

The Ichishkiin Sound System and the Yakima Practical Alphabet

In this course, we will use a writing system developed by tribal elders and linguist Bruce Rigsby in the 1970's. The alphabet is easier to use than the English alphabet, because each letter represents one and only one sound in Ichishkiin. In addition, many of the sounds are similar to sounds you already know from speaking English. However, other sounds will take practice before you will be able to recognize and produce them.

To become a good Ichishkiin speaker, you will need to hear the individual sounds in each word, so that you can recognize, pronounce and write it. You'll also need to learn how to pronounce each sound, and eventually be able to fluidly pronounce words. Remember, if you find some of them difficult, you are not alone!

Here are all of the letters of the Yakima Practical Alphabet:

a	aa	ch	ch'	h	i	ii	ï	k	k'	kw	kw'	<u>k</u>
<u>k</u> '	<u>k</u> w	<u>k</u> w'	l	ł	m	n	p	p'	s	sh	t	t'
tł	tł'	ts	ts'	u	uu	w	x	<u>x</u>	xw	<u>x</u> w	y	'

Vowel sounds:

There are four vowel sounds. They are i, ï, u, a.

i, u, and a

i, u, and a have comparable sounds in English:

- i is pronounced like the vowel in the English word *ski*
- u is pronounced like the vowel in the English word *moo*
- a is pronounced like the first vowel in the English word *father*

Depending on what sounds are around the vowel and how fast the speaker is talking, the sound of the vowels may change slightly – so the i may sound more the vowel in the English word *bit*, the u may sound more like the vowel in *foot*, and the a may sound more like the vowel in the English word *pup*.

Barred ï

The sound represented by barred ï [ï] is close to the sound of the first vowel in the English word *supply*, or the vowel in the English word *but*.

Long vowels

Vowel length is important in Ichishkiin—for example, the word *washa-* means *ride*, but *waasha-* means *dance*. Long vowels in Ichishkiin are *ii*, *uu*, and *aa*. (*ĩ* never occurs as a long vowel.) A long vowel is a sequence of the same two vowel sounds in a row. The sound is held out for a longer duration than the corresponding short vowel.

Here are examples of long and short vowels in Ichishkiin:

Yakama practical alphabet		example word	meaning
short a	a	am	husband
		ásham	wife
		kápin	digging stick
long aa	aa	aan	sun
		taak	meadow
		hawláak	spirit, abyss, bottomless place
short i	i	ístama	baby animal
		iksíks	small
		łkw'i	day
long ii	ii	ii	yes

		niimí	our
		lakamín	lakamín (salmon dumpling stew)
barred i	i	im	mouth
		áshim	come in
		iwínsh	man
short u	u	útpaas	blanket, robe
		mups	fawn
		púsha	father's father
long uu	uu	puush	juniper
		ttuush	some
		ip'úus	cat

Diphthongs:

Diphthongs are combinations of two vowel sounds. The beginning vowel sound for Ichishkiin diphthongs is short or long i, a, or u; the second vowel sound is i (spelled y) or u (spelled w). Here are the diphthongs:

Yakama practical alphabet		example word	meaning
short a w diphthong	aw	chaw	no

		<u>ka</u> 'áw	fast, swift
long a w diphthong	aaw	<u>ka</u> 'áaw	lightweight
		waaw	mountain goat
short a y diphthong	ay	paysh	maybe
		sikáywa	breadroot
long a y diphthong	aay	yaay	beargrass
short iw diphthong	iw	kiwkíwlas	drum
		wíwnu	huckleberry
long i w diphthong	iiw	íiwsh	urine
short u y diphthong	uy	anahúy	black bear
		ts'múy	warm
long u y diphthong	uuy	huuy	hardly, almost can't
		puuy	snow

Consonant Sounds:

Here are a few things to notice about the consonants in the chart on page 1.

- The apostrophe is a letter that represents a glottal stop. It occurs on its own, and also with other consonants to indicate glottalized consonants.
- Some of the consonant sounds are written with two letters – these are called digraphs. For example, the letters ch and sh are digraphs. (They are pronounced the same in Ichishkiin as they are in English.)
- There is one consonant sound, ʔ, that is written with a letter you may not have seen before.

For many of the consonants, your skills as a speaker of English will help you – even though there may be small differences in the way the sounds are made by Ichishkiin speakers. Here are those letters. For many letters, we’ve included a word with that letter at the beginning, and also at the middle or the end. So, for the letter s, example words could be saplil, ‘bread’, sasílaw ‘egg’, and lákas ‘mouse’.

Yakama practical alphabet		example word	meaning
soft ch	ch	chiish	water
		chimti	new
		íchi	this
h	h	haasht	breath
		lahaháam	far down (for example, at the bottom of a canyon)
		hulí	wind
soft front k	k	kálux	blueback salmon
		aykáwaas	chair
		íkuuk	now, today

front k w	kw	kwayaam	true
		áykw̄s	cottontail rabbit
l	l	latít	flower
		saplil	bread
		láymut	youngest one
m	m	mámin	breadroot
		mimím	dove
		miyáwax̄	chief
n	n	nawát	belly
		núsux̄	salmon
		núshnu	nose
soft p	p	papsh	fir tree
		plash	white
		ipáp	arm

s	s	sawítk	Indian carrot
		silksilk	cricket
		ptis	muskrat
sh	sh	sháxat	raspberry
		shúshaynsh	steelhead
		patísh	branch
soft t	t	táp'ash	pine tree
		táshtash	canvasback duck (common merganser)
		tamaláw	gravel, sand
soft ts	ts	tsawktsáwk	red-hot
		watsúkt	axe
		tsníts	younger sister (man's word)
w	w	wawá	mosquito
		watám	lake
		Nch'iwána	Columbia River

y	y	yáamash	mule deer
		yápaash	grease
		yáxa	beaver

More Consonant Sounds:

Other consonant sounds will take practice and patience. Sounds that may be new to you are represented by the letters ɬ , $\underline{\text{k}}$, x , $\underline{\text{x}}$.

