

한국어

KOREAN FOR SOCIAL LIFE

Foundations

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Before the openers and the flirting, you need the ground floor: how Korean **sounds**, the brilliant little alphabet you can read in an afternoon, and the politeness dial that decides how every sentence ends.

LESSON 0 OF 6

01 How Korean Sounds 받음

Good news first: Korean has **no tones**. A word means the same thing whether your voice rises or falls. The vowels are clean and consistent, much closer to Spanish or Italian than to the slippery vowels of English. Two things will trip you up early — a three-way consonant distinction English doesn't have, and final consonants (batchim) that get quietly swallowed.

Vowels are pure and steady 모음

Each vowel is one clean sound that doesn't glide around. Lock these in and your accent improves instantly.

KOREAN	SOUNDS LIKE	ENGLISH	NOTE
ㅏ	<i>a</i> — "father"	ah	open, relaxed
ㅑ	<i>eo</i> — "sung"	aw/uh	not "ee-oh"; one sound
ㅓ	<i>o</i> — "go"	oh	rounded lips
ㅕ	<i>u</i> — "moon"	oo	tight, rounded
ㅡ	<i>eu</i>	uh (no lips)	smile, push from throat
ㅣ	<i>i</i> — "see"	ee	bright, short
ㅚ / ㅜ	<i>ae / e</i> — "bed"	eh	basically merged today

The consonant three-way 평음·격음·경음

This is the single hardest sound feature for English speakers. Korean splits many consonants into three: a **plain** one, an **aspirated** one (big puff of air), and a **tense** one (tight, sharp, no air). Mixing them up can change the word.

KOREAN	SOUNDS LIKE	ENGLISH	NOTE
ㄱ / ㅋ / ㆁ	<i>g · k · kk</i>	plain · aspirated · tense	소주 vs ... listen for air
ㄷ / ㅌ / ㄸ	<i>d · t · tt</i>	plain · aspirated · tense	tense = stiff, clipped

KOREAN	SOUNDS LIKE	ENGLISH	NOTE
ㅂ / ㅃ / ㅄ	<i>b · p · pp</i>	plain · aspirated · tense	hold a tissue: air or none
ㅈ / ㅉ / ㅊ	<i>j · ch · jj</i>	plain · aspirated · tense	진짜 jin-jja uses both
ㅅ / ㅆ	<i>s · ss</i>	plain · tense	tense ss is hissed, sharp

TIP — FEEL THE AIR

Hold a tissue in front of your mouth. ㅋ ㅌ ㅍ ㅈ (aspirated) should flutter it hard. The plain and tense versions should barely move it. Train this once and your Korean stops sounding "off."

Batchim — the final consonant 받침

When a consonant sits at the bottom of a syllable block it's a **batchim**, and it's often unreleased — you set up the sound but don't fully pop it. Final ㄱ, ㄷ, ㅂ are stopped softly; final ㅇ is "ng." This is why 한국 sounds like "han-guk" with a clipped, swallowed k.

02 Hangeul — the Alphabet 한글

Hangeul is not thousands of characters — it's a true alphabet of about 24 letters, and it was deliberately **designed**. It's a featural alphabet: the letter shapes hint at how your mouth makes the sound. You can realistically learn to read it in a weekend, and reading menus and Kakao messages yourself is a huge unlock.

Letters stack into syllable blocks 음절

You don't write Korean in a flat line of letters. You pack each syllable into a tidy square block, reading top-to-bottom and left-to-right inside it. Take **한** (han): it's **ㅎ** (h) + **ㅏ** (a) + **ㄴ** (n) fused into one block. Then **한** + **국** + **어** spells 한국어 — "Korean language."

Basic consonants 자음

ㄱ <i>g/k</i>	ㄴ <i>n</i>	ㄷ <i>d/t</i>	ㄹ <i>r/l</i>	ㅁ <i>m</i>
ㅂ <i>b/p</i>	ㅅ <i>s</i>	ㅇ <i>-/ng</i>	ㅈ <i>j</i>	ㅊ <i>ch</i>
ㅋ <i>k</i>	ㅌ <i>t</i>	ㅍ <i>p</i>	ㅎ <i>h</i>	

Basic vowels 모음

ㅏ <i>a</i>	ㅑ <i>ya</i>	ㅓ <i>eo</i>	ㅕ <i>yeo</i>	ㅗ <i>o</i>
ㅛ <i>yo</i>	ㅜ <i>u</i>	ㅠ <i>yu</i>	ㅡ <i>eu</i>	ㅣ <i>i</i>

INFO — THE ○ TRICK

ㅇ is a placeholder when it leads a syllable: in **아** (a) it's silent and just holds the spot so the vowel has a "consonant." At the **bottom** of a block it becomes "ng," as in **강** (gang) "river." Same letter, two jobs.

03 The Politeness System 존댓말과 반말

Korean bakes respect into the grammar. The **same** verb changes its ending depending on who you're talking to. Get this dial right and you read as charming and well-raised; get it wrong and you sound either cold or weirdly over-familiar.

