite article in action when you start reading Greek sentences and texts. So, while you might like to spend a few minutes looking at the different forms of the definite article and trying to learn them if you can, don't worry if you do not know the different endings off by heart quite yet. That said, any learning you do now will come in very useful later on.

From words to sentences: checklist

In this section, you have met:

- the idea of an 'inflected' language
- the concept of gender (masculine, feminine and neuter), number (singular, plural) and case (in this section, we have concentrated on the nominative and accusative case)
- the nominative and accusative forms of the definite article (ὁ, ἡ, τό, etc.)
- using word shape (especially that of the definite article), to determine the case of a noun and its role in the sentence (e.g. subject or object)
- two common clause patterns:

  subject + transitive verb + direct object ('The dog chases the cat')

  subject + intransitive verb ('The flower dies').

And finally …

This marks the end of your preparatory work on ancient Greek. You are now ready to start working from a textbook. However, if you still feel you need to consolidate your work on the Greek alphabet or grammatical concepts, you may find it useful to read parts of this introduction again, repeat some of the activities or use the Introducing Ancient Greek site (http://www.open.ac.uk/Arts/greek/) to gain more practice with Greek words and letters.

---

[6] A short note on accents: Greek accents are complex and not normally covered in detail in a beginner's course. You may, however, have noticed that the accents on some words seem to 'change' – it is, for example, a general rule that an acute accent (´) at the end of a word becomes a grave accent (`) when another word follows (e.g. τήν, 'the' (fem. acc. sing.) but τὴν γυναῖκα, 'the woman' (acc.)). For the time being it is probably best to accept this simply as a quirk of classical Greek.

Answers to exercises

The following are the answers to the exercises contained in this booklet.

Exercise 1:

He chases her	→	She chases him
I chase them	→	They chase me
We chase you	→	You chase us

Note that the English word 'you' has the same form whether it is subject or object of 'chases'. This is typical of English nouns in general, but not Greek.

Exercise 2:

Your list should include at least the consonants θ (theta), φ (phi), χ (chi) and ψ (psi) and the long vowels η (eta) and ω (omega).

Exercise 3:

Your list may differ from ours, but it probably includes some of the following: γ (gamma), ν (nu), ρ (rho), σ (sigma), χ (chi), ω (omega). The capital letters you might have chosen are: Η (eta), Ρ (rho again), Υ (upsilon), Χ (chi again).

Exercise 4:

The Greek alphabet is for the most part in the same sequence as the Roman. This is a great help when looking up Greek vocabulary, but the position of ζ (zeta) and ξ (xi) might catch you out initially.

Exercise 5:

(Note that you are ***not*** expected to include accents for the purpose of exercises 5 and 6. They are, however, included in the answers to allow you to get used to seeing accented Greek.)

Ὅμηρος, Ξέρξης, Περικλῆς, Ἀριστοφάνης, Σωκράτης, Πλάτων, Ἰούλιος Καῖσαρ. These are the Greek names of Homer, Pericles, Xerxes, Aristophanes, Socrates, Plato and Julius Caesar.

Exercise 6:

Τάνταλος, Πέλοψ, Ἀτρεύς, Θυέστης, Ἀγαμέμνων, Μενέλαος, Ὀρέστης, Ἰφιγένεια, Ἠλέκτρα

Exercise 7:

	Greek	**transliteration**	**English name**	**role**
Ζεύς	Ζευς	Sdeus	Zeus	father of the gods
Ἥρα	Ἡρα	Hēra	Hera	wife and sister of Zeus
Δημήτηρ	Δημητηρ	Dēmētēr	Demeter	goddess of grain, and agriculture
Ἀφροδίτη	Ἀφροδιτη	Aphroditē	Aphrodite	goddess of love and beauty
Ἀπόλλων	Ἀπολλων	Apollōn	Apollo	god of the lyre, prophecy, medicine
Ἄρης	Ἀρης	Arēs	Ares	god of war
Ἄρτεμις	Ἀρτεμις	Artemis	Artemis	goddess of the hunt and childbirth
Ἀθήνη	Ἀθηνη	Athēnē	Athene/ Athena	goddess of wisdom and war
Διόνυσος	Διονυσος	Dionysos	Dionysos/ Dionysus	god of the grape and wine
Ἥφαιστος	Ἡφαιστος	Hēphaistos	Hephaistos/ Hephaestus	god of fire and blacksmiths
Ἑρμῆς	Ἑρμης	Hermēs	Hermes	the messenger god
Ποσειδῶν	Ποσειδων	Poseidōn	Poseidon	god of the sea

You will find that Greek names are not rendered consistently in English. Many of the most common names have been Latinised, and in some cases Anglicised. Thus 'Hephaestus' is used for the more correct 'Hephaistos', or 'Corinth' for 'Korinthos'.

Exercise 8:

1 *subject verbs* Hegestratos

2 Hegestratos *verbs* [*direct object*]

3 *subject* chases *direct object*

4 *subject* loves Hegestratos

5 *subject* waits