- ɬ - barred l – is a voiceless lateral fricative. It is made by placing the tip of the tongue behind your upper front teeth and moving air through the sides of the mouth. Try setting your mouth to make an English l, smile slightly, then blow gently.
- $\underline{\text{k}}$ - back k – is a stop made farther back in the mouth than front k and t. It is a uvular stop, made with the back of the tongue pulled up and back to touch the far back of the mouth/upper throat. This is area of the uvula.
- $\underline{\text{x}}$ - back x – is a uvular fricative, made with the back of the tongue pulled up and back towards the far back area of the mouth, in the same area of the mouth as $\underline{\text{k}}$. The tongue does not touch the mouth to block off air.
- x – front x – is not a very common sound in Ichishkiin. It is a velar fricative, made by placing the tongue and mouth in the same position as you do to pronounce k, but without blocking off the air.

You'll see in the list of letters that there are also digraphs that include some of these new sounds: $\underline{\text{k}}\text{w}$, xw , $\underline{\text{x}}\text{w}$, and ɬ . When $\underline{\text{k}}$, $\underline{\text{x}}$ or x are followed by w, it means the sounds are pronounced with the lips rounded, as we do at the beginning of the English word *quick* or the Ichishkiin word *kwyaaam*.

Yakama practical alphabet		example word	meaning
soft back $\underline{\text{k}}$	$\underline{\text{k}}$	$\underline{\text{k}}\text{ash}\underline{\text{k}}\text{áash}$	roan horse
		$\text{twí}\underline{\text{s}}\underline{\text{k}}\underline{\text{a}}\underline{\text{k}}\text{a}$	robin

		<u>k</u> átuti	stand up, stop
soft back <u>k</u> w	<u>kw</u>	<u>k</u> wnin <u>k</u> wnin <u>á</u>	peddler
		pa <u>k</u> wchtpamá	socket
barred <u>ł</u>	<u>ł</u>	<u>ł</u> amt <u>ix</u>	head
		<u>łk</u> 'am	moccasins
		sapsikw'a <u>ł</u> á	teacher
t barred <u>ł</u>	<u>łt</u>	<u>łt</u> úpsha	is jumping
front <u>x</u>	<u>x</u>	i <u>wí</u> x	thin
		kawx <u>ká</u> wx	palomino horse
back <u>x</u>	<u>x</u>	<u>x</u> úl <u>x</u> ul	trout-like fish
		<u>x</u> álish	wolf
		ánach'a <u>x</u> i	again
front <u>x</u> w	<u>xw</u>	ts' <u>x</u> wiilí	teepee
		<u>xw</u> ixwił	meadowlark

back <u>x</u> w	<u>x</u> w	<u>x</u> wín	sucker fish
		<u>x</u> wisaat	old man

Glottalized stops and the letter ’:

Say **uh-oh**, and notice that between the two syllables, you can make your vocal folds come together and stop the air and the sound from coming out. This is what the glottal stop is. It is a letter in Ichishkiin:

Yakama practical alphabet		example word	meaning
glottal stop: ’	’	á’a	crow
		áy’ay	magpie
		pu’úuł	blind

This same action of the vocal folds is used to create an ejective stop. Ichishkiin has 9 glottalized, or ejective, stops. Take a deep breath, and begin saying ‘sock.’ Don’t exhale, and don’t release the **k**. After a second or so, while still holding your breath, release the [k] closure. You should be able to hear a faint popping sound. Sounds of this type are ejectives. With a little practice, you should be able to make a vowel sound after an ejective. Take a deep breath, say ‘sock’, hold your breath, release the **k** closure, and say ‘a’ as you release your breath. Once you get a feel for making a glottal stop and a **k** closure, you will be able to leave out the preliminary maneuvers and say **k’a**, with an ejective stop at the beginning of the syllable. Then, move to the other consonants that are ejectives. Adapted from Ladefoged 2001, *Vowels and consonants: an introduction to the sounds of languages*. Blackwell Publishers.

Here are example words with the Ichishkiin glottalized consonants:

Yakama practical alphabet		example word	meaning
hard ch’	ch’	ch’im	sharp

		nch'i	big
		pich'im	bobcat
hard front k'	k'	k'pís	cold
		k'úsi	horse
		pank'ú	breadroot
hard front k w	kw'	kw'ayawí	mountain lion
		skw'ípa	morning
		íkw'ak	that
hard back <u>k</u> '	<u>k</u> '	<u>k</u> 'áxnu	prairie chicken
		pinak'inut'áwaas	mirror
		<u>k</u> 'shpalí	buzzard
hard back <u>k</u> w	<u>kw</u> '	<u>kw</u> 'iit	plain, visible
		nukw'ash	throat
		<u>kw</u> 'ásh <u>kw</u> 'ash	crane
hard p'	p'	p'íp'i	guts, intestines

		p'íyu	nighthawk
		p'ushtáy	hill
hard t'	t'	t'it'sh	grasshopper
		t'íxt'ix	swallow (bird)
hard t barred †	tʰ	tʰaaɣw	all
		tʰalk	blacktail deer
hard ts'	ts'	ts'aa	near
		ts'í	sweet
		luts'á	red