

Course Goals

This is a list of facts about the Russian language which you absolutely must understand in order to make progress with the language and to speak intelligibly. Check them off as they are covered in class. Periodically review those which you have checked off.

Keys to Success

- Successful students study a little every day instead of doing infrequent marathon sessions.
- Successful students are not in grammar denial. ([Grammar 3—Thinking in English, Speaking Russian](#))
- Successful students put themselves in situations where they have to speak Russian or not speak at all. Often this is by socializing with those who have little or no English. ([Dialog 3—Чайпитие \(Tea Party\)](#))

Alphabet

- Russian is written with 33 symbols compared to English which has 26, but this does not mean there is more to learn. To make an apples-to-apples comparison we would have to count English letter combinations such as th, ch, and sh which make distinctive sounds as if they were letters. Once this is done, English requires far more memorization. ([Alphabet 2—The Russian Alphabet](#))
- Russian has 12 vowels arranged in six pairs. One member of each pair is “hard” whereas the other is “soft” which in most cases means that it has a short Y sound in front of it. You must memorize these pairs. ([Alphabet 4—Phonetic Rules Reference](#))
- Russian is mostly written as it is pronounced. Exceptions are the word “что” (what) which is pronounced “што”, the word “его” (him, his) which is pronounced “ёво”, and the adjectival ending spelled “-oro” or “-ero” which is pronounced “-ово” or “-ёво” respectively. ([Alphabet 4—Phonetic Rules Reference](#))
- The pronunciation of six consonants changes when they represent the last sound in a word. This is sometimes done in English too. For example we pronounce “stepped” as “stept” rather than “stepp-ed”. The “d” is pronounced without vibrating the vocal cords so that it comes out like “t”. In Russian this occurs consistently. ([Alphabet 4—Phonetic Rules Reference](#))

Words

- Russian words are inflected far more than English words. To inflect a word means to change its form when fitting it into a sentence. In English we inflect words when we make the plural and possessive forms or choose between “I” and “me”. To learn Russian you must memorize charts which show how to make the various forms. If you do not learn to use the correct forms, you will not be understood. ([Grammar 5—Russian Case Charts](#))
- You can almost always tell whether an unfamiliar Russian word is a noun, verb, or adjective just by looking at it, often just by its ending. You cannot put a word into the necessary form until you have identified its part of speech. ([Vocabulary 5—About 100 of the Most Common Russian Words](#))
- The word “thou” has died out of English, but the Russian equivalent is still very much alive. Complex social rules determine when you should address someone as “you” and when he is “thou”. ([Usage 1—Ты versus Вы](#))
- There is seldom a one-to-one correspondence between English and Russian words. You must learn the range of meaning of each Russian word and when it is appropriate to use it. If you make the mistake of assuming that each Russian word always means the same thing as a particular English word, you will frequently use them in ways which make no sense. ([Grammar 4—Odd English](#), [Usage 2—Shackles of English](#), [Usage 3—Translating the Word “For”](#))

Motion

- Verbs of motion are words such as “go”, “come”, “walk”, and “fly”. ([Vocabulary 11—Verbs of Motion](#))
- Most Russian verbs of motion come in pairs. One of each pair is called “unidirectional” which means it describes a motion which at the time the narrator has in mind is making progress toward some destination. A

Course Goals

unidirectional verb might be used to say “I was crossing the street when...” ([Vocabulary 11—Verbs of Motion](#))

The second verb is called “multidirectional” which means it describes motion that went back and forth or proceeded in various directions during the time the narrator has in mind. Multidirectional verbs are used to say things such as “I walked around the downtown.” or “I went to the store this morning.” ([Vocabulary 11—Verbs of Motion](#))

There is a standard set of prefixes which can be added to motion verbs in order to say something about the effect of the motion. For example, the prefix при- means that thanks to the motion the mover was present whereas y- means that the motion caused him to be absent. ([Language Generator 9—Идти](#))

The Russian and English ways of talking about motion (going, coming, etc.) are completely incompatible. The meaning of English motion expressions is heavily depending on context. Do not ask your instructor how to translate English motion phrases. Instead learn the picture which each Russian motion expression paints in the listener's mind.

A narrator will choose motion expressions which cause the reader to picture the motion in a manner relevant to the story he is telling. A different narrator might use completely different expressions to tell a different and equally true story using the same facts. Do not ask present your instructor with a set of raw facts and ask him to tell you the correct motion expression. A narrative context is required.

Where in English we would say “here”, “there”, “where”, or “from where” in Russian we must decide whether we are talking about where something is resting or the direction of its motion. If we are talking about motion then we must use a completely different set of words which correspond to the archaic English words “hither”, “thither”, “whither”, and “whence”. ([Grammar 9—Motion and Location](#))

Nouns

A noun is a word which identifies a person, place, thing, or concept. ([Grammar 1—Review of Basic Grammar](#))

All nouns have gender. If a noun refers to a sexless thing (such a table or a pencil), the gender is determined by the last letter. Nouns ending in consonants are masculine. Those ending in -a or -я are feminine. Those ending in -o or -e are neuter. The gender of animate nouns follows sex regardless of ending. ([Grammar 5—Russian Case Charts](#))

Nouns are “declined” (literally “tilted”) into “cases”. Put more simply, the ending of each noun is changed as a way of indicating the role it plays in the action described in the sentence. There are six such roles or cases. ([Grammar 5—Russian Case Charts](#))

There are three main declensions (sets of endings) used to indicate the case of nouns. Each noun belongs to a particular declension. The proper declension can usually be determined by looking at the last letter of the noun's nominative form (which is the form found in a dictionary). ([Grammar 5—Russian Case Charts](#))

