

# THE TONE SYSTEM

Vietnamese is a tonal language, which means that the tone used for a sound can cause it to become a different word conveying a different meaning. In written Vietnamese, there are only five tone marks indicating five different tones, with the sixth tone – the level tone – receiving no marking. Bear in mind that different dialects may or may not produce all these tones in their speech. For example, the southern dialects normally use only five tones out of six, and this can sometimes cause some misunderstanding for language learners. Fortunately, spoken words always carry enough contextual information to tell us what is being said.

1. The level tone (→) has no diacritic to represent it and is articulated at a relatively high pitch, like the pitch we use when we stick out our tongues and say “ah” at the doctor’s office.

**ma** / *ma* / ghost

2. The rising tone (↗) is represented by the acute accent and produced at a very high pitch.

**má** / *má* / mother; cheek

3. The falling tone (↘) is indicated by the grave accent and pronounced at a rather low pitch.

**mà** / *mà* / but; who/that/which

4. The low-rising tone (↑) is expressed by the question mark minus the dot. It starts at a low pitch and then rises.

**mă** / *mă* / grave, tomb

5. The broken, low-rising tone (↝) is symbolized by the tilde. In its articulation, the voice starts low and rises abruptly, resulting in a glottal stop.

**mă** / *mă* / horse (in Sino-Vietnamese<sup>1</sup>)

6. The lowest tone (↓) is expressed by the dot placed beneath a vowel. Its production involves the dropping of the voice to the lowest possible pitch.

**mᾳ** / *mᾳ* / rice seedling

In southern dialects, the broken, low-rising tone represented by the tilde is generally replaced by the low-rising tone, making “mă” sound very much

like “má”. We can now sum up the tone system in the following table:

TONE MARK	TONE LEVEL	EXAMPLE	MEANING
No mark	→ (level)	ma	ghost
'	↗ (rising)	má	mother
ˋ	↘ (falling)	mà	but
,	↑ (low-rising)	mǎ	grave
~	↝ (broken, low-rising)	mã	horse
.	↓ (low-falling)	mạ	rice seedling

## THE VOWEL SYSTEM

### Single Vowels

a	as in <i>psalm</i>	e.g., <b>mang</b> ( <i>mahng</i> ) carry
ă	like “ah” as in <i>cot</i>	e.g., <b>ăn</b> ( <i>an</i> ) eat
â	as in <i>fun</i>	e.g., <b>cân</b> ( <i>kùn</i> ) need
e	as in <i>lend</i>	e.g., <b>ném</b> ( <i>nem</i> ) throw
ê	as in <i>play</i>	e.g., <b>đén</b> ( <i>dáyn</i> ) come
i	as in <i>seem</i>	e.g., <b>tim</b> ( <i>teem</i> ) heart
o	as in <i>dawn</i>	e.g., <b>có</b> ( <i>káw</i> ) have
ô	as in <i>oh</i>	e.g., <b>cỗ</b> ( <i>kôh</i> ) neck
ơ	as in <i>era</i>	e.g., <b>chờ</b> ( <i>chùh</i> ) wait
ư	as in <i>root</i>	e.g., <b>ngủ</b> ( <i>ngôo</i> ) sleep
ư	as in <i>huh</i>	e.g., <b>rừng</b> ( <i>rùhng</i> ) forest
y	as in <i>reed</i>	e.g., <b>Mỹ</b> ( <i>Mēe</i> ) = America

