

25 verbs, three tenses

One pattern, three tenses plus 'am for "right now", the 25 most useful verbs of Damascus, six exercises. Say every form out loud.

NAME _____

DATE _____

A. ONE VERB, THREE TENSES

KATAB / YEKTOb · TO WRITE

Syrian verbs have a past form and a present form. Everything else is a small word or prefix in front: **b-** for habits, 'am for right now, **rah** for the future. Learn this grid and you can conjugate most verbs.

PERSON	PAST	PRESENT (B-)	FUTURE (RAH)	ARABIC (PRESENT)
ana I	katabt	bektob	rah ektob	بكتب
enta you (m)	katabt	btektob	rah tektob	بتكتب
enti you (f)	katabti	btektbi	rah tektbi	بتكتبي
huwwe he	katab	byektob	rah yektob	بيكتب
hiyye she	katbet	btektob	rah tektob	بتكتب
nehna we	katabna	mnektob	rah nektob	منكتب
ento you (pl)	katabtu	btektbu	rah tektbu	بتكتبوا
henne they	katabu	byektbu	rah yektbu	بيكتبوا

Notice: **we** takes **mn-**, not **b-** (mnektob, a Syrian and Lebanese hallmark). **enta** and **hiyye** share one present form (btektob); **ana** and **enta** share one past form (katabt). Context does the rest.

b- = habits, 'am = right now

beshrab 'ahwe kell yom = I drink coffee every day. Put 'am in front for what is happening now: 'am **bektob** = I'm writing (at the moment).

Drop **b-** after **baddi**, **lazem**, **fiyyi**: **baddi ektob**, **lazem ruh**, **fiyyi eshrab**?

rah = future

Put **rah** in front of the form without **b-**: **rah shufak bokra** = I'll see you tomorrow. **rah nruh 'ash-Sham bes-seif** = we're going to Damascus in the summer. The bare form asks for a decision: **ruh halla'**? = shall I go now?

Negation: just ma

Put **ma** in front of any verb: **ma katabt** (I didn't write), **ma bektob** (I don't write), **ma rah ektob** (I won't write). No -sh as in Cairo. Non-verbs take **mu**: **mu mnih**, **mu hon**, **mu Suri**.

COMMANDS

ADD -I TO A WOMAN, -U TO A GROUP

ruh! go (f: ruhi, pl: ruhu) · **ta'a!** come (f: ta'i) · **kol!** eat (f: koli) · **eshrab!** drink (f: eshrabi) · **sma'!** listen (f: sma'i) · **'ul!** say (f: 'uli) · with **la:** **la truh!** don't go.

B. SAY IT THE DAMASCUS WAY

Four sounds you hear in every verb

- **ق** is a glottal stop, the catch in "uh-oh", written ' : 'al (he said), **be'ra** (I read), **ma be'der** (I can't). Never a hard q in Damascus.
- **ج** sounds like the s in "pleasure": **ija** (he came) is "i-zha", **el-jawab** (the answer) is "el-zhawab".
- **b-** and **mn-** glue straight onto the verb with no vowel: say **btektob** as one word, "bt-tek-tob" is wrong. **'am** is short and unstressed: "'am-bektob".
- **rah** often shrinks to **ra** or **ha** in fast speech: "ra-ruh", "ha-shufak". Careful: **rah** on its own also means "he went".

Ex. 1 Complete the grid: shereb / yeshrab (to drink)

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Three forms are given in green. Fill in the rest with the pattern of katab above. Say each form as you write it.

PERSON	PAST	PRESENT (B-)	FUTURE (RAH)
ana	sherebt		
enta			
enti			
huwwe		byeshrab	
hiyye			
nehna			rah neshrab
ento			
henne			

A. THE 25 VERBS

• = IRREGULAR

Past and present are given for **huwwe** (he), the form dictionaries use. Build the others with the katab grid. Tick a verb once you can say both forms without looking.

