

The Alphabet • Yr Wyddor

The Welsh alphabet is both similar to and different from the English alphabet. When learning the letters and their pronunciations, sometimes it is more helpful to pretend it is a completely different alphabet like Cyrillic (А Б В Г Д Е Ё etc.) or Greek (Α Β Γ Δ Ε Ζ Η etc.) and be delighted by the similarities rather than dismayed by the differences. There are 29 letters in the Welsh alphabet:

A B C CH D DD E F FF G NG H I J L LL M N O P PH R RH S T TH U W Y

Digraphs. The main difference from English is that certain letters are *digraphs*, one letter alphabetically but composed of two separate characters. The digraphs are **CH, DD, FF, NG, LL, PH, RH, and TH**, and in Welsh they are alphabetized as a single letter.

Correct Welsh Alphabetization

ci	'dog'
cyfiethu	'translate'
cyngor	'council'
cyhyr	'muscle'
chi	'you'
dagr	'tear'
danadl	'nettles'
dangos	'show'*
dant	'tooth'
dod	'come'
dŵr	'water'
ddoe	'yesterday'

English Alphabetization; Incorrect for Welsh

chi	'you'
ci	'dog'
cyfiethu	'translate'
cyhyr	'muscle'
cyngor	'council'
dagr	'tear'
danadl	'nettles'
dangos	'show'*
dant	'tooth'
ddoe	'yesterday'
dod	'come'
dŵr	'water'

*Note **NG** in particular, both because it falls between **G** and **H** alphabetically and because in a handful of words, such as **dangos** 'show', what looks like the single letter **NG** is really two letters, **N + G**, and so it is alphabetized between **danadl** 'nettles' and **dant** 'tooth'.

Other letters. The letters **K, Q, V, X, and Z** only appear in borrowed words, but when they do they take their usual place in the alphabet. Other combinations are not considered letters even though they make unique sounds (see below): **Ngh, Mh, Nh, Si, Ts, and Tsi.**

Vowels. There are seven vowels in Welsh. **A E I** and **O** are exactly the same as most of the languages that use the Latin alphabet, such as German, Italian, or Spanish. Note that here English is the unusual language! The other three vowels are **U, W, and Y.** **W** works exactly the way **U** does in most European languages, such as German, Italian, or Spanish. **U** and **Y** are discussed below. As in other languages, vowels can be long or short. Welsh uses some accents, primarily the circumflex, which is used to mark long vowels: **Â Ê Î Ô Û Ŵ Ŷ.** The acute is used the same way as in Spanish, to mark stress on the rare occasion where that is necessary.

Accent. Welsh has both a *stress accent* and a *pitch accent*, which gives the language its characteristic lilt. The stress accent goes on the penultimate (second-to-last) syllable in almost every word. There are a few exceptions. *Cymraeg, yma, yna,* and *yno* are all stressed on the final syllable, as are words with an acute accent (*glanháu*, 'to clean'). The pitch accent goes on the final syllable, spoken at slightly a higher pitch. As English does not have a pitch accent, learners sometimes hear the syllable with the pitch accent as the stressed syllable. (Singers do not need to worry about this.)

Long and short vowels. This is horrifically complicated for Welsh and you'd do well to skip this paragraph. In general, Welsh vowels are short except in stressed syllables, and even those can be shortened if they are not the main stressed word in a phrase. Long vowels are found in final syllables when they end in the following single vowels, diphthongs, or most single consonants: **A, AE, B, CH, D, DD, E, F, FF, G, I, LL, O, OE, S, TH, U, W, WY, Y,** and also the **I** or **U** in words ending in **IL, UL, IN, UN, IR,** or **UR**; also **dyn** meaning "man" and **hen.** It might be easier to list the exceptions: vowels are short before **C, L, M, P, R,** and **T,** except **I** and **U** which are only short before **C, M, P,** and **T.** Otherwise, long vowels are indicated with a circumflex (*to bach* in Welsh): **Â, Ê, Î, Ô, Û, Ŵ, Ŷ.** A few common exceptions are words borrowed from English and a few extremely common words such as **(n)a, (n)ag, (n)ac, beth, nes, os, rhag,** and the monosyllables with obscure **Y** (see below). A number of further exceptions are listed [here](#).

