

# LEARNING RUSSIAN HANDWRITING

Я не должен говорить на уроке  
я не должен говор



Writing in Progress

CHRIS PINNOCK

# Learning Russian Handwriting

Chris Pinnock

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# Introduction

Повторение - мать ученья.  
Repetition is the mother of learning.

When I started learning Russian several years ago, my teacher asked me what I wanted to achieve. Back then, like many students, I wanted to be able to just speak the language and so I did not bother to learn Russian handwriting. For the first year or so of my learning, I wrote Russian in block capitals.

As I learnt more and more, it became apparent that I would have to get better at writing when studying. I also wanted to do a bit more than just speak the language. Despite the prevalent use of computers, tablets and other devices in the learning process, I still study best using pen and paper. For me, writing block capitals is unsatisfying and slow. To keep up in class, I need to be able to write effectively. Furthermore, I started at a new Russian school and the new teacher encouraged us to use handwriting.

When I started to learn handwriting properly, I managed to make progress in three weeks. At the end of the three weeks, others could understand my handwriting, I could read it back and I had become faster at taking notes.

One of the best ways to learn the practical aspects of a skill is to do it repetitively until it has been mastered. I learnt by practicing, practicing and then practicing again. When I was unsure of a word or if I was worried that I would have trouble reading it back, I would repeat it in the margin in block capitals.

To the beginner, it is sometimes difficult to read handwriting because it is not always clear where one letter ends and another begins. We will see in this book that there are some important techniques to learn when reading handwriting and once these are learnt it is easy to distinguish the letters. For example, we will see that some letters have “hooks” at their boundaries.

I’m assuming that you are a student of Russian of any level who is already familiar with the printed Russian Cyrillic alphabet. If you have not started learning Russian, it may be better to learn the printed alphabet in your class to learn the pronunciation and use of stress correctly. You can then proceed with handwriting. However in this book we will start with some light revision of the Russian printed alphabet.

If you are looking for a traditional book on Russian handwriting as taught in Russian schools or a book on calligraphy, then this might not be the book for you. I’ve designed this book based on my personal experience with the aim of getting others going quickly by showing how to write and practice.

When we start to tackle the handwriting, our first set of letters will be those that should be familiar to you from our Latin-based alphabet. We will then look at some “false friends” - the letters that look like familiar ones but represent different sounds

There are a few letters that may present an initial difficulty because they look similar - for example **в** and **б**, and also **м** and **ж**. We will cover these potentially confusing letters in two

chapters and show that there is little to be worried about. We will then finish with the remaining letters.

I have included practice throughout the book, building on what one has learnt up to that point. There is a chapter on drills to encourage you to practice further. In the printed edition of the book, I have included some practice sheets. For the owners of the digital edition, I have made these [practice sheets available on my website<sup>1</sup>](#).

In the final chapter we will also look at the Belarusian, Bulgarian, Ukrainian and pre-revolution Russian alphabets.

You will need your favourite writing materials and your favourite pen. The writing materials should ideally be ruled or squared, but do not get too worried about the tools - please use whatever is comfortable for you. The aim of the game is to write legibly and be understood by others.

Keep practicing and repeating, and you will be able to master Russian Handwriting in a short period of time. Eventually you will develop your own style, just like you did with your English Handwriting. Good luck.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Chris Pinnock". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the "C" and "P" being particularly prominent.

Chris Pinnock @chrispinnock, London, 2020

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<sup>1</sup><https://chrispinnock.com/books/learningrussianhandwriting/>

# Acknowledgements

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# 1. The Russian Alphabet

## The Russian Alphabet

Аа	Бб	Вв	Гг	Дд	Ее	Ёё	Жж	Зз	Ии	Йй
Кк	Лл	Мм	Нн	Оо	Пп	Рр	Сс	Тт	Уу	Фф
Хх	Цц	Чч	Шш	Щщ	Ђ	ы	ь	Ээ	Юю	Яя

We are assuming that you have learnt about the Russian Cyrillic Alphabet before. As we indicated in the Introduction, if you have not, we advise that you spend some time learning it first. If you intend to take Russian lessons, it would be better to sit through the first few lessons where you will learn the alphabet, the pronunciation of the letters and eventually about stress in Russian words. We have included a full list of Russian letters and their names in the Appendix.