ENGLISH	PAST (HE)	PRESENT (HE)	ARABIC	EXAMPLE
☐ go	rah •	biruh	بيروح	bruh 'ash-shoghl I go to work
☐ come	ija •	biji	بيجي	hiyye ijet mbareh she came yesterday
☐ do, make	'emel	bya'mel	بيعمل	shu 'am bta'mel? what are you doing?
☐ eat	akal •	byakol	بياكل	akalt shawarma I ate shawarma
☐ drink	shereb	byeshrab	بيشرب	beshrab matte I drink mate
☐ know	'eref	bya'ref	بيعرف	ma ba'ref I don't know
☐ want	kan baddo	baddo / badda	بدّو	baddi mayy I want water (no b-)
☐ say	'al •	bi'ul	بيقول	shu 'elt? what did you say?
☐ see	shaf •	bishuf	بيشوف	sheft el-film? did you see the film?
☐ speak, talk	haka •	byehki	بيحكي	behki 'arabi shwayy I speak a bit of Arabic
☐ understand	fehem	byefham	بيفهم	fhem! got it!
☐ learn	t'allam	byet'allam	بيتعلم	'am bet'allam shami I'm learning Syrian
☐ work	eshtaghal	byeshteghel	بيشتغل	wein bteshteghel? where do you work?
☐ live	sakan	byeskon	بيسكن	saken b-Berlin I live in Berlin
☐ sleep	nam •	binam	بينام	nemt bakkir I slept early
☐ wake up	fa' •	bifi'	بيفيق	bfi' es-sa'a sab'a I wake up at seven
☐ buy	eshtara	byeshtri	بيشتري	shtareit khebez I bought bread
☐ pay	dafa'	byedfa'	بيدفع	ana rah edfa' I'll pay
☐ take	akhad •	byakhod	بياخذ	khod taksi take a taxi
☐ give	'ata •	bya'ti	بيعطي	'tini el-hsab give me the bill
☐ love, like	habb	bihebb	بيحب	bhebb el-kebbe I love kibbeh
☐ read	'ara •	bye'ra	بيقرا	be'ra 'arabi I read Arabic

☐ write	katab	byektob	بيكتب	ktob esmak write your name
☐ walk, leave	meshi	byemshi	بيمشي	yalla nemshi come on, let's go
☐ can	'eder	bye'der	بيقدر	ma be'der I can't

The irregular ones •

- **Hollow verbs** (a long vowel in the middle) shorten it before a consonant ending: rah → **reht** (I went), shaf → **sheft**, nam → **nemt**, 'al → **'elt**, fa' → **fe't**. The present keeps the long vowel: bruh, bshuf, bnam, b'ul, bfi'.
- **akal, akhad** (eat, take) have a short present: bakol, bakhod. **ija** (come) is the odd one out: jit (I came), ijet (she came), present beji (I), biji (he).
- **Verbs ending in -a** (haka, 'ara, 'ata) take -it for ana and enta: **hkit** (I spoke), **'rit** (I read), **'tit** (I gave). eshtara takes -eit: **shtareit** (I bought).

C. EXERCISES

Ex. 2 Past, now or future?

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Tick P (past), N (now / habit) or F (future). The prefix tells you.

- | | |
|---|--|
| 1 rah shuf el-film bokra. ☐ P ☐ N ☐ F | 2 beshrab 'ahwe kell yom. ☐ P ☐ N ☐ F |
| 3 reht 'ash-Sham es-sene el-madye. ☐ P ☐ N ☐ F | 4 hiyye bteshteghel b-bank. ☐ P ☐ N ☐ F |
| 5 akalna kebbe mbareh. ☐ P ☐ N ☐ F | 6 rah nehki 'arabi ba'd sene. ☐ P ☐ N ☐ F |
| 7 'am neshrab matte halla'. ☐ P ☐ N ☐ F | 8 shtareit khebez es-sobh. ☐ P ☐ N ☐ F |

Ex. 3 Change the tense

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Rewrite the verb in the tense in brackets.

- bakol (past) → _____
- sheft (future) → _____
- rah ruh (habit) → _____
- hiyye katbet (habit) → _____
- bnam (past) → _____
- ento dafa'tu (future) → _____

Ex. 4 Say no

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Negate each sentence. ma or mu?

- bektob → _____
- rah ruh → _____
- 'andi wa't → _____
- baddi 'ahwe → _____
- huwwe saken hon → _____
- sheft → _____

D. DIALOGUE: SATURDAY MORNING IN DAMASCUS

Rami calls his friend Lina. Read the dialogue twice out loud with a partner, once as Rami and once as Lina.

Rami صباح الخير يا لينا! شو عملتي مبارح؟ **sabah el-kheir ya Lina! shu 'melti mbareh?**
Good morning, Lina! What did you do yesterday?

Lina رحت عالسوق مع أختي واشترينا كبة. **reht 'as-sou' ma' ekhti w shtareina kebbe.**
I went to the souq with my sister and we bought kibbeh.

Rami وهلق شو عم بتعملي؟ **w halla' shu 'am bta'mli?**
And what are you doing now?

Lina عم بشرب مة وعم بتعلم الأفعال. **'am beshrab matte w 'am bet'allam el-af'al.**
I'm drinking mate and learning verbs.

