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.
   mả / *mả* / 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.
   mã / *mã* / horse (in Sino-Vietnamese[1])
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.
   mạ / *mạ* / rice seedling

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

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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
ˊ	↗ (rising)	**má**	mother
ˋ	↘ (falling)	**mà**	but
ˀ	↱ (low-rising)	**mả**	grave
~	⇝ (broken, low-rising)	**mã**	horse
.	↧ (low-falling)	**mạ**	rice seedling

THE VOWEL SYSTEM

Single Vowels

a	as in *psalm*	*e.g.*, **mang** *(mahng)* carry
ă	like “ah” as in *cot*	*e.g.*, **ăn** *(an)* eat
â	as in *fun*	*e.g.*, **cần** *(kùn)* need
e	as in *lend*	*e.g.*, **ném** *(nem)* throw
ê	as in *play*	*e.g.*, **đến** *(dáyn)* come
i	as in *seem*	*e.g.*, **tim** *(teem)* heart
o	as in *dawn*	*e.g.*, **có** *(káw)* have
ô	as in *oh*	*e.g.*, **cổ** *(kỏh)* neck
ơ	as in *era*	*e.g.*, **chờ** *(chùh)* wait
u	as in *root*	*e.g.*, **ngủ** *(ngỏo)* sleep
ư	as in *huh*	*e.g.*, **rừng** *(rùhng)* forest
y	as in *reed*	*e.g.*, **Mỹ** *(Mẽe)* = America

Vowel Combinations

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ai	as in *Thai*	*e.g.*, **chai** *(chai)* bottle
ao	as in *brown*	*e.g.*, **cao** (*kow)* tall
au	a combination of "ah" in *cot* and "oo" in *root*	*e.g.*, **rau** *(rah-oo)* vegetable
ay	a combination of "ah" in *cot* and "ee" in *seem*	*e.g.*, **chạy** *(chạh-ee)* run
âu	a combination of "oh" in *oh* and "oo" in *root*	*e.g.*, **đầu** *(dòh-oo)* head
ây	as in *day*	*e.g.*, **đẩy** *(day)* push
eo	a combination of "e" in *lend* and "oo" in *root*	*e.g.*, **leo** *(le-oo)* climb
êu	a combination of "ay" in *play* and "oo"in *root*	*e.g.*, **nếu** *(néh-oo)* if
ia	as in *deal*	*e.g.*, **chia** *(chee-a)* divide
iê	as in *yet*	*e.g.*, **tiền** *(tyèn)* money
iu	as in *few*	*e.g.*, **thiu** *(thew)* stale
oa	as in *armoire*	*e.g.*, **hoa** *(hwah)* flower
oe	as in *querulous*	*e.g.*, **khoe** *(khwe)* boast
oi	as in *boy*	*e.g.*, **hỏi** *(hỏy)* ask
ôi	a combination of "o" in *oh*, and "ee" in *seem*	*e.g.*, **tối** *(tóh-ee)* dark
ơi	a combination of "a" in *era* and "ee" in *seem*	*e.g.*, **mời** *(mùh-ee)* invite
ua	as "ua" in *quart*, when preceded by "q"; elsewhere, a combination of "oo" in *root* and "a" in *era*	e.g., **mùa** *(mòo-a)* season
uâ/uơ	as in *swirl*	*e.g.*, **quần** *(kwùn)* pants or **quơ** *(kwuh)* brandish

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uê	as in *way*	*e.g.*, **quên** *(kwayn)* forget
ui	a combination of "oo" in *root* and "ee" in *seem*	*e.g.*, **núi** *(nóo-ee)* mountain
uô	a combination of "oo" in *root* and "oh" in *oh*	*e.g.*, **uống** *(oo-óhng)* drink
uy	as in *sweet*	*e.g.*, **quỳ** *(kwèe)* kneel
ưa/ ươ	a combination of "uh" in *huh* and "a" in *era*	*e.g.*, **mưa** *(muh-a)* rain, *e.g.*, **nước** *(núh-ak)* water
ưi	a combination of "uh" in *huh* and "ee" in *seem*	*e.g.*, **hửi** *(hủh-ee)* sniff
iêu	as in *yew*	*e.g.*, **kiểu** *(kyểw)* style
oai	as in *wise*	*e.g.*, **ngoài** *(ngwài)* outside
oay	a combination of "oi" in *armoire* and "ee" in *seem*	*e.g.*, **xoáy** *(swáy)* whirl
uôi	a combination of "oo" in *root*, "oh" in *oh*, and "ee" in *seem*	*e.g.*, **muỗi** *(mōo-a-ee)* mosquito
uya	a combination of "wee" in *sweet* and "a" in *era*	*e.g.*, **khuya** *(khwee-a)* late at night
uyê	a combination of "wee" in *sweet* and "ay" in *day;*	*e.g.*, **suyễn** *(swēe-ayn)* asthma
ươi	a combination of "uh" in *huh*, "a" in *era*, and "ee" in *seem*	*e.g.*, **mười** *(mùh-ah-ee)* ten
ươu	a combination of "uh" in *huh*, "a" in *era*, and "oo" in *root*	*e.g.*, **bướu** *(búh-a-oo)* tumor
ưu	a combination of "uh" in *huh* and "oo" in *root* *e.g.*, **cứu** *(kúh-oo)* rescue	

THE CONSONANT SYSTEM

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

Consonant Combinations

ch	as in *chalk*	*e.g.,* **chuông** *(choo-ohng)* bell
kh	as in *Bach*	*e.g.,* **khó** *(kháw)* difficult

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ng/ngh	as in *singing*	*e.g.*, **nghe** *(nge)* listen
nh	as in *lasagna*	*e.g.*, **nhỏ** *(nhảw)* small
ph	as in *fame*	*e.g.*, **phà** *(fàh)* ferry
th	close to "th" in *theme*	*e.g.*, **thích** *(théek)* like
tr	close to "j" in *joy*	*e.g.*, **trẻ** *(jẻ)* 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.

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

bạc *(bạhk)*	silver
bạch *(bạik)*	white
hàng *(hàhng)*	merchandise
hành *(hàing)*	onion

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