English uses the Latin alphabet, whereas Russian uses the Cyrillic alphabet. The Cyrillic alphabet is named after St Cyril, who with St Methodius, created a forerunner of Cyrillic called the Glagolitic alphabet. Cyrillic is the third official script of the European Union – the first two being the Latin alphabet and the Greek alphabet.

The Cyrillic alphabet derives a number of its letters from the Greek alphabet, as well as the Glagolitic alphabet. At a first glance, one might wonder why one would write **B** for a *V* sound and **P** for an *R* sound. The answer lies in the fact that the modern Greek letter  $\beta$  is pronounced more like a Latin *v* than a Latin *b* and the Russian *P* is similar to the Greek letter  $\rho$  which sounds more like our *r*. Hopefully the explanations below will help you with remembering the differences between the Latin alphabet and the Cyrillic alphabet, particularly of the letters that look familiar but sound different.

The development of the Russian Cyrillic alphabet has continued. There have been various reorganisations over the years particularly by Peter the Great and more recently after the Russian Revolution. Even more recently in 1942, the Soviet Ministry of Education made the letter Ё official (see [Yoo]).

Let's investigate the alphabet in groups. Where the letter is derived from a Greek letter, we will list the relevant letter. The names of the Greek letters can be found in the Appendix.

## Letters similar to Latin ones

The letters in this section are similar because they are based on the Greek letters in the same way that the Latin letters are.

The Cyrillic letter **A(a)**, for example, is similar to our *a* and is pronounced *ah* as the *a* in father – much in the same way that *a* is pronounced in Dutch, German and Czech. In both the Latin and Cyrillic alphabets, this letter is derived from the Greek letter  $\alpha$ .

The other letters in this group are the vowel **O(o)** and the consonants **K(k)**, **M(m)** and **T(t)**. They are very similar to their Latin counterparts, but also to their Greek counterparts *O(o)*, *K(k)*, *M(μ)* and *T(τ)*.

## Letters similar to Latin ones but with different sounds

These letters are written like Latin characters but have different sounds.

**E(e)** – pronounced *ye*. It has a different sound from our *E* but nevertheless is derived from the same Greek letter *ε*.

**Ё(ё)** – pronounced like the *yo* in *yonder*. This letter is a variation of **E(e)** and is always stressed in the sentence. Between the 12th and 16th centuries, the *e* sound started to be pronounced as an *o* when the letter was under stress (see [Yoo]) and this explains the connection between the letters. The letter *ё* was first used in print in 1795 and was declared mandatory in 1942. In dictionaries, you will find words correctly spelt using *ё*.

Despite the mandatory requirement, some writers still leave the dots off of the letter and the reader is expected to know that the **E(e)** is pronounced as *yo* in the context of the word. An example is *Горбачев* (*Gorbachev*), often written and transliterated with a regular *e*, but pronounced as *Gorbachov*.

**Y(y)** – pronounced *oo* and is derived from the Greek *Y(υ)* which also influenced the Latin *u*.

**Б(в)** – pronounced *v*. This is usually the first letter that causes learners temporary difficult. It is derived from the Greek *β* which in modern Greek is more of a *v* sound. You will see below that Russian also has a *b* sound like ours, also derived from *β*.

**Н(н)** – pronounced *n* as in *new*. The letter is derived from the Greek *N(ν)*. If we investigate further back in time, the letter may well be derived from a similar one in the Phoenician alphabet whose shape is like *H*.

**Р(р)** – pronounced as a rolled *r* as in *rat*. Derived from the Greek *ρ*.

**С(с)** – pronounced *s* as in *sip*. This letter is derived from a version of the Greek *Σ* which used to be written as a C-shaped letter (the Lunate Sigma [Lun]).

