

The alphabet, the Egyptian way

All 28 letters in their four shapes, with the sounds people use in Cairo. Tracing, connecting, reading a real menu.

NAME _____

DATE _____

A. THE 28 LETTERS _____ * EGYPTIAN SOUND DIFFERS · † NEVER CONNECTS TO THE NEXT LETTER

Arabic runs right to left and most letters change shape with their position in the word. Say the sound out loud for every row; the example words come back in the next sheets.

NAME	ALONE	END	MIDDLE	START	SOUND IN EGYPTIAN	EXAMPLE
alif †	ا	ـا	ا	ا	long a (or carries a short vowel at the start)	باب bab door
ba	ب	ـب	ب	ب	b	بيت beit house
ta	ت	ـت	ت	ت	t	تمام tamam okay
tha *	ث	ـث	ث	ث	t or s , never "th"	ثلاثة talata three
gim *	ج	ـج	ج	ج	g as in "go", never "j"	جميل gamil beautiful
ha	ح	ـح	ح	ح	h , strong and breathy, from the throat	حلو helw sweet, nice
kha	خ	ـخ	خ	خ	kh as in Scottish "loch"	خلاص khalas done, enough
dal †	د	ـد	د	د	d	درس dars lesson
dhal *†	ذ	ـذ	ذ	ذ	d or z , never "th" as in "this"	ذهب dahab gold
ra †	ر	ـر	ر	ر	r , rolled	راجل ragil man
zay †	ز	ـز	ز	ز	z	زيت zeit oil
sin	س	ـس	س	س	s	سلام salam peace, hi
shin	ش	ـش	ش	ش	sh	شاي shay tea
sad	ص	ـص	ص	ص	s , heavy (mouth more open)	صباح sabah morning
dad	ض	ـض	ض	ض	d , heavy	ضيف deif guest
ta	ط	ـط	ط	ط	t , heavy	طيب tayyib fine, okay
za *	ظ	ـظ	ظ	ظ	z , heavy, never "th"	ظريف zarif charming
‘ayn	ع	ـع	ع	ع	‘, a squeezed "a" from deep in the throat	عربي ‘arabi Arabic
ghayn	غ	ـغ	غ	غ	gh , like a French "r"	غالي ghali expensive
fa	ف	ـف	ف	ف	f	فلوس filus money
qaf *	ق	ـق	ق	ق	‘, a glottal stop (the catch in "uh-oh"), not "q"	قهوة ‘ahwa coffee
kaf	ك	ـك	ك	ك	k	كتاب kitab book

lam	ل	ل	ل	ل	l	ليل leil night
mim	م	م	م	م	m	مصر masr Egypt
nun	ن	ن	ن	ن	n	نور nur light
ha	ه	ه	ه	ه	h, soft as in "hello"	هنا hena here
waw †	و	و	و	و	w, or long u	وقت wa't time
ya	ي	ي	ي	ي	y, or long i	يلا yalla let's go

* Five letters sound different in Cairo than in Modern Standard Arabic: ج = g, ق = ' (q survives only in a few formal or religious words), ث = t or s, ذ = d or z, ظ = heavy z. Learn the Egyptian sound first, that is what you will hear.

† Six letters (ا د ز ر و) never connect to the letter after them, so a word can have a gap in the middle: درس dars.

Three more signs you will see: ة ta marbuta, an "a" at the end of feminine words (قهوة 'ahwa) · ء hamza, the glottal stop written on its own (سؤال su'al, question) · ى alif maqsura, an "a" at the end of a word (على 'ala, on).

B. VOWELS & THE ARTICLE

Arabic writes the consonants and the long vowels. Short vowels are small marks above or below the letter, and everyday texts leave them out, so learn every word together with its sound.

Short vowels (marks)				Long vowels (letters)			
بَ	fatha, a	كَتَبَ	katab, he wrote	ا	long a	بَاب	bab, door
بِ	kasra, i	بِنْتَ	bint, girl	و	long u	نور	nur, light
بُ	damma, u	كُلْ	kul, eat!	ي	long i	فِيل	fil, elephant
بْ	sukun, none	بِنْتُ	bint: n has no vowel	وِي	ei, o	بَيْت، يَوْم	beit, yom (Cairo says ei, o)
بّ	shadda, double	إِزَّيْكَ	izzayyak				

The article: el-, not al-

"The" is ال in front of the word. Cairo says el-. Before a **moon letter** it stays el-: الكتاب el-kitab, القمر el-'amar (the moon), البيت el-beit.

Before a **sun letter** the l disappears and the first letter doubles: الشمس esh-shams (the sun), النور en-nur, السلام es-salam. The sun letters are the ones made with the tip of the tongue:

ت ث د ذ ر ز س ش ص ض ط ظ ل ن

C. EXERCISES

Ex. 1 Trace, then write

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Start on the right. Trace the grey letters, write the letter three times, then trace the word and write it twice. Say the sound every time.

		بيت				ب	ب
		جميل				ج	ج
		حلو				ح	ح
		خلاص				خ	خ
		عربي				ع	ع
		غالي				غ	غ
		كتاب				ك	ك
		هنا				ه	ه

Ex. 2 Connect the letters

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The letters are given one by one, right to left. Write the joined word on the line. Watch the † letters: they leave a gap.