Welsh Pronunciation

Letter	= English	Similar to English	Different from English / Notes
A		As in <i>father</i> ; like Spanish or French A	
B	✓		
C		As English K (<i>cat</i>). Never like S or CH	Technically, this is the unaspirated 'C' as in <i>scat</i> rather than the aspirated 'C' in <i>cat</i> . Hold your hand in front of your mouth as you say both words: you want the one with no little puff of air, as in French or Spanish hard C.
CH			KH as in Scottish <i>loch</i> or German <i>bach</i>
D	✓		
DD		As English TH in <i>then</i> . Never as TH in <i>thin</i> !	See also TH
E		As in <i>bet</i> or <i>ay</i> in <i>day</i> ; like Spanish or French E	
F			V. Mnemonic: the English word <i>of</i>
FF	✓		F. Mnemonic: the English word <i>off</i>
G		As English G (<i>get</i>). Never like J or ouGH	
NG		As English <i>singer</i> . Rarely like <i>finger</i> .	The sound in <i>finger</i> is represented with N + G as two letters, but it looks the same when written. Unlike English, NG can begin words.
NGh			As above, pronounced simultaneously with H (unvoiced). In this case, never like <i>finger</i> .
H	✓		
I		As <i>big machine</i> or as Y; like Spanish or French I	As a vowel, like Spanish or French I; as a consonant (usually next to the vowels A, E, or O) like English Y
J	✓		
L	✓		
LL			To make this sound, 1) place your tongue exactly where it goes to make an English L, and 2) hiss (unvoiced)
M	✓		
Mh			As above, pronounced simultaneously with H (unvoiced)
N	✓		

Nh			As above, pronounced simultaneously with H (unvoiced)
O		As in <i>dog bone</i> ; like Spanish or Italian <i>O</i>	
P	✓		Technically, this is the unaspirated 'P' as in <i>spot</i> rather than the aspirated 'P' in <i>pot</i> . Hold your hand in front of your mouth as you say both words: you want the one with no little puff of air, as in French or Spanish P.
PH	✓		Exactly the same as FF.
R			A rolled R, as in Scots English or Spanish RR.
RH			As above, pronounced simultaneously with H (unvoiced)
S	✓		Some dialects pronounce S as SH in some positions.
Si			As English SH; sometimes written Sh.
T	✓		Technically, this is the unaspirated 'T' as in <i>stop</i> rather than the aspirated 'T' in <i>top</i> . Hold your hand in front of your mouth as you say both words: you want the one with no little puff of air, as in French or Spanish T.
Ts			As English TS or (when final) CH
Tsi			As English CH
TH		As English TH in <i>thin</i> . Never as TH in <i>then</i> !	See also DD
U			South Wales: Just like I North Wales: Just like Y ₂ (most dialects)
W			As a consonant, just like English; as a vowel, like <i>oo</i> in <i>food</i> , though it can be short or long.
Y	Y ₁ In final syllables and monosyllables (one-syllable words). This is called "clear Y."		South Wales: Just like I and U. North Wales: Just like U. An unrounded high central vowel; as French U is to English OO, so Welsh Y is to English I
	Y ₂ , called "obscure Y". Elsewhere, and in the words common words <i>dy</i> , <i>fy</i> , <i>myn</i> , <i>syr</i> , <i>y</i> , <i>yng</i> , <i>ym</i> , <i>yn</i> , and <i>yr</i> , the verbal forms <i>dyn</i> and <i>dych</i> , and the rare words <i>yd</i> and <i>ys</i>		A short u-sound [ə] (some dialects [ʌ]) as in English <i>uh</i> or the <i>u</i> in <i>puzzle</i> . When stressed, as in English <i>put</i> [ʊ].