**Х(х)** – pronounced *ch* as in *loch*. The letter is derived from the Greek *χ*.

## Letters that sound familiar but with different shapes

The letters in this section have familiar sounds to us, but are written with unfamiliar letters.

**И(и)** – pronounced like *ee* in *feet* and also like a continental European *i*. The letter is usually transliterated as an *i* and is derived from the Greek *H(η)*.

**Й(й)** – the “short I” - pronounced like the *y* in *toy* and is transliterated in several ways - *i*, *j* and sometimes *y*. The active use of the letter started between the 15th and 16th centuries and it became considered a separate letter from **И** in the 1930s (see [Shi]).

**Б(б)** – pronounced like the Latin *b* and is similarly derived from the ancient Greek  $\beta$ .

**Г(г)** – pronounced as a soft *g* as in *garage* but never hard as in *Gerald*. The letter is derived from the Greek  $\Gamma$  from where it gets its shape.

**Д(д)** – pronounced as a *d* and derived from the Greek equivalent  $\Delta$ .

**З(з)** – pronounced as *z* in *zoo* and similar to our handwritten *z*. The letter is derived from the Greek  $\zeta$ .

**Л(л)** – pronounced *l*. The letter is derived from the Greek  $\lambda$ .

**П(п)** – pronounced *p* and derived from the Greek  $\pi$ . You will have seen this letter when you about circles in mathematics at school.

**Ф(ф)** – pronounced *f* as in *fill* and derived from the Greek  $\varphi$ . Our written language has *f* but also *ph* as in *telephone*.

## Letters that neither sound nor look familiar

**ы** – The letter *I* was removed from the Russian alphabet shortly after the Russian revolution being replaced in spellings by *и*. The *i* was derived from the Greek  $\iota$ . It remains in other Cyrillic alphabets.

The letter *ы* looks as if it is derived from the combination of the soft sign *б* (see later) and the defunct letter *i*. Indeed that is how it is written, but in fact is originally derived from the combination of the hard sign *ъ* and *i* (see [Uwe]). It is usually transliterated in English as an *i*, but the sound does not occur naturally in the English language. You can get away pronouncing it by saying a shortened *i* as in *ill* or by saying *uwe* in the back of the throat. This letter is not usually seen in upper case.

**Э(э)** – the “backwards *e*” sounds very much like our *e* and as such is derived from the Greek  $\varepsilon$ .

**Ю(ю)** – pronounced *yu* like the *u* in *university*. The letter is believed to originate from the Greek combination  $o\iota$ .

**Я(я)** – pronounced as *ya* as in *yard*. The letter is derived from an older Cyrillic character called *Little Yus* [Yus].

The following letters originated in the earlier Glagolitic alphabet (see the Appendix):

**Ж(ж)** – pronounced as the *s* in *treasure* and often transliterated as a *j*.

**Ц(ц)** – pronounced as *ts* or the *zz* in *pizza*.

**Ч(ч)** – pronounced as the *ch* in *choose*.

**Ш(ш)** – pronounced like *sh* in *sheep*.

**ШШ(шш)** – pronounced like *shsh* in *EnglishShampoo*.

## Letters that have no sound of their own

**Ђ** – the *hard sign*, which for practical purposes adds a tiny pause between syllables.

**Ь** – the *soft sign* which adds a gentle soft y sound after the preceding consonant.

Both of these letters originate from the Glagolitic alphabet. The subject of hardness and softness is beyond the scope of this book. You will cover it in your Russian lessons or you can refer to a Russian textbook such as [RMC] Adian/Althaus page 20, [New] Brown section 2.2 or [Col] le Fleming/Kay page 7.

Note that ь, ъ and ы never start a word so we do not have to consider upper case versions for them. For this reason, in a Russian dictionary the ё section directly follows the ю section.

We will tackle the letters in a slightly different order to the above, but our first step is to start with something we know and build on it - the familiar friends.