Your home base: 존댓말 jondaetmal

Polite speech, ending in **-요** (casual-polite) or **-습니다 / -습니다** (formal-polite). As a learner meeting new people, **always start here**. It's warm, safe, and the default for strangers, anyone older, and most first conversations.

The intimacy switch: 반말 banmal

Casual speech, with the **-요** dropped. Reserved for close friends, people clearly younger, kids, and partners. You don't just start using it — switching **to** banmal is a relationship milestone you ask permission for. We'll weaponize that flirtatiously in Lesson 2.

KOREAN	SOUNDS LIKE	ENGLISH	NOTE
안녕하세요	<i>annyeonghaseyo</i>	Hello (polite)	your default greeting
안녕	<i>annyeong</i>	Hi / bye (casual)	banmal — friends only
감사합니다	<i>gamsahamnida</i>	Thank you (formal)	-습니다 ending
고마워요	<i>gomawoyo</i>	Thanks (polite)	-요 ending
고마워	<i>gomawo</i>	Thanks (casual)	banmal version
민준 씨	<i>Minjun-ssi</i>	Mr./Ms. Minjun	-씨 is polite after a name
민준 <i>Minjun</i> (name) 씨 <i>ssi</i> Mr./Ms.			
선생님	<i>seonsaengnim</i>	teacher / sir	-님 = highest respect

CULTURAL NOTE — AGE SETS THE RULES

Koreans often ask your age early; it's not rude, it's **navigation**. Age decides who uses casual speech with whom and which kinship words apply (oppa, hyung, noona, unni — Lesson 1). When in doubt, stay polite and let the other person invite you down to banmal.

04 Survival Phrases & Backchannel 생존 표현

Ten phrases that get you through a day, plus the little reaction words that make you sound like you're **actually listening** — the secret sauce of feeling like a natural in conversation.

The survival ten 기본 표현

KOREAN	SOUNDS LIKE	ENGLISH	NOTE
네 / 아니요	<i>ne / aniyo</i>	Yes / No	네 also = "uh-huh"
죄송합니다	<i>joesonghamnida</i>	I'm sorry	also "excuse me"
실례합니다	<i>sillyehamnida</i>	Excuse me (to pass / get attention)	polite intro to a stranger
잘 모르겠어요	<i>jal moreugesseoyo</i>	I don't really know	softer than a flat "no"
<p>잘 <i>jal</i> well/really 모르겠어요 <i>moreugesseoyo</i> (I) don't know</p>			
한국어 잘 못해요	<i>hangugeo jal mothaeyo</i>	I'm not good at Korean	disarming, charming
<p>한국어 <i>hangugeo</i> Korean 잘 <i>jal</i> well 못해요 <i>mothaeyo</i> (I) can't do</p>			
천천히 말해 주세요	<i>cheoncheonhi malhae juseyo</i>	Please speak slowly	lifesaver
<p>천천히 <i>cheoncheonhi</i> slowly 말해 <i>malhae</i> speak 주세요 <i>juseyo</i> please</p>			
이거 주세요	<i>igeo juseyo</i>	This one, please	point + say it
<p>이거 <i>igeo</i> this 주세요 <i>juseyo</i> please give</p>			
얼마예요?	<i>eolmayeyo?</i>	How much is it?	shops, bars
<p>얼마 <i>eolma</i> how much 예요 <i>yeyo</i> is it?</p>			
화장실 어디예요?	<i>hwajangsil eodiyeyo?</i>	Where's the bathroom?	essential nightlife phrase
<p>화장실 <i>hwajangsil</i> bathroom 어디 <i>eodi</i> where 예요 <i>yeyo</i> is it?</p>			
괜찮아요	<i>gwaenchanayo</i>	It's okay / I'm fine	also "no thanks"

Backchannel & fillers 맞장구

Koreans react **constantly** while you talk — these little words signal "I'm with you." Sprinkle them and you instantly sound more fluent and more engaged.

KOREAN	SOUNDS LIKE	ENGLISH	NOTE
응	<i>eung</i>	yeah / mm-hm	casual "yes"; warm
그래?	<i>geurae?</i>	Oh yeah? / Really?	keeps them talking
진짜?	<i>jinjja?</i>	For real?!	surprise + interest
헐	<i>heol</i>	whoa / no way	shock, gossip-friendly
맞아	<i>maja</i>	right, exactly	agreement, "so true"
대박	<i>daebak</i>	awesome / insane	both good and bad surprise
아 그렇구나	<i>a geureokuna</i>	ahh, I see	"got it" — sounds native
아 <i>a</i> ah 그렇구나 <i>geureokuna</i> I see			

TIP — REACT BEFORE YOU REPLY

When someone tells you something, lead with a reaction (*진짜? / 헐 / 대박*) **before** you answer. That half-second of "I felt that" is what makes you feel like good company — long before your grammar is good.