The Dutch alphabet: letter names and how to spell your name

The Dutch alphabet has the same 26 letters as the English one, in the same order, but most of them have different names: a is “ah”, e is “ay”, i is “ee” and j is “yay”. Two more things to know: ij, two letters that work as one, and the Dutch way of spelling on the phone, with a name for a letter, as in D van Dirk. Below are all the letter names with a rough guide for English speakers, ij and y, the spelling alphabet and the letters that are easy to mix up.

The 26 letters of the Dutch alphabet

You need the letter names more often than you might think: for your name at the doctor’s or the gemeente (town hall), an address, a license plate, an email address read out on the phone. The guide below compares each name with an English sound. It is only a rough guide, but it is close enough to be understood.

There is a pattern. Most consonants are said with “ay” after them, like be, de and pe, or with a short e in front, like ef, el and es. Ha and ka take “ah”. The vowels are said with their long sound.

The 26 letters of the Dutch alphabet, with their names and a rough guide for English speakers

a
Dutch name: a
Roughly like: “ah”, long, as in father
Example: avond (evening)

b
Dutch name: be
Roughly like: “bay”
Example: brood (bread)

c
Dutch name: ce
Roughly like: “say”
Example: centrum (center), cadeau (present)

d
Dutch name: de
Roughly like: “day”
Example: dag (day)

e
Dutch name: e
Roughly like: “ay”, as in day
Example: eten (to eat)

f
Dutch name: ef

Roughly like: “ef”
Example: fiets (bike)

g

Dutch name: ge
Roughly like: “khay”, with a rasp in the throat like the ch of Scottish loch
Example: goed (good)

h

Dutch name: ha
Roughly like: “hah”
Example: huis (house)

i

Dutch name: i
Roughly like: “ee”, as in see
Example: idee (idea)

j

Dutch name: je
Roughly like: “yay”: the Dutch j is the English y
Example: ja (yes)

k

Dutch name: ka
Roughly like: “kah”
Example: kaas (cheese)

l

Dutch name: el
Roughly like: “el”
Example: lezen (to read)

m

Dutch name: em
Roughly like: “em”
Example: melk (milk)

n

Dutch name: en
Roughly like: “en”
Example: nee (no)

o

Dutch name: o
Roughly like: “oh”, as in no
Example: oma (grandma)

p

Dutch name: pe
Roughly like: “pay”
Example: pan (pan)

q

Dutch name: ku
Roughly like: a k, then the Dutch u (see u)
Example: quiz (quiz)

r

Dutch name: er
Roughly like: “air”, short, with a rolled or throaty r
Example: rood (red)

s
Dutch name: es
Roughly like: “ess”
Example: school (school)

t
Dutch name: te
Roughly like: “tay”
Example: tafel (table)

u
Dutch name: u
Roughly like: no English sound: say “ee” with your lips rounded, as in French tu
Example: uur (hour)

v
Dutch name: ve
Roughly like: “vay”, in much of the Netherlands close to “fay”
Example: vis (fish)

w
Dutch name: we
Roughly like: a soft “vay”: the lower lip touches the upper teeth lightly
Example: water (water)

x
Dutch name: iks
Roughly like: “iks”, as in mix
Example: taxi (taxi)

y
Dutch name: i-grec, Griekse ij or ypsilon
Roughly like: “ee-khrek”, with the Dutch g; on its own often said as ij
Example: yoghurt (yogurt)

z
Dutch name: zet
Roughly like: “zet”
Example: zon (sun)

The c is an s before e and i (centrum) and a k before a, o and u (cadeau). Together with h it makes ch, the same rasp as the g: acht, lachen. How to make that sound, and the other sounds English does not have, is on Dutch pronunciation. The letters c, q, x and y are rare in native Dutch words and turn up mostly in loanwords and names, such as quiz, taxi and yoghurt.

Learning the names is the first step; the words come next. The 1,000 most common Dutch words are a good place to start, with a list you can download.

Vowels: why the name is the long sound

The names of the vowels a, e, i, o and u are their long sounds. In a word, Dutch shows long and short vowels in the spelling. A short vowel is written once in a closed syllable: man. A long vowel is written twice in a closed syllable (maan, moon) and once when the syllable ends in the vowel (ma-nen, moons). The long i is written ie: fiets.