## 2. Familiar Friends

M A E E O K 3

Let us begin with some letters that are similar to our own to get a head start. We are not going to start at the beginning of the alphabet, but with the beautiful and curvy M. We are going to start with M because it is a familiar letter to us but it has the important hooks that show the beginning and end of the letter.

Once we have mastered M, we will learn A and be able to write our first handwritten word: Mama. The remaining letters will be our familiar friends E, O, K and 3.

## Mm



The Russian M is curvier than our English M. Observe the deep middle dip and, importantly, the hooks at the beginning and end of the letter. As we learn Russian handwriting, we will see that the hooks on the letters are a way of marking the boundaries between the letters. The letter M also leans and relaxes on the page. The letter sits on the line on the writing paper.



Let's have a go at writing it. Use a pen and paper, and use the guide above to write an upper case M. The lower case m is a smaller version of the upper case M. Using the same strokes, write a smaller letter and practice the lower case letter. The middle dip can be as low as you like, even touching the line of the writing paper.



It would not be handwriting if the letters were not joined up. Let's practice joining up the capital M with the small m. Make sure that you draw the hooks and then join them up. Draw the capital letter normally and then flow into the lower case letter naturally by joining up the hooks.

We have now learnt our first letter and we are on our way. Practice the letter until you are confident before moving on to the next.

**Aa**

Here is our recognisable friend, the letter A, who in the Russian script may be a little more curvy than the one that we are used to. The Russian A has a boundary hook on the left and we curve back to form the middle of the character.



The lower case a is very similar to our English one but for completeness let's practice that too.



Once again, handwriting needs to be joined up, so let's practice joining the upper case A to the lower case a like so:



Actually, you can get away with using the straighter A of your existing handwriting if you want to.



Please keep repeating and practicing until you are confident with this letter. Once you are confident, you will be able to write a vowel and a consonant. More importantly you are now able to write your first word, Mama. Let's try now:

*Mama*

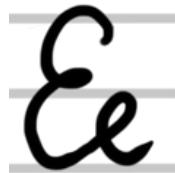
## Ee/Ёё

A set of three lines (top, middle, bottom) for handwriting practice. The first line shows the letters 'Ee' in black. The second line shows the letters 'Ёё' in black, with two small dots above the 'Ё'. The third line shows the letters 'Ee' in black again.

We will cover two letters in this section. One of them is simply the other with two dots on the top. Recall that although the letter ё is official in the Russian language, it is often written without the dots by some Russians.

A set of three lines (top, middle, bottom) for handwriting practice. The first line shows the letters 'Ee' in black. The second line shows the letters 'Ee' in black, with the 'e' colored red. The third line shows the letters 'Ee' in black again.

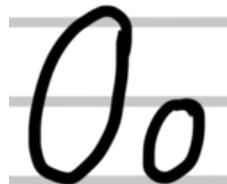
The capital E here is curlier than ours, but as with the A, you can get away with a squarer one like the printed version if you prefer. Simply write the letter from top to bottom. The little e is a friend of yours already. Let's practice joining the E to the little e:

A set of three lines (top, middle, bottom) for handwriting practice. The first line shows the letters 'Ee' in black. The second line shows the letters 'Ee' in black, with the 'e' joined to the 'E' on the middle line. The third line shows the letters 'Ee' in black again.

To practice once more, we can write a word with both letters - the Russian for her, ёё.

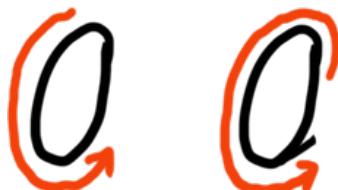
A set of three lines (top, middle, bottom) for handwriting practice. The first line shows the letters 'ёё' in black. The second line shows the letters 'ёё' in black, with two small dots above the 'ё'. The third line shows the letters 'ёё' in black again.

## Oo



The O is another familiar vowel to us. There are two ways to join up the o. When I learnt to handwrite English, I was taught to join the o up at the top with the next letter. We shall join the Russian o up at the bottom. You will find that you retrace the o on the page and because you are joining up at the bottom, you must take care not to make your o too much like an e.

