

LESSON NOTES

Thai Alphabet Made Easy #1

Maaw máa, Naaw nǔu, and Long a

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#1

VOCABULARY

Thai	Romanization	English	Class
นา	naa	rice field	noun
นาน	naan	long	adverb

SAMPLE SENTENCES

คุณเรียนภาษาไทยมานานเท่าไรแล้วคะ

khun riian phaa-sǎa thai maa naan thâo-rài láaeo khá

"How long have you been studying Thai?"

GRAMMAR

The Focus of this Lesson is Two Low Class Consonants and One Vowel: *Maaw máa*, *Naaw nǔu*, and Long a

The Thai alphabet is made up of 44 consonants. That might seem like a lot to you now. But if you just learn a few at a time you'll see that they're not difficult to master. Thai is read from left to right just like English. The letters of the Thai alphabet are grouped into three consonant classes: low, middle, and high. In this lesson we'll learn 3 low class consonants.

Each Thai consonant has a name made up of two parts. The first part of the name is the sound that the letter makes as the initial sound of a syllable. The last part of the name is some word that contains that letter. These names make it easier to remember the letters.

In addition to the consonants, the Thai script has 32 vowels. That sounds like a lot, but most of them are pairs of long and short vowels, so it's not as hard as you think. Thai vowels have to be written and attached to a consonant. They can appear above, below, in front, behind, or all around a consonant.

Thai has 5 different tones. Tone means how high or low the pitch of a sound is. The 5 tones are: mid, low, falling, high, and rising. Or if we use the sound ก่า (*gaa*) as an example, the 5 tones are ก่า ก่า ก่า ก่า ก่า (*gaa gaa gaa gaa gaa*). If you make the wrong tone you won't be easily understood.

Thai script has 4 different tone symbols, which help to indicate different tones in writing. But they don't automatically tell you which tone a syllable is. The consonant class, length of the vowel, and type of ending sound also factor in. If that sounds like a lot to keep track of, don't worry. We'll tackle each tone rule one by one so you won't feel overwhelmed. OK, are you ready to learn your first Thai consonant? Let's begin!

The Consonant ฃ (*maaw máa*)

Remember how I said each letter has two parts to its name? The first part of ม (maaw-máa) is มอ (maaw) because it makes the sound "m" just like the letter M. And ม้า (máa) is a word that means "horse."

Most Thai letters start with a small circle which we call the head of the letter. Some are written clockwise and some are written counter-clockwise. The head of ม is written clockwise, and then the rest of the letter is written with one continuous line. There is a second loop in the bottom left corner, then we bring the line over to the lower right corner, and then keep drawing the line up to the top right corner.

If you want an easy way to remember the shape of this letter think of a coffee mug with a broken handle. The head on the top and the loop on the bottom are where the handle used to be attached. This will help you to remember that ม has the head and loop on the same side. And of course, ม and "mug" both start with the same sound "m."

The Consonant น (naaw nǔu)

It makes the sound "n" just like the letter N. Do you know what animal น (naaw nǔu) is named after? นู้น (nǔu) means "rat" in Thai. I bet you're thinking that น looks very similar to ม. Well, you're right. The only difference between the shape of these two letters is น has the loop on the right side instead of the left side. That's why I said you should remember a mug for ม that has a broken handle on the left side.

น is handwritten like this. The head is drawn clockwise, and the loop is in the lower right corner.

The Vowel สระ อา (sà-rà a - "long a")

Now you know two Thai consonants, but we need to learn some vowels before we can start making words. Remember that the Thai alphabet is entirely consonants. Vowels are a separate group of symbols that orbit around the consonants. The Thai word for "vowel" is สระ (sà-rà). Each vowel's name is made up of the word สระ (sà-rà) plus the sound that the vowel makes. The first vowel that we'll learn is สระ อา (sà-rà aa). It is written to the right of a consonant, but a lot of other vowels will be found in different positions. Vowels can be long or short. In this case, สระ อา (sà-rà aa) is a long vowel that makes the sound อา "aa," like the A in "father."

สระ อา is very easy to write. Just draw a slightly curved line going to the right, and then drop straight down. It looks a little like a cane or walking stick. If you think of the sentence "My father walks with a cane", it will help you remember the shape of สระ อา (sà-rà aa).

You will never see สระ อา (sà-rà aa) written just by itself like this. It always has to follow a consonant. Let's use the consonants we learned to demonstrate. ม followed by สระ อา (sà-rà aa) is the word มา (maa). This is the verb "to come." Let's practice writing it together. ม, สระ อา (sà-rà aa).

Practice Words

Now let's try a new word. This time we'll start with น.

น followed by สระ อา makes นา (naa).

This is the word for "rice field." Let's write it again together. น, สระ อา, นา.

Many Thai consonants have different sounds at the beginning and end of syllables. But these two consonants ม and น don't change their sound. So you can make another word very easily just by adding another น to the end of นา (naa).

Now you have the word นาน (naan), which means "a long time."