

Handout 1 - Anishinaabemowin Alphabet

Ojibwe is most often used with the Double Vowel system. The seven vowels, seventeen consonants, and the glottal stop make up the Ojibwe alphabet.

a, aa, b, ch, d, e, g, h, ', i, ii, j, k, m, n, o, oo, p, s, sh, t, w, y, z, zh

The consonants ch, sh, and zh are treated as one letter. The glottal stop is an important part of Ojibwe and when we use it, it is almost as if we cut our breath short very quickly.

Sometimes it is easier to understand the Ojibwe sounds when we compare them to what we know in English.

Ojibwe letter	Phonetic	Ojibwe examples	English equivalents
a	[ə]~[ʌ]	<i>agim</i> - 'count someone!' <i>namadabi</i> - 'sits down' <i>baashkizigan</i> - 'gun'	about
aa	[a:]	<i>aagim</i> - 'snowshoe' <i>maajaa</i> - 'goes away'	father
e	[e:]~[ɛ:]	<i>emikwaan</i> - 'spoon' <i>awenen</i> - 'who' <i>anishinaabe</i> - 'person, Indian, Ojibwe'	café
i	[ɪ]	<i>inini</i> - 'man' <i>mawi</i> - 'cries'	pin
ii	[i:]	<i>niin</i> - 'I' <i>googii</i> - 'dives'	seen
o	[o]~[ʊ]	<i>ozid</i> - 'someone's foot' <i>anookii</i> - 'works' <i>nibo</i> - 'dies, is dead'	obey, book
oo	[o:]~[u:]	<i>oodena</i> - 'town' <i>anookii</i> - 'hires' <i>goon</i> - 'snow' <i>bimibatoo</i> - 'runs along'	boat, boot

The consonants are represented below:

b – as in “big”

p – as in “potato”

ch – as in the “tch” in “stitch”

j – as in “jump”

d – as in “do”

t – as in “pit”

g – as in “goose,” and following an “n” sounds the same as “song”

k – as the “ck” in “sick”

h – not a common sound but the same as “h” in “hello,” some who write Anishinaabemowin also use it for a glottal stop, as in the stop on “uh-” and “oh-” in “uh oh”

m – as in “man”

n – as in “name”

s – as in “miss”

z – as in “zipper”

sh – as in “bush”

zh – as in the “s” in “measure,” or the “j” in “bonjour”

w – as in “way”

y – as in “yellow”

Some of the consonants are related (this is true in English too) and can share a level of interchangeability. Consider how it is a mere change in voicing to distinguish between many sounds: “b”/“p,” “ch”/“j,” “t”/“d,” “g”/“k,” “s”/“z,” “sh”/“zh.”

Some nasal sounds occur as well that do not really occur in English, but it is difficult to give a comparison. Additionally, people that are not used to the double-vowel system may find surprising pronunciations contrary to their expectation. One example of this is that “day,” pronounced using the double-vowel system, rhymes with the English word “mice” instead of rhyming as expected with the English word “fray.”

As a last note for those who have encountered written Anishinaabemowin, there can be some variance in how things appear in writing as a reflection of dialect.

Ojibwe has many nasal sounds. When we see some words they have an ‘nh’ after a long vowel and the pronunciation sounds slightly different.

Ojibwe letter	Phonetic	Ojibwe examples
aa nh	[ã:]	banaja aa nh - 'nestling'
e nh	[ě:]~[ɛ:]	nisaya e nh - 'my older brother'
i nh	[í:]	awesi i nh - 'wild animal' agaashi i nyi, agaashi i nhyi - '(someone) is small'
oo nh	[õ:]~[ũ:]	giigo oo nh - 'fish'

Ojibwe also has what are call 'consonant clusters'. This means that there are two or more consonants in a row that are not separated by vowels. Similar to how 'th' is a consonant cluster in English, the Ojibwe consonant clusters are:

gw, kw, nd, ng, nj, shk

You can see these in words like memengwaa, makwa, aandeg, maang, nininj, and nashke,