

# The Double Vowel System

In Minnesota and Wisconsin, Ojibwe is written in a standardized alphabet called the **double vowel system or Fiero orthography** (after Charles Fiero, the linguist who devised it). The double vowel system is not the only standardized way to write Ojibwe. In many Ojibwe communities in Canada, Ojibwe is written using symbols representing syllables. This writing system is known as syllabics.

The double system is not perfect but is generally easy for English speakers to understand, as most consonants and some vowels have a similar sound as English. Here are the letters of the Ojibwe alphabet:

**a, aa, b, ch, d, e, g, h, ' , i, ii, j, k, m, n, o, oo, p, s, sh, t, w, y, z, zh**

Unlike English **there are no f, l, q, r, u, v, or x sounds** in the Ojibwe language.

## Glottal Stop

Also note that Ojibwe features a **glottal stop**, represented in double vowel by the letter ' . The glottal stop roughly corresponds to the sound heard in the English phrase "uh-oh."

## Vowels

While consonants in Ojibwe sound roughly like their English equivalents, vowels in Ojibwe have their own unique sound.

Vowel	Phonemic Sound	A Similar Sound in English
a	uh (similar to letter "u")	about
aa	aah	father
e	ay	day
i	ih	pin
ii	ee	seen
o	oh	open
oo	oo	boot

## Accent

Double vowels are the vowels with two letters, with the exception of "e" which has a double vowel or long vowel sound. **When speaking, an emphasis (or accent) is applied on the first double vowel in a word.** Beginning students often struggle to accent their long vowels. As English speakers, long vowels may seem strange but **be sure to make your long vowels long.** Your long vowels can almost never be too long. Try it with these words:

Naagaj (Later)  
Naanan (5)  
Wiisini (s/he is eating)  
Giikaji (s/he is cold)  
Zaaga'am (s/he is going outside or to the bathroom)

## Nasal sounds

A major difference between Ojibwe and English is the presence of more nasal sounds. Practice saying these words to get a sense of the nasal sounds:

Injaanzh (my nose)  
Nisayenh (my older brother)

Mindimooyenh (old woman: a term of respect in Ojibwe)  
Oboodashkwaanishiinh (dragonfly)

### Reading new words

Despite the length of many words, it is relatively easy to sound out Ojibwe words by breaking it down by syllable. Ojibwe follows a strict pattern of alternating between vowels and consonants making it easy to break words down to syllables. When a word is comprised of many syllable parts, pronounce each syllable individually, starting at the beginning and working your way forward, adding each syllable as you go. Take the word "iskigamizige" (s/he is making maple syrup).

Start with "i" then "i ski," next "i ski ga," "i ski ga mi," "i ski ga mi zi," and finally "i ski ga mi zi ge." Try it slowly at first and then build up your speed.

Now try to say these words:

Aaniin (hello or how/what)  
Name (sturgeon)  
Nibi (water)  
Nibiikaang (in the water)  
Jiimaan (canoe)  
Jiimaanens (little canoe)  
Ishpiming (above)  
Gaagiigido (s/he is speaking)  
Giminwendam ina? (Are you happy)  
Daga anishinaabemodaa! (Let's speak Anishinaabe!)

Try saying the following English words written in double vowel system, then write in your answer:

Doo yiw no mii? \_\_\_\_\_

Ay yooz to no yiw laang ago. \_\_\_\_\_

Yiw med mii jump wen ay saa yiw. \_\_\_\_\_

### Why do we use the double vowel system?

The double-vowel system is not totally flawless but it is the most fluid and consistent system in Ojibwe country thus far. The following examples exemplify the inconsistency of phonetic writing. These are actual spellings given by people when they were asked how to spell "bread" and "deer":

Example:

<b>bakwezhigan:</b> (double vowel)	baquashegon baquashegun buckweshigan baaquezhigan buckwayshigun	<b>waawaashkeshi:</b> (double vowel)	wawaskashii wawashkesi waawayshkashe waawaskishi wawahshkayshee
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