Nouns which in their nominative form end in a consonant (most of which are masculine) belong to the first declension. Nouns which end in -o or -e are neuter and use a slightly modified version of the first declension. Nouns which end in -a or -я (most of which are feminine) belong to the second declension. Nouns which end in -ь belong to the first declension if they are masculine and a third declension if they are feminine. You must consult a dictionary to determine their gender. ([Grammar 5—Russian Case Charts](#))

You cannot determine the nominative form or the gender of an unfamiliar noun when you see in a sentence just by looking at the ending. This is because some of the case endings are not unique. For example, “стола” might look like a feminine word, since -a is feminine ending, but it is actually the genitive case of “стол”, a masculine word. A fluent speaker will analyze the structure of the sentence and work back to the nominative form. You as a beginner will have to use a dictionary or vocabulary list to find the nominative form. ([Grammar 5—Russian Case Charts](#))

Sentences

- The subject of a sentence is the party which performs the action. It will always be in the nominative case. ([Grammar 1—Review of Basic Grammar](#), [Grammar 2—Introduction to Inflection and Grammatical Case](#))
- Which party is performing the action (and hence should be the subject of the sentence) is sometimes a matter of perspective and can be different in Russian. English tends to make a person or other living thing the subject of the sentence even if this strains logic. The equivalent Russian sentence may portray the person as a mere bystander. ([Language Generator 1—У кого есть, у кого нет](#), [Language Generator 2—Кому нужно что](#), [Language Generator 3—Кому как](#))
- The direct object is the party on which the action is performed. It will be in the accusative case. ([Grammar 1—Review of Basic Grammar](#), [Grammar 2—Introduction to Inflection and Grammatical Case](#))
- The indirect object is a party which gains or loses as a result of the action. It will be in the dative case. ([Grammar 1—Review of Basic Grammar](#), [Grammar 2—Introduction to Inflection and Grammatical Case](#))

Verbs

- A verb is a word which indicates an action which is or could be performed. ([Grammar 1—Review of Basic Grammar](#))
- Verbs are “conjugated” which means that their endings are changed to make them compatible with the subject of the sentence. ([Grammar 8—Verb Conjugation](#))
- Verbs are conjugated in the present and future tense using six standard endings. The ending must match the person (1st, 2nd, or 3rd) and number (singular or plural) of the subject of the sentence. ([Grammar 8—Verb Conjugation](#), [Vocabulary 5B—Frequently Used Verbs Conjugated Like Читать](#), [Vocabulary 5C—More Frequently Used Verbs](#))
- Verbs are conjugated in the past tense using four standard endings. There is one ending for each gender and one for plural. ([Grammar 8—Verb Conjugation](#))
- When conjugating a verb we always start with the dictionary form which is called the infinitive. Russian infinitives almost always end with -ть.
- Verbs do not have cases. It would be completely illogical for them to have cases. Remember, the case of a noun and its adjectives indicates its role in the action. A verb is the action.
- There is a standard set of prefixes which can be put in front of verbs. The will often will modify the direction or shape of the action. ([Vocabulary 14—Verb Prefixes](#))
- Each verb has two “aspects”. The “imperfective” aspect simple indicates that something was, is, or will be going on. The perfective aspect indicates that something did or will occur and that we are talking about the consequences. ([Language Generator 6—Видеть \(To See\)](#))

Cases

([Grammar 2—Introduction to Inflection and Grammatical Case](#))

- In grammar “case” refers to the role which a noun plays in a particular sentence. A noun can name the person or thing performing the action, the thing acted on, the location of the action, etc.
- The nominative case is the “name case”. It is used to name the subject of a sentence, the person or thing which performs the action.
- The accusative case is used when naming the direct object of the sentence. It is the case of the noun which identifies someone or something touched, pointed at, or looked at by the subject of the sentence.
- The genitive case is the “of” case. A noun in this case is an owner or source source. It can also name

Course Goals

something that is missing or absent expressing the idea “none of that”.

- The dative case is the “to” case. A noun in this case is a recipient of the action or the action moves toward it.
- The prepositional case is the “about” case. A noun in this case will always have a preposition in front of it. It is the location of the action or the topic of a story.
- The instrumental case is the “with” and “as a” case. A noun in this case is a tool used to perform the action or is a companion to one of the participants. It can also be the name of the role when we state that someone acts as something.
- When inserting a noun into a Russian sentence you must choose the case based on the logic of the Russian sentence rather than following the logic of an English sentence with the same meaning. ([Language Generator 1—У кого есть, у кого нет](#), [Language Generator 2—Кому нужно что](#), [Language Generator 3—Кому как](#))
- Russians master the case system well before they enter school. A large part of the information in a Russian sentence is conveyed by the cases which the speaker chooses. In English this information is conveyed in other ways such as by using the words “of” and “to”.

Adjectives

- An adjective is a word which describes a noun, possibly altering its meaning somewhat. Examples from English are “red”, “big”, and “wooden”. ([Grammar 1—Review of Basic Grammar](#))
- Russian adjectives are declined into cases just like nouns. However adjectives have their own sets of case endings. There is one set for each gender. The endings for masculine and neuter are mostly the same. ([Grammar 5—Russian Case Charts](#))
- The case and number of an adjective will always be the same as the case and number of the noun it modifies.

Adverbs

- An adverb is a word which modifies a verb or modifies an adjective. Examples from English are “quickly” and “very”.
- Most Russian adverbs end with -о (though they can also end in -ски or be run-together prepositional phrases. Adverbs do not have cases, so their endings never change.