Eventually when you develop your own style of handwriting, you may find that you can join your letters at the top. The main thing is to be legible and understood.



Let's start by drawing the upper-case O. Draw it from the top and retrace your steps in order to provide the joining line as in the diagram. The lower-case o is simply a smaller version of the upper-case O, so let's skip ahead and join up the upper-case O to the lower-case o.



Let's practice writing a word. Moë is the neuter singular form of "my". Notice the difference between the e shape of the ë and the shape of the o. The o should be joined up at the bottom, but not so that it looks like an e. Practice this until your o's do not look like e's.

Moë

**Kk**The image shows the letters 'K' and 'k' written in cursive on a set of horizontal lines. The capital 'K' has a vertical stem and two curved arms. The lowercase 'k' has a vertical stem and a single curved arm.

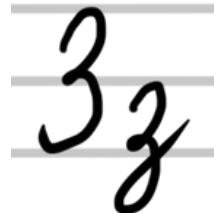
Our second consonant is K. The Russian K has curlier arms than our K. The lower case Russian  $\kappa$  is written more like the capital one than ours. Let's try the capital K noting that the lower-case version is just smaller.

The image shows three letters: a vertical line with a downward arrow, a vertical line with an upward arrow, and a vertical line with a curved loop at the top and a downward arrow at the bottom.

Let's practice joining up the letters with the word Kak (how):

The image shows the word 'Kak' written in cursive. Red arrows indicate the stroke order: a vertical line down for the 'K', a vertical line up for the 'a', and a vertical line down with a loop for the 'k'.

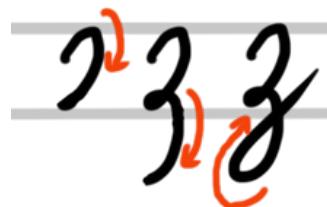
## 33



The last letter in this chapter is the letter 3. In Russian handwriting, the 3's are always curly and never like our printed z. Many of us write our lower case English z's like the Russian 3's. The character is drawn from top to bottom with a crossover at the bottom to join to the next letter. Up until now, all of the letters we have learnt have sat on the guideline. The upper case 3 also sits on the line but the tail of the lower case 3 should be written hanging from the line. Let's tackle the upper case letter first.



The lower case tail hangs down from the line on the page like so:



Let's join the upper case letter to the lower case letter as we have done with the previous letters.



## Practice

In this section you have met several letters that are similar to English ones that you know already. Please make sure that you are comfortable with them before continuing, particularly the hooks on the M, the joining up of the O underneath and the joining all the letters together. The more letters we learn, the more words we will be able to practice. For now let's practice some simple words using the letters we have learnt:

1. замок (lock). Note the hooks on the м and way the о joins to the к.

*замок*

2. Маме (the dative of Mama)

*Маме*

3. мак (poppy)

*Мак*

Remember: the hooks are important on some Russian letters and they show where the letter begins and ends.

*М А*  
↑ ↑ ↑

Hooks

## 3. False Friends

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### Cc

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### HH

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### Пп

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### Pp

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### Yy

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### Xx

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## ДД

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## Ии/Йй

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## Practice

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## 4. Letters that look like M

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### Тт

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### Жж

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### Шш

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### Щщ

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## 5. Letters that look like B

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### Бб

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### Вв

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### ь

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### ы

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### ъ

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# 6. Remaining Letters

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## Гг

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## Лл

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## Фф

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## Чч

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## Ээ

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## Юю

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## Яя

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# 7. Mastering the craft

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## To Join or not to Join

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## Practice

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## Joining it all up

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## Write a short story

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## 8. Other Cyrillic letters and alphabets

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### **Belarusian**

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### **Bulgarian**

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### **Ukrainian**

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### **Pre-revolution Russian**

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# Appendices

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## The Russian Alphabet

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## The Greek Alphabet

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## The Glagolitic Alphabet

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# **Bibliography**

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## **Books**

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## **Other Resources**

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