

# 3. Vowels & Diphthongs, Syllables, Punctuation

## Lesson in a Nutshell

Greek vowels are very similar to English vowels: α (η), ε, ι, ο (ω), υ.

The diphthongs are αι (aisle), ει (eight), οι (oil), αυ (sauerkraut), ου (soup), υι (suite), ευ/ηυ (feud).

One syllable per vowel or diphthong.

## Vowels

Greek vowels are similar to English vowels. I think of the η as a long “α” sound and the ω as a long “ο” sound.

a	α	η
e	ε	
i	ι	
o	ο	ω
u	υ	

## Diphthongs

Diphthongs are two vowels that combine to create a single sound. I find it helpful to remember the diphthongs like this:

a	αι aisle	αἶρω	
e	ει eight	εἶ	
i	οι oil	οἰκία	
o	ου sauerkraut	αὐτός	
u	ου soup	οὐδέ	

  

"we"	υι suite	υἱός
"you"	ευ, ηυ feud	εὐθύς, ηὕξαεν

In most cases, the diphthongs make the sound you would expect if you were to say the two single vowels together very quickly.



Do diphthongs seem stupid to you? Think about English. We have diphthongs and they are not nearly as consistent.

Consider the words

eight  
height  
Leigh (girl's name)

Notice how inconsistent English is. Aren't you glad you are learning Greek instead of English?

## Improper Diphthongs

Sometimes at the end of a word, you will notice that an iota has crawled under an α, η, or ω like this:

αῖ    ηῖ    ωῖ

These are called "improper diphthongs." [The iota is not pronounced.](#)

## Syllables

To pronounce Greek, it is important to be able to divide Greek words into syllables. Thankfully, this is relatively easy — much easier than English. The rule is simple:

*One syllable per vowel (or diphthong).*

You can see how many syllables any word has by counting vowels/diphthongs. Notice how important it is to recognize diphthongs. If you fail to see them you will create two syllables where there should only be one. I underlined them and put them in bold type to help you see them.

ἄνθρωπος  
man  
ἄν-θρω-πος<sup>1</sup>

γίνομαι  
I become  
γί-νο-μαι

---

<sup>1</sup> You might wonder how to place the consonants. Actually, this is not important since when you put the word together and say it, it will sound the same whether you put the consonants with the preceding vowel or the one that follows. But in case you want to know, here are the rules:

- Single consonants and consonant clusters that can be pronounced together go with the following vowel.
- A consonant cluster that cannot be pronounced together is divided. The first part goes with the preceding vowel and the second part goes with the following vowel. You can tell if a consonant cluster can be pronounced together by two tests: 1. Try it! If it is awkward it probably does not belong together. For example, in ἄνθρωπος, try saying the letters νθρ together. Doesn't work, does it? 2. Look up the letters in a dictionary. If no words start with a given set of consonants, it is probably a cluster that cannot be pronounced together.
- Double letters are divided (see ἀλλά below).

But please do not sweat too much about this. The important thing is to recognize the vowels, not to be precise in the division of consonants.

Notice the difference between **διά** and **καί** in the next two examples. Since **ια** in **διά** is not a diphthong, it is separated into two syllables. But since the **αι** in **καί** is a diphthong, this word remains a single syllable.

**διά**  
through  
**δι-ά**

**καί**  
and  
**καί**

**ἐγώ**  
I  
**ἐ-γώ**

**εἰμί**  
I am  
**ει-μί**

**ἔρχομαι**  
I come or go  
**ἐρ-χο-μαι**

**λέγω**  
I say  
**λέ-γω**

**ποιέω**  
I make or do  
**ποι-έ-ω**

ἄδελφός  
brother  
ἄ-δελ-φός

ἄλλά  
nevertheless  
ἄλ-λά

ἀπό  
from  
ἀ-πό

Practice dividing some words into syllables in the “Take a Hike” workbook.

### Punctuation

Greek punctuation is super easy:

- The period and comma in Greek are identical to English.
- The Greek question mark looks like an English semicolon.
- The Greek semicolon looks like a dot above the line.

Greek	English
·	·
,	,
;	?
·	;