1	ب ي ت	_____	house	5	ق ل ب	_____	heart
2	ك ت ا ب	_____	book	6	ج م ي ل	_____	beautiful
3	ش ا ي	_____	tea	7	س ل ا م	_____	peace
4	م ص ر	_____	Egypt	8	ع ر ب ي	_____	Arabic

Ex. 3 Read it the Egyptian way

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Write how a Cairene says each word, in Latin letters. Then circle every ج ق ث the word contains: these are the letters where the Egyptian sound differs.

- | | | | | | | | |
|---|-------|-------|-------|----|-------|-------|-------|
| 1 | جميل | _____ | ج ق ث | 6 | شكراً | _____ | ج ق ث |
| 2 | قهوة | _____ | ج ق ث | 7 | كتاب | _____ | ج ق ث |
| 3 | ثلاثة | _____ | ج ق ث | 8 | مصر | _____ | ج ق ث |
| 4 | جامعة | _____ | ج ق ث | 9 | جديد | _____ | ج ق ث |
| 5 | قلب | _____ | ج ق ث | 10 | سوق | _____ | ج ق ث |

Ex. 4 Sun or moon?

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Each word has the article. Tick sun or moon, then write the pronunciation the way you would say it (el-kitab, esh-shams).

- | | | | | | | | |
|---|--------|--|-------|---|--------|--|-------|
| 1 | الكتاب | ☐ sun ☐ moon | _____ | 5 | السلام | ☐ sun ☐ moon | _____ |
| 2 | الشمس | ☐ sun ☐ moon | _____ | 6 | البيت | ☐ sun ☐ moon | _____ |
| 3 | النور | ☐ sun ☐ moon | _____ | 7 | الدرس | ☐ sun ☐ moon | _____ |
| 4 | القهوة | ☐ sun ☐ moon | _____ | 8 | الراجل | ☐ sun ☐ moon | _____ |

Ex. 5 Read a real sign: the café menu

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A menu board in a Cairo café. Match each English item to the Arabic (write the letter) and write the price in your digits. Then read every line out loud: "shay, khamsa geneh".

قائمة الأسعار				
ج ٥	شاي A	1	Koshari	_____ geneh
ج ١٠	قهوة B	2	Water	_____ geneh
ج ١٥	عصير C	3	Tea	_____ geneh
ج ٣	مبة D	4	Fava beans	_____ geneh
ج ٢٠	كشري E	5	Juice	_____ geneh
ج ٨	فول F	6	Coffee	_____ geneh

The digits Egypt uses

٠ ١ ٢ ٣ ٤ ٥ ٦ ٧ ٨ ٩ 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

Numbers are written left to right, like yours: ١٥ is 15, not 51.

ج = geneh, the Egyptian pound · prices are made up

Done? Speaking check

- ☐ I said the Egyptian sound of every letter in section A out loud, in order, without looking at the sound column.
- ☐ I read all 10 words in Ex. 3 out loud with g and ', not j and q.
- ☐ I read the whole menu out loud, including the prices.

Answer key

For teachers and self-learners. Remove this page before handing the sheet out in class.

Ex. 1 Check the shapes against section A. The letter must sit on the line and the dots must be in the right place (one under ب, two above ت, three above ث, one under ج, one above خ, one above غ).

Ex. 2 عربي 8 · سلام 7 · جميل 6 · قلب 5 · مصر 4 · شاي 3 · كتاب 2 · بيت 1
(gaps after l in 2, 3 and 7, after r in 4 and 8)

Ex. 3 1 gamil (ج) · 2 'ahwa (ق) · 3 talata (ث twice) · 4 gam'a (ج) · 5 'alb (ق) · 6 shukran (none) · 7 kitab (none) · 8 masr (none) · 9 gidid (ج) · 10 su' (ق)

Ex. 4 1 moon, el-kitab · 2 sun, esh-shams · 3 sun, en-nur · 4 moon, el-'ahwa · 5 sun, es-salam · 6 moon, el-beit · 7 sun, ed-dars · 8 sun, er-ragil

Ex. 5 1 E, 20 · 2 D, 3 · 3 A, 5 · 4 F, 8 · 5 C, 15 · 6 B, 10. Read: shay khamsha geneh · 'ahwa 'ashara geneh · 'asir khamastashar geneh · mayya talata geneh · koshari 'eshrin geneh · ful tamanya geneh.

TEACHER'S NOTES

- Timing: about 45 minutes for the full sheet. Section A plus Ex. 1 works as a 20-minute first lesson; Ex. 3 to 5 as a reading session in the next one.
- Pronunciation is Cairo Egyptian throughout. If your students also learn Modern Standard Arabic, point out the five starred letters once and move on; mixing the two systems in one lesson confuses beginners more than it helps.
- The ق rule has exceptions: in formal, religious and some learned words Egyptians keep the q sound, for example القرآن el-qur'an, قانون qanun (law), القاهرة el-qahira (Cairo, though many say masr anyway). Treat these as vocabulary, not as a second rule.
- Cairenes often also assimilate el- before ل and ج (ek-kitab, eg-gam'a). Accept both answers in Ex. 4 if a student has heard it; teach the standard sun-letter rule first.
- Ex. 3 is the key exercise: it is where the Egyptian sounds get attached to the letters. Pair the tracing in Ex. 1 with saying the sound out loud; silent copying does not stick.

NEXT WORKSHEET

Worksheet 2: Greetings & meeting people. Hello, how are you, introducing yourself, with a café dialogue. Free at yallahspeak.com/worksheets/egyptian-arabic.

To hear every letter and word on this sheet in a real Egyptian voice and get feedback on your own pronunciation, try the Yallah Speak app (free to start, iOS and Android).