### Vowel Combinations

<b>ai</b>	as in <i>Thai</i>	<i>e.g.</i> , <b>chai</b> ( <i>chai</i> ) bottle
<b>ao</b>	as in <i>brown</i>	<i>e.g.</i> , <b>cao</b> ( <i>kow</i> ) tall
<b>au</b>	a combination of “ah” in <i>cot</i> and “oo” in <i>root</i>	<i>e.g.</i> , <b>rau</b> ( <i>rah-oo</i> ) vegetable
<b>ay</b>	a combination of “ah” in <i>cot</i> and “ee” in <i>seem</i>	<i>e.g.</i> , <b>chạy</b> ( <i>chah-ee</i> ) run
<b>âu</b>	a combination of “oh” in <i>oh</i> and “oo” in <i>root</i>	<i>e.g.</i> , <b>đầu</b> ( <i>doh-oo</i> ) head
<b>ây</b>	as in <i>day</i>	<i>e.g.</i> , <b>đẩy</b> ( <i>day</i> ) push
<b>eo</b>	a combination of “e” in <i>lend</i> and “oo” in <i>root</i>	<i>e.g.</i> , <b>leo</b> ( <i>le-oo</i> ) climb
<b>êu</b>	a combination of “ay” in <i>play</i> and “oo” in <i>root</i>	<i>e.g.</i> , <b>nếu</b> ( <i>néh-oo</i> ) if
<b>ia</b>	as in <i>deal</i>	<i>e.g.</i> , <b>chia</b> ( <i>chee-a</i> ) divide
<b>iê</b>	as in <i>yet</i>	<i>e.g.</i> , <b>tiền</b> ( <i>tyèn</i> ) money
<b>iu</b>	as in <i>few</i>	<i>e.g.</i> , <b>thiu</b> ( <i>thew</i> ) stale
<b>oa</b>	as in <i>armoire</i>	<i>e.g.</i> , <b>hoa</b> ( <i>hwah</i> ) flower
<b>oe</b>	as in <i>querulous</i>	<i>e.g.</i> , <b>khoe</b> ( <i>khwe</i> ) boast
<b>oi</b>	as in <i>bøy</i>	<i>e.g.</i> , <b>hỏi</b> ( <i>høy</i> ) ask
<b>îi</b>	a combination of “o” in <i>oh</i> , and “ee” in <i>seem</i>	<i>e.g.</i> , <b>tôi</b> ( <i>tóh-ee</i> ) dark
<b>oi</b>	a combination of “a” in <i>era</i> and “ee” in <i>seem</i>	<i>e.g.</i> , <b>mời</b> ( <i>mùh-ee</i> ) invite
<b>ua</b>	as “ua” in <i>quart</i> , when preceded by “q”; elsewhere, a combination of “oo” in <i>root</i> and “a” in <i>era</i>	<i>e.g.</i> , <b>mùa</b> ( <i>mòo-a</i> ) season
<b>ûâ/uô</b>	as in <i>swirl</i>	<i>e.g.</i> , <b>quần</b> ( <i>kwùn</i> ) pants or <b>quôr</b> ( <i>kwuh</i> ) brandish

<b>uê</b>	as in <u>way</u>	<i>e.g., quên (kwayn)</i> forget
<b>ui</b>	a combination of “oo” in <u>root</u> and “ee” in <u>seem</u>	<i>e.g., núi (nóo-ee)</i> mountain
<b>uô</b>	a combination of “oo” in <u>root</u> and “oh” in <u>oh</u>	<i>e.g., uống (oo-óhng)</i> drink
<b>uy</b>	as in <u>sweet</u>	<i>e.g., quỳ (kwèe)</i> kneel
<b>ra/ ro</b>	a combination of “uh” in <u>huh</u> and “a” in <u>era</u>	<i>e.g., mưa (muh-a)</i> rain, <i>e.g., nước (núh-ak)</i> water
<b>ri</b>	a combination of “uh” in <u>huh</u> and “ee” in <u>seem</u>	<i>e.g., hửi (húh-ee)</i> sniff
<b>iêu</b>	as in <u>yew</u>	<i>e.g., kiêu (kyéw)</i> style
<b>oai</b>	as in <u>wise</u>	<i>e.g., ngoài (ngwài)</i> outside
<b>oay</b>	a combination of “oi” in <u>armoire</u> and “ee” in <u>seem</u>	<i>e.g., xoáy (swáy)</i> whirl
<b>uôi</b>	a combination of “oo” in <u>root</u> , “oh” in <u>oh</u> , and “ee” in <u>seem</u>	<i>e.g., muỗi (mōo-a-ee)</i> mosquito
<b>uya</b>	a combination of “wee” in <u>sweet</u> and “a” in <u>era</u>	<i>e.g., khuya (khwee-a)</i> late at night
<b>uyê</b>	a combination of “wee” in <u>sweet</u> and “ay” in <u>day</u> ;	<i>e.g., suyễn (swēe-ayn)</i> asthma
<b>roi</b>	a combination of “uh” in <u>huh</u> , “a” in <u>era</u> , and “ee” in <u>seem</u>	<i>e.g., mười (mùh-ah-ee)</i> ten
<b>rou</b>	a combination of “uh” in <u>huh</u> , “a” in <u>era</u> , and “oo” in <u>root</u>	<i>e.g., búróu (búh-a-oo)</i> tumor
<b>ru</b>	a combination of “uh” in <u>huh</u> and “oo” in <u>root</u>	
	<i>e.g., cúru (kúh-oo)</i> rescue	

## THE CONSONANT SYSTEM

We will look at initial consonants and consonant combinations, and then final consonants to see the distinctions in the way they are pronounced.

