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Korean for First-Time Travellers

Lesson 1: learn to read Hangul from scratch, in a single sitting
— no memorisation of hundreds of words, just the letters,
sounds and building blocks you need to start decoding real
Korean signs and menus.

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Introduction: A Short History of the Korean Language

Korean, or **한국어 (hangugeo)**, has a long and fascinating history. While the exact origins of the Korean language are still debated by linguists, Korean developed on the Korean Peninsula over many centuries.

For much of Korean history, educated people used **Classical Chinese (한문, hanmun)** for writing. This was difficult for ordinary Koreans because the Chinese writing system was not designed specifically to represent the Korean language.

In **1443**, King **Sejong the Great**, together with scholars at the royal court, created a new writing system specifically for Korean. It was called **훈민정음 (Hunminjeongeum)**, meaning roughly "*The Correct Sounds for the Instruction of the People*." It was officially introduced in **1446**.

Today, this alphabet is known as **한글 (Hangul)**.

Hangul was designed to be logical and relatively easy to learn. Its letters represent the sounds of spoken Korean, and individual letters are combined into neat **syllable blocks**.

For example:

ㅎ + ㅣ + ㄴ = 한

ㄱ + ㅏ + ㄱ = 국

Together:

한국 = Hanguk = Korea

Over the centuries, Korean vocabulary was heavily influenced by **Classical Chinese**, and later by languages such as Japanese and English. Modern Korean contains many English loanwords, particularly in areas such as technology, food, fashion, entertainment and popular culture.

Today, Korean is spoken primarily in **South Korea and North Korea**, as well as by Korean-speaking communities around the world. Although the two Koreas share the same linguistic roots, their vocabulary, spelling conventions and some aspects of pronunciation have developed differently since the peninsula was divided.

For a traveller, there is one particularly important thing to remember:

Hangul is not Chinese.

Hangul is Korea's own writing system, created specifically to represent the Korean language.

And fortunately for beginners, you can learn the basics of Hangul surprisingly quickly.



Lesson 1 — Learning to Read Hangul

Your first Korean lesson

Welcome to your first Korean lesson!

The goal of this lesson isn't to make you fluent. Instead, we're going to give you the foundation you need to start **reading Korean for yourself**.

By the end of this lesson, you should be able to:

- Recognise the basic Korean vowels and consonants
- Write the basic letters
- Understand how Korean syllable blocks work
- Read simple Korean syllables
- Read your first Korean words
- Recognise some useful words when travelling

Your first goal

Don't worry about speaking perfectly yet.

Your first goal is simply to look at Korean and think:

"I know how to sound this out."

1. How Hangul works

Korean is written using individual letters, just like English.

However, instead of writing the letters in a long line, Korean groups them together into **syllable blocks**.

For example:

한

This is one syllable block made from three letters:

ㅎ + ㅣ + ㄴ = 한

And:

국

is:

ㄱ + ㅓ + ㄱ = 국

Put them together:

한국

한국 = **Korea**

So don't think of 한 as one mysterious character.

Think:

ㅎ + ㅣ + ㄴ → 한

Once you understand this idea, Hangul becomes much easier.

2. Your first vowels

Let's start with six basic vowels.

Letter	Approximate sound
ㅏ	ah
ㅑ	uh
ㅓ	oh
ㅕ	oo
ㅡ	eu
ㅣ	ee

The English sounds above are only approximations. Korean has some sounds that don't have an exact English equivalent.

Practice 1 — Copy the vowels

Write each one **5 times**:

ㅏ ㅏ ㅏ ㅏ ㅏ

ㅑ ㅑ ㅑ ㅑ ㅑ

ㅓ ㅓ ㅓ ㅓ ㅓ

ㅕ ㅕ ㅕ ㅕ ㅕ

ㅡ ㅡ ㅡ ㅡ ㅡ

ㅣ ㅣ ㅣ ㅣ ㅣ

Don't rush.

Try to make each letter roughly the same size.

3. A useful vowel pattern

There is a simple pattern that helps you remember several Korean vowels.

ㅏ → ㅑ

Adding the extra line gives you a **y** sound.

So:

ㅏ = **ah**

ㅑ = **yah**

The same pattern appears here:

ㅓ → ㅕ

ㅓ = **uh**

ㅕ = **yuh**

And:

ㅗ → ㅛ

ㅗ = **oh**

ㅛ = **yo**

And:

ㅜ → ㅠ

ㅜ = **oo**

ㅠ = **yoo**



Practice 2

Complete the pairs:

ㅏ → _____

ㅓ → _____

$\perp \rightarrow$ _____

$\top \rightarrow$ _____

Answers

$\exists, \forall, \bot, \top$

4. Your first consonants

Now let's learn six basic consonants.

Letter	Approximate sound
ㄱ	g/k
ㄴ	n
ㄷ	d/t
ㄹ	r/l
ㅁ	m
ㅂ	b/p

Again, these are only approximate English equivalents.

For now, focus on recognising the letters.

Practice 3 – Write the consonants

Write each consonant five times:

ㄱ ㄱ ㄱ ㄱ ㄱ

ㄴ ㄴ ㄴ ㄴ ㄴ

ㄷ ㄷ ㄷ ㄷ ㄷ

ㄹ ㄹ ㄹ ㄹ ㄹ

ㅁ ㅁ ㅁ ㅁ ㅁ

ㅂ ㅂ ㅂ ㅂ ㅂ

5. Let's build your first syllables

Now comes the fun part.

We're going to combine a consonant with a vowel.