Diphthongs	Sounds Similar to English	Sounds Different from English / Notes
AE	as English <i>eye</i>	
AI	as English <i>eye</i>	
AU	as English <i>eye</i>	Except as a plural ending, where it is like A in North Welsh and E in South Welsh
AW	as <i>ou</i> in English <i>house</i>	
EI		Close to <i>i</i> in <i>night</i> , the schwa sound <i>uh</i> (ə) plus <i>ee</i>
EU		Close to <i>i</i> in <i>night</i> , the schwa sound <i>uh</i> (ə) plus <i>ee</i>
EW		<i>e</i> in <i>pet</i> plus <i>oo</i> in <i>moose</i>
IW		<i>i</i> in <i>pit</i> plus <i>oo</i> in <i>moose</i>
OE	As <i>oy</i> in <i>toy</i>	
OI	As <i>oy</i> in <i>toy</i>	
OU	As <i>oy</i> in <i>toy</i>	
OW	As <i>o</i> in <i>phone</i>	This is more like the English long <i>o</i> , with a final <i>w</i> glide, while Welsh long O is more like Spanish, and Italian.
UW		<i>i</i> in <i>pit</i> plus <i>oo</i> in <i>moose</i> (North: Welsh U + Welsh W)
WY ₁		As Spanish <i>uy</i> in <i>muy</i> , <i>oo</i> + <i>ee</i> ; sometimes written <i>ŵy</i>
WY ₂	As English <i>we</i>	Sometimes written <i>ŵy</i>
YW ₁		<i>i</i> in <i>pit</i> plus <i>oo</i> in <i>moose</i>
YW ₂		The schwa sound <i>uh</i> (ə) plus <i>oo</i>

In general, North Welsh U and Y retain their values, and in South Welsh they merge with I. For further reference, this [Wikipedia page](#) give the International Phonetic Alphabet symbols, and you can hear those symbols pronounced [here](#).

Mutations. The dictionary form of a Welsh word can change in three ways:

- 1) By adding endings, as in English: *cath* 'cat' becomes *cathod*, 'cats'
- 2) By changing the middle vowels, as in English: *troed* 'foot' becomes *traed* 'feet'. (Less common.)
- 3) Unlike English, Welsh changes the beginning of words through a series of changes called *mutations*. *Cath* can be *gath*, *chath*, or *nghath* depending on the grammatical environment. A table of these mutations is below, followed by a reverse listing to help you look up mutated words.

Root Consonant	Lenition / Soft Mutation	Nasal Mutation	Aspiration	Mixed
P	B	Mh	PH	PH
T	D	Nh	TH	TH
C	G	NGh	CH	CH
B	F	M	<i>no mutation</i>	F
D	DD	N	<i>no mutation</i>	DD
G	— (<i>the G is dropped</i>)	NG	<i>no mutation</i>	— (<i>dropped</i>)
M	F	<i>no mutation</i>	<i>no mutation</i>	F
LL	L	<i>no mutation</i>	<i>no mutation</i>	L
RH	R	<i>no mutation</i>	<i>no mutation</i>	R

If you see a word beginning with:

A
B
C
CH
D
DD
E
F
FF
G
NG
H
I
J

Look in the dictionary under:

A-, GA-
B-, P-
C-, CH-
C-, G- (*only gan & gyda*)
D-, DD-, T-
D-, DD-
E-, GE-
B-, F-, M-
FF-
C-, G-
C-, G-,
EH-, H-
GI-, I-
J-

If you see a word beginning with:

L
M
N
O
P
PH
R
RH
S
T
TH
U
W
Y

Look in the dictionary under:

GL-, L-, LL-
B-, M-, P-
D-, N-, T-
GO-, O-
P-
P-, PH-
GR-, R-, RH-
RH-
S-, YS-
T-
T-, TH-
GU-, U-
GW-, W-
GY-, Y-