## I. Initial Consonants

### Single Consonants

<b>b</b>	as in <u>bay</u>	e.g., <b>bán</b> ( <i>báhn</i> ) sell
<b>c</b>	as in <u>cat</u>	e.g., <b>cá</b> ( <i>káh</i> ) fish
<b>d</b>	as in <u>zoo</u> (northern dialects); otherwise, as “y” in <i>yew</i> e.g., <b>dĕ</b> ( <i>yĕh</i> ) easy	e.g., <b>đoán</b> ( <i>dwáhn</i> ) guess
<b>đ</b>	as in <u>door</u>	e.g., <b>đoán</b> ( <i>dwáhn</i> ) guess
<b>g/gh</b>	as in <i>go</i>	e.g., <b>gà</b> ( <i>gáh</i> ) chicken
<b>h</b>	as in <u>hear</u>	e.g., <b>ho</b> ( <i>haw</i> ) cough
<b>k</b>	as in <u>cat</u> but softer e.g.,	<b>kim</b> ( <i>keem</i> ) needle
<b>l</b>	as in <u>love</u>	e.g., <b>lá</b> ( <i>lá</i> ) leaf
<b>m</b>	as in <u>may</u>	e.g., <b>mua</b> ( <i>moo-a</i> ) buy
<b>n</b>	as in <u>new</u>	e.g., <b>nên</b> ( <i>nayn</i> ) should
<b>q</b>	as in <i>quick</i> (northern dialects); or, as “w” in <u>well</u>	e.g., <b>quét</b> ( <i>kwét</i> ) sweep
<b>r</b>	as in <u>roar</u> ; as “z” in <u>zoo</u> (some northern dialects)	e.g., <b>rồi</b> ( <i>ròh-ee</i> ) already
<b>s</b>	as in <u>seal</u> ; as in <u>shore</u> (some southern dialects)	e.g., <b>sông</b> ( <i>sohng</i> ) river
<b>t</b>	as in <u>stair</u>	e.g., <b>tím</b> ( <i>tím</i> ) purple
<b>v</b>	as in <u>yain</u> ; as “y” in <i>young</i> (some southern dialects)	e.g., <b>vua</b> ( <i>voo-a</i> ) king
<b>x</b>	as in <u>seal</u>	e.g., <b>xinh</b> ( <i>sinh</i> ) cute

### Consonant Combinations

<b>ch</b>	as in <u>chalk</u>	e.g., <b>chuông</b> ( <i>choo-ohng</i> ) bell
<b>kh</b>	as in <u>Bach</u>	e.g., <b>khó</b> ( <i>kháw</i> ) difficult

<b>ng/ngh</b>	as in <i>singing</i>	<i>e.g.</i> , <b>nghe</b> ( <i>nge</i> ) listen
<b>nh</b>	as in <i>lasagna</i>	<i>e.g.</i> , <b>nhỏ</b> ( <i>nhǎw</i> ) small
<b>ph</b>	as in <i>fame</i>	<i>e.g.</i> , <b>phà</b> ( <i>fāh</i> ) ferry
<b>th</b>	close to “th” in <i>theme</i>	<i>e.g.</i> , <b>thích</b> ( <i>théek</i> ) like
<b>tr</b>	close to “j” in <i>joy</i>	<i>e.g.</i> , <b>trẻ</b> ( <i>jé</i> ) young

## II. Final Consonants

Final consonants in Vietnamese are always silent. The mouth forms the shape of the consonant but no air is released and no sound is made. For example, in English we pronounce the final “k” by releasing the air from our mouth in a little burst. In Vietnamese the back of the tongue does need to be pressed against the soft palate to form a silent “k”. The following are common final consonants in Vietnamese.

<b>-c</b>	as in book	<i>e.g.</i> , <b>khác</b> ( <i>kháhk</i> ) different
<b>-m</b>	as in claim	<i>e.g.</i> , <b>mềm</b> ( <i>měm</i> ) soft
<b>-n</b>	as in dawn	<i>e.g.</i> , <b>nón</b> ( <i>nón</i> ) hat
<b>-p</b>	as in sleep	<i>e.g.</i> , <b>hộp</b> ( <i>hōhp</i> ) box
<b>-t</b>	as in cot	<i>e.g.</i> , <b>tốt</b> ( <i>tóht</i> ) good
<b>-ch</b>	as in look	<i>e.g.</i> , <b>sách</b> ( <i>sáik</i> ) book
<b>-ng/-nh</b>	as in ring	<i>e.g.</i> , <b>nắng</b> ( <i>náng</i> ) sunny, <b>nhanh</b> ( <i>nyaing</i> ) fast

When “a” is followed by a final “c,” it keeps its sound quality (which is a full “a” sound). However, when it is followed by a final “ch”, its pronunciation changes to “ai.” Likewise, when “a” is followed by a final “ng”, its sound quality doesn’t change. However, when followed by a final “nh”, it sounds like “ai” as in Thailand.

<b>bạc</b> ( <i>bāhk</i> )	silver
<b>bạch</b> ( <i>bāik</i> )	white
<b>hàng</b> ( <i>hàhng</i> )	merchandise
<b>hành</b> ( <i>hāing</i> )	onion