Short and long vowels in Dutch spelling

a
Short: man (man)
Long, written twice: maan (moon)
Long, written once: manen (moons)

e
Short: bed (bed)
Long, written twice: been (leg)
Long, written once: benen (legs)

o
Short: pot (pot)
Long, written twice: boot (boat)
Long, written once: boten (boats)

u
Short: bus (bus)
Long, written twice: muur (wall)
Long, written once: muren (walls)

This is why spelling matters on the phone: man and maan differ in one letter. A Dutch speaker who spells a word with a double vowel says met twee a's (with two a's). The sounds themselves, long and short, are on Dutch pronunciation.

ij: two letters that work as one

Officially, ij is not a letter of its own: it is an i followed by a j, and dictionaries list words with ij under i. In practice it behaves as one letter. When a word with ij at the start takes a capital, both letters do: IJsselmeer, IJmuiden, IJsland. Ijsland, with a small j, is wrong. Old Dutch phone books even sorted ij together with y, between x and z.

The sound of ij is also written ei, and in standard Dutch the two sound the same. The difference is only in the spelling, and it can change the meaning: lijden is to suffer, leiden is to lead. So Dutch speakers name them apart: ij is de lange ij (the long ij) and ei is de korte ei (the short ei). Long and short describe the letters, not the sound: the j reaches below the line.

ij and ei: one sound, two spellings

ij
Name when you spell: lange ij
Roughly like: between the “ay” of day and the “eye” of eye
Examples: ijs (ice), wijn (wine), IJsselmeer

ei
Name when you spell: korte ei
Roughly like: the same sound
Examples: ei (egg), trein (train), klein (small)

Names use both spellings, and sometimes a y: Meijer, Meier and Meyer are versions of one surname. That is why you will hear a name spelled like this: Van Dijk, met een lange ij (Van Dijk, with the long ij).

y: i-grec, Griekse ij or ypsilon

The y has three names. In the Netherlands most people say i-grec (“ee-khrek”, from French i grec) or Griekse ij (Greek ij); in Belgium ypsilon is more usual. On its own, as in de y-as (the y-axis), many Dutch speakers simply say ij.

In words, the y comes mostly from other languages and keeps its sound from there: a j in yoghurt, an ie in baby. In old family names it often stands for ij, as in Meyer.

Spelling your name on the phone

At the doctor’s, the gemeente or a delivery company you will hear Kunt u dat spellen? (Could you spell that?). Dutch speakers spell with the letter names above, and for a letter that is easy to mishear they add a word: D van Dirk, V van Victor (D as in Dirk, V as in Victor). A call can go like this:

- **Wat is uw achternaam?** What is your surname?
- **Silva.**
- **Kunt u dat spellen?** Could you spell that?
- **S van Simon, I van Izaak, L van Lodewijk, V van Victor, A van Anton.**

You do not need a word for every letter. Many people use one only where a letter could be misheard: Silva, met een V van Victor.

The Dutch spelling alphabet

The words come from the traditional Dutch telephone alphabet, the telefoonalfabet or spelalfabet: mostly men’s first names, plus three place names. No law sets it, and for a few letters other names are heard too, but this is the list most people in the Netherlands know.

Belgium uses a list of its own.

The Dutch spelling alphabet

A
Word: Anton
Also heard: Anna

B
Word: Bernard
Also heard: Bernhard

C
Word: Cornelis

D
Word: Dirk

E
Word: Eduard

F
Word: Ferdinand

G
Word: Gerard

H
Word: Hendrik

I
Word: Izaak

J
Word: Jan

K
Word: Karel

L
Word: Lodewijk

M
Word: Maria
Also heard: Marie

N
Word: Nico

O
Word: Otto

P
Word: Pieter

Q
Word: Quotiënt
Also heard: Quirinus

R
Word: Rudolf

S
Word: Simon

T
Word: Teunis
Also heard: Tinus, Theodoor

U
Word: Utrecht

V
Word: Victor

W
Word: Willem

X
Word: Xantippe

IJ
Word: IJmuiden
Also heard: IJsbrand

Y
Word: Ypsilon

Z
Word: Zaandam
Also heard: Zacharias

Learn the ones for the letters in your own name first, and the ones for the letters that sound alike: V van Victor, W van Willem, F van Ferdinand, E van Eduard, I van Izaak.