Take:

ㄱ + ㅏ

Put them together:

가

This sounds approximately like **ga**.

Now try:

ㄴ + ㅏ = 나

ㄷ + ㅏ = 다

ㅁ + ㅏ = 마

ㅂ + ㅏ = 바

So we get:

가 나 다 라 마 바

Try reading them aloud.

6. Your first reading exercise

Don't look at the answers immediately.

Try to sound these out:

가

나

다

마

바

너

도

무

미

Answers

가 → ga

나 → na

다 → da

마 → ma

바 → ba

너 → neo

도 → do

무 → mu

미 → mi

The important thing isn't perfect pronunciation.

The important thing is that you can **decode the letters**.

7. How Korean syllable blocks are arranged

Korean syllables can be arranged in different ways depending on the vowel.

For example:

Consonant + vertical vowel

ㄱ + ㅣ = 가

ㄴ + ㅣ = 나

The consonant goes on the **left** and the vowel goes on the **right**.

Consonant + horizontal vowel

ㄱ + ㅏ = 고

ㄴ + ㅏ = 노

Here the consonant goes **above** the vowel.

Don't worry about memorising complicated rules.

For now, remember:

Korean letters are arranged into a square-shaped syllable block.

8. Adding a final consonant

A syllable can also have a consonant at the bottom.

For example:

한

This is:

ㅎ + ㅏ + ㄴ = 한

The ㄴ goes underneath.

This final consonant is called a 받침 (**batchim**).

You don't need to master batchim pronunciation yet. For now, simply learn to recognise it.

More examples

밥

ㅂ + ㅏ + ㅅ

한

ㅎ + ㅏ + ㄴ

물

ㅁ + ㅓ + ㄴ

9. Your first real Korean words

Now that you understand syllable blocks, let's read some real words.

나

I / me in some contexts.

너

you in informal speech.

나무

tree

Break it down:

나 + 무

바다

sea

Break it down:

바 + 다

사람

person

Break it down:

사 + 람

한국

Korea

Break it down:

한 + 국

10. Reading Challenge ★

Try reading these **without looking at the romanisation**.

1. 나

2. 너

3. 나무

4. 바다

5. 사람

6. 한국

7. 마마

8. 가나

Write down what you think each one says.

Then check your answers.

Answers

1. 나 — na

2. 너 — neo

3. 나무 — tree

4. 바다 — sea

5. 사람 — person

6. 한국 — Korea

7. 마마 — mama

8. 가나 — Ghana

Notice something important:

You are already beginning to **read Korean without relying entirely on English letters.**

That's exactly what we want.

11. Useful Korean travel words

You don't need to know hundreds of Korean words before travelling.

Start with these:

Korean	Meaning
한국	Korea
서울	Seoul
사람	person
물	water
커피	coffee
밥	rice / meal
화장실	bathroom
지하철	subway
호텔	hotel
식당	restaurant

You will gradually start recognising these on signs, menus, maps and around the city.

12. Writing practice

Now try writing these words yourself.

한국

Write it three times:

한국 한국 한국

Now break it apart:

한 + 국

And then break the syllables into letters:

ㅎ + ㅏ + ㄴ

ㄱ + ㅏ + ㄱ

사람

사람 사람 사람

Break it apart:

사 + 람

물

물 물 물

Break it apart:

ㅁ + ㅏ + ㄹ

밥

밥 밥 밥

Break it apart:

ㅂ + ㅊ + ㅂ

서울

서울 서울 서울

Try to identify the individual syllable blocks:

서 + 울

As you practise, try **not to copy Korean words simply as pictures**.

Instead, think about the letters inside each block.

13. Mini Quiz

Question 1

What letters make 가?

A. ㄴ + ㅏ B. ㄱ + ㅏ C. ㄱ + ㅓ

Question 2

What vowel is this?

ㅓ

A. ah B. oh C. oo

Question 3

Which word means **water**?

A. 밥 B. 물 C. 사람

Question 4

How many syllable blocks are in:

한국

A. 1 B. 2 C. 3

Question 5

Break this word into its syllable blocks:

사람

Answer:

사 + 램

Quiz Answers

1. B — ㄱ + ㅌ

2. C — ㅌ

3. B — 물

4. B — 2

5. 사 + 램

14. Your first Hangul homework

Before moving to Lesson 2, practise for **10–15 minutes**.

Part A — Write

Write each vowel five times:

ㅏ ㅑ ㅓ ㅕ ㅡ ㅣ

Write each consonant five times:

ㄱ ㄴ ㄷ ㄹ ㅁ ㅂ

Part B — Build

Write these syllables:

가 나 다 라 마 바

고 노 도 로 모 보

구 누 두 루 무 부

Try to read each one aloud.

Part C — Read

Try to read:

나무

바다

사람

한국

물

밥

Don't look up the pronunciation until you've had a chance to work them out yourself.

Part D — Decode

Look at a Korean sign, menu or phone screen.

Find **three Korean syllable blocks**.

You don't need to know what they mean.

Instead, try to identify the individual letters inside each block.

For example:

한

→ ᄒ + ㅣ + ㄴ

Lesson 1 Goal

If you can now look at:

한국

and understand that it is:

한 + 국

and that each block is made from individual letters, you've already made a great start.

You **do not need to memorise every Korean letter in one day.**

The best way to learn Hangul is:

Learn a few letters → build syllables → read words → write them → repeat.

In the next lesson, we'll add more consonants and vowels and start reading **real Korean words and simple travel phrases.**