Rami بكرة رح نروح عالشغل سوا؟ **bokra rah nruh 'ash-shoghl sawa?**
Are we going to work together tomorrow?

Lina لا، بكرة ما رح روح. بدي نام! **la, bokra ma rah ruh. baddi nam!**
No, tomorrow I'm not going. I want to sleep!

Ex. 5 Find the tense in the dialogue

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Write one example from the dialogue for each.

A · A PAST VERB

B · SOMETHING HAPPENING RIGHT NOW ('AM)

C · A FUTURE (RAH)

D · A NEGATION

Ex. 6 Your day (pair work)

Write five sentences about yourself: two about yesterday (past), two about every day (b-), one about tomorrow (rah). Use at least five different verbs from the list.

1 · MBAREH (YESTERDAY)

2 · MBAREH

3 · KELL YOM (EVERY DAY)

4 · KELL YOM

5 · BOKRA (TOMORROW)

With a partner: ask **shu ‘melt mbareh?** (what did you do yesterday? to a woman: ‘melti) and **shu rah ta‘mel bokra?** (what will you do tomorrow? to a woman: ta‘mli). Note one answer each, then switch.

PARTNER · MBAREH

PARTNER · BOKRA

Done? Speaking check

- ☐ I said the whole katab grid out loud, all three tenses, and two sentences with ‘am.
- ☐ I can say past and present of 15 verbs from the list without looking.
- ☐ I told my partner (or my mirror) my five sentences from Ex. 6 without reading.

Answer key

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

Ex. 1 **Past:** sherebt · sherebt · sherebti · shereb · sherbet · sherebna · sherebtu · sherbu · **Present:** beshrab · bteshrab · bteshrabi · byeshrab · bteshrab · mneshrab · bteshrabu · byeshrabu · **Future:** rah eshrab · rah teshrab · rah teshrabi · rah yeshrab · rah teshrab · rah neshrab · rah teshrabu · rah yeshrabu. (Note the dropped vowel in sherbet and sherbu; accept shirib-, bitishrab and similar spellings too.)

Ex. 2 1 F · 2 N · 3 P · 4 N · 5 P · 6 F · 7 N · 8 P

Ex. 3 1 akalt · 2 rah shuf · 3 bruh · 4 hiyye btektob · 5 nemt · 6 ento rah tedfa' u

Ex. 4 1 ma bektob · 2 ma rah ruh · 3 ma 'andi wa't · 4 ma baddi 'ahwe · 5 huwwe mu saken hon · 6 ma sheft. ('andi and baddi behave like verbs and take ma; saken is a participle and takes mu.)

Ex. 5 a 'melti, reht or shtareina · b 'am bta'mli, 'am beshrab or 'am bet'allam · c rah nruh (or ma rah ruh) · d ma rah ruh

Ex. 6 Open answer. A model: 1 mbareh reht 'ash-shoghl · 2 akalt kebbe w sherebt shay · 3 kell yom bfi' es-sa'a sab'a · 4 'am bet'allam shami kell yom · 5 bokra rah shuf film ma' sahbi.

TEACHER'S NOTES

- Timing: about 50 minutes for the full sheet. It splits well into two lessons: tenses (A, B, Ex. 1 to 3) and negation, dialogue and speaking (Ex. 4 to 6).
- Drill the katab grid chorally before Ex. 1: you say the person, the class says all three forms. Then add 'am: you say "halla'!" (now) and the class answers with 'am bektob, 'am btektob and so on.
- Common mistakes: using bn- for "we" (bnektob is Palestinian and Jordanian; Damascus says mnektob), keeping b- after baddi and lazem (baddi bektob → baddi ektob), and adding the Egyptian -sh to negatives (ma bektobsh). In Damascus it is simply ma bektob.
- Learners from other dialects will hear variants: Lebanese often says lah instead of rah for the future and fiyye for "I can"; rural Syrian speakers may say ' as q or g. Accept them, but model the Damascus form.
- Transliteration follows common Damascus usage, not an academic standard: ' = glottal stop (the city ق), ' = 'ayn, j = ج said like the s in "pleasure", kh as in Scottish "loch", e and o for the short Syrian vowels.

NEXT WORKSHEET

Worksheet 5: 100 core words and 20 everyday Syrian expressions, grouped by topic, with a 7-day plan and self-test boxes. Free at yallahspeak.com/worksheets/syrian-arabic.

To tell an AI partner about your day in Syrian Arabic and get your verb forms corrected as you speak, try the Yallah Speak app (free to start, iOS and Android).