Phrases for spelling

Phrases for spelling on the phone

Kunt u dat spellen? · Could you spell that?
Hoe schrijf je dat? · How do you write that?
Hoe schrijft u dat? · The same, polite.
Ik spel het even. · I'll spell it for you.
Met een hoofdletter. · With a capital letter.
Met twee o's. · With two o's.
Met een lange ij. · With the ij spelling (not ei).
Met een korte ei. · With the ei spelling (not ij).
e met trema · an e with two dots, as in België
Alles aan elkaar. · All one word, no spaces.
apenstaartje · @ in an email address (literally: monkey's little tail)
punt · dot
streepje · hyphen (-)
liggend streepje · underscore (_)

An email address is read out with the letter names: a.silva@voorbeeld.nl is a punt silva apenstaartje voorbeeld punt en el. Phone numbers follow their own habits, digit by digit or in pairs: see Dutch numbers. For the rest of the call, from Met Anna (Anna speaking) to Kunt u mij terugbellen?, see the basic Dutch phrases.

Letters English speakers mix up

Some Dutch letter names sound like a different English letter. When a Dutch speaker spells to you, these are the ones to listen for:

Dutch letter names that sound like another English letter

a (“ah”) · R, as British English says it
e (“ay”) · A
i (“ee”) · E
ij · I (“eye”)
we (a soft “vay”) · V

- **E and i.** It works the other way too. Say the English E (“ee”) and a Dutch listener writes i; say the English A (“ay”) and they write e. Spell with the Dutch names: e is “ay”, i is “ee”.

- **I is not “eye”.** The English I is close to the Dutch ij, so a name with an i can come back with ij. Say “ee”, or add I van Izaak.

- **J is “yay”.** The Dutch j is the sound of the English y, in ja and jij, and its name is je. The English “jay” is not a Dutch letter name.

- **G is a sound in the throat.** Ge is “khay”, with the rasp of goed; in the south and in Belgium it is softer. The English “jee” is not a Dutch letter name.

- **H is “hah”.** Not “aitch”. And an h at the start of a word is always said: huis, hallo.

- **V and w.** The Dutch w is softer than the English one: the lower lip touches the upper teeth lightly, so water can sound like “vater” to English ears. And in much of the Netherlands a v at the start of a word sounds close to an f: vis can sound like “fis”. On the phone, add the word: V van Victor, W van Willem, F van Ferdinand.

See it in a text

The free texts on this site show the alphabet at work: the same sound spelled two ways, a name with two capitals, and the first question of a call like this. Each sentence below is quoted word for word from its text.

- **Piep, piep, piep. Wei scant de rijst, de appels en de kip.** Beep, beep, beep. Wei scans the rice, the apples and the chicken. (Wei and rijst: the same sound, spelled ei and ij. Controle, A1)

- **Aan de andere kant zie je een meer. Dat meer heet het IJsselmeer.** On the other side you see a lake. That lake is called the IJsselmeer. (Two capitals: IJ. De Afsluitdijk, A2)

- **‘Wat is de naam van uw zoon?’ vraagt Sandra.** “What is your son’s name?” Sandra asks. (A call to the doctor’s practice. Bij de huisarts, A2)

Read next

Bij de huisarts is a short A2 story with a glossary: Amir calls the doctor's practice because his son has an earache and a fever, and the assistant asks for the name, the date of birth and the temperature before she gives him an appointment. It is the kind of call where you need the alphabet and the numbers. If A2 is still a step too far, start with the free A1 texts.

For a whole book at the beginner level, Fairy Tales is the A1 volume of the Dutch Readers series: eight famous fairy tales, from Little Red Riding Hood to The Little Mermaid, retold in easy Dutch, with a glossary and questions after every tale. It is out now as a paperback.

How many letters are in the Dutch alphabet?
Twenty-six, the same as in English and in the same order. The y is the 25th. The combination ij works as one letter in practice, but officially it is an i and a j.

Is ij one letter in Dutch?
Officially no: it is i plus j, and dictionaries list ij words under i. In practice it acts as one letter. Both letters take the capital at the start of a name (IJsselmeer, IJmuiden), and when Dutch speakers spell it they call it de lange ij, to tell it apart from ei, which sounds the same.

What is the letter y called in Dutch?
In the Netherlands mostly i-grec or Griekse ij, in Belgium usually ypsilon. On its own, as in de y-as, many people simply say ij.

How do Dutch people spell a name on the phone?
With the Dutch letter names, adding a word for any letter that is easy to mishear: D van Dirk, V van Victor, IJ van IJmuiden. The words come from the traditional Dutch spelling alphabet, mostly first names, which starts Anton, Bernard, Cornelis, Dirk.