

Lesson 1. The alphabet

The Nuu-chah-nulth alphabet has forty-five letters. This is a phonetic alphabet, which means that each letter represents a different sound, and every sound is represented by only one letter.

- (1) a aa c ċ č ċ̣ e ee h ḥ i ii k k^w ḳ
- k^w ł λ λ̣ m ṃ n ṇ o oo p p̣ q q^w s
- š t ṭ u uu w ẉ x x^w x̣ x̣^w y ỵ ? ʔ

Pronunciation tips

- The common consonants *h k m n p s t w y* are pronounced the same as in English.
- The barred el (*ł*) is a continuous, hissing el sound, and can be said for a long time. The barred lambda (*λ*) begins in silence, and can be said only briefly.
- The back consonants *ḥ q q^w x x^w ʔ* tend to deform adjacent vowels, especially the high vowels (*i ii u uu*), because they pull the tongue back.
- The hard plosives *ċ č ḳ ḳ^w λ̣ p̣ ṭ* have a stronger release than plain plosives. To practise them, say them with your mouth without exhaling from the lungs.

Handwriting tips

These diagrams illustrate some handwritten Nuu-chah-nulth letters.

- (2) 
- (3) 
- (4) 
- (5) 

- The underdot in *ḥ x* can be written as a line in handwriting.
- To make them easy to tell apart, give *ł* a loop, *λ* a hook, and *t* a tail.

Quick reference

Below is a quick reference to every letter. It includes each letter's name, a brief clue to its pronunciation, and a Nuu-chah-nulth example word that uses that sound.

Letter	Name	Pronunciation	Word	Translation
a	short a	<i>uh</i>	patpat	inboard motorboat
aa	long a	long <i>ah</i>	waa	say
c	plain cee	<i>ts</i>	caapin	sawbill duck
ċ	hard cee	explosive <i>ts</i>	ċawaak	one

č	cee wedge	<i>ch</i>	čakup	man
č̣	hard cee wedge	explosive <i>ch</i>	čapac	canoe
e	short e	as in <i>pet</i>	—	—
ee	long e	as in <i>eh</i> , and long	ʔeepinis	apple
h	aitch	<i>h</i>	husmin	kelp
ḥ	back aitch	like breathing on glass	ḥayu	ten
i	short i	as in <i>pit</i>	hisit	sockeye salmon
ii	long i	as in <i>ski</i> , and long	tiičma	heart
k	kay	<i>k</i>	kuuk	packed lunch
k ^w	round kay	<i>k</i> with rounded lips	k ^w istuup	something different
ḳ	hard kay	explosive <i>k</i>	ḳaaʔin	crow
ḳ ^w	hard round kay	ḳ with rounded lips	ḳ ^w iis	snow
ł	barred el	a hissed <i>l</i> , like <i>lth</i>	łucma	woman
λ	barred lambda	<i>tl</i>	λama	house post
λ̣	hard barred lambda	explosive <i>tl</i>	λ̣isuk	white
m	em	<i>m</i>	maamaati	bird
ṃ	hard em	<i>m</i> with a catch	ṃaamiiqsu	older sibling
n	en	<i>n</i>	nunuuk	sing
ṇ	hard en	<i>n</i> with a catch	hunụii	drift whale
o	short o	<i>oh</i> or <i>aw</i>	—	—
oo	long o	long <i>oh</i> or <i>aw</i>	ʔooyinčas	orange (fruit)
p	pee	<i>p</i>	puupuuca	dreaming
p̣	hard pee	explosive <i>p</i>	p̣ap̣ii	ear
q	cue	back <i>k</i>	qawii	salmonberry
q ^w	round cue	<i>q</i> with rounded lips	q ^w inii	seagull
s	ess	<i>s</i>	saasin	hummingbird
š	ess wedge	<i>sh</i>	šuuk ^w aa	sugar
t	tee	<i>t</i>	tupkak	black
ṭ	hard tee	explosive <i>t</i>	ṭaṭuus	star
u	short u	as in <i>put</i>	susaa	swimming
uu	long u	as in <i>due</i> , and long	muu	four
w	double-u	<i>w</i>	witwaak	warrior
ẉ	hard double-u	<i>w</i> with a catch	suẉa	you
x	front ex	like a cat's hiss	xaʔuumin	pigeon
x ^w	round front ex	<i>x</i> with rounded lips	x ^w akyuu	swollen
x̣	back ex	like hissing to spit	x̣ax̣aškuk	pilot biscuit
x̣ ^w	round back ex	x̣ with rounded lips	mux̣ ^w aškin	soapberry
y	wye	<i>y</i>	yačaa	dogfish
ỵ	hard wye	<i>y</i> with a catch	siỵa	me
ʔ	glottal stop	a catch, as in <i>uh-oh</i>	ʔaama	loon
ʕ	pharyngeal stop	a catch plus <i>r</i>	ʕaanis	heron