

# Wombat's Irish Grammar Guide

A brief contemplation of Irish (Gaelic) grammar.

# Wombat's Irish Grammar Guide

A brief contemplation of Irish grammar.



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## Irish language

This guide refers to “Irish”, which is the Irish language. That's how it is generally known to people in Ireland. However, you might know of the language more as “Irish Gaelic”, or may simply refer to it as “Gaelic”. This is where things get messy! “Gaelic” alone tends to refer more directly to the Gaelic language of Scotland. In any case, we'll just call the language Irish from here on in.

## Dialects

Irish has different dialects, just as English does. Each dialect has minor differences in grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary. Roughly speaking, Ulster and Munster are two ends of a spectrum, with Connacht somewhere in the middle.

Which dialect should you learn? If you're in a class, your best bet is to focus on the dialect used by your teacher. Once you get comfortable with the basics of the language, you can change dialects without much difficulty. If you're learning on your own, you might want to pick Connemara (Connacht) Irish because it follows the

"standard" a little more closely than the other dialects. Or simply pick the book that best suits your learning style, and start with whatever dialect it teaches. Dialect isn't as much of an issue as you might think, because any book designed for beginners will stick fairly close to the standard, even if that book focuses on one particular dialect.

There is a standard for Irish grammar, called An Caighdeán Oifigiúil. There is no official standard for pronunciation. Except where noted, in this guide I will follow the standard for grammar, and give you the most widespread pronunciations. If you learned a different way of pronouncing certain words, stick with the pronunciation you know.

## Alphabet

Irish uses a subset of the alphabet used in English:

a b c d e f g h i l m n o p r s t u

The letters j, k, q, v, w, x, y, and z can occur in loan-words.

Vowels can be either short or long. We use a mark called a síneadh fada, or fada for short, to indicate long vowels. So long vowels would be written:

á, é, í, ó, ú

Short vowels are written without a fada:

a, e, i, o, u

There are also some vowel combinations that are always pronounced long, even though they are not marked with a fada. Whether a vowel is long or short affects its pronunciation, as explained in the section on pronunciation.

Modern Irish uses the regular latin alphabet, so any normal font will work fine, as long as it has the accented vowels — which most do. Until the middle of the last century a font style called an cló Ghaelach (sometimes referred to as seanchló) was used. This style is sometimes used, mainly for decorative purposes.

For more information, see:

[Fonts for writing Irish \(IGTF\)](http://www.irishgaelictranslator.com/articles/?p=8)

<<http://www.irishgaelictranslator.com/articles/?p=8>>

[Irish Language Alphabet \(Bitesize Irish Gaelic\)](http://www.bitesizeirishgaelic.com/lesson/55/)

<<http://www.bitesizeirishgaelic.com/lesson/55/>>

## Broad and Slender Vowels

The terms slender and broad refer to two categories of vowels.

- The broad vowels are a, o, u and á, ó, ú.
- The slender vowels are i, e and í, é.

Whether a vowel is slender or broad affects the pronunciation of its neighbouring consonants, as explained in the section on pronunciation.

## Caol le caol agus leathan le leathan

Irish has a very regular spelling system, although it may seem intimidating at first. The golden rule for spelling in Irish, *caol le caol agus leathan le leathan*, means “slender with slender and broad with broad”. It means that the vowels on either side of a consonant (or group of consonants) should agree; they should both be broad or both be slender. There are a few common words that do not satisfy this rule.

This rule is important when you add an ending to a word (e.g., when conjugating a verb). To satisfy the rule you may need to add a vowel between the word and its ending.

For more information, see:

[Caol le caol agus leathan le leathan \(IGTF\)](http://nualeargais.ie/foghlaim/caol.php)

<<http://nualeargais.ie/foghlaim/caol.php>>

[Something about consonants \(Bitesize Irish Gaelic\)](http://www.bitesizeirishgaelic.com/lesson/8/)

<<http://www.bitesizeirishgaelic.com/lesson/8/>>

## Pronunciation

Aside from a few very common words, Irish pronunciation is very regular. Of course, some of the letters and letter combinations are pronounced differently than in English.

 **Tip:** While you're first learning, you'll find it less confusing if you model your pronunciation after just one person.

Earlier I mentioned the golden rule for spelling, *caol le caol agus leathan le leathan*, requires that the vowels on either side of a consonant (or group of consonants) should both be broad or both be slender. That's because consonants have two pronunciations, broad and slender. A consonant that is flanked by broad vowels is pronounced broad, and a consonant that is flanked by slender vowels is pronounced slender. But don't let the fact that every consonant has two

pronunciations panic you. In most cases, the difference between the broad and slender pronunciation is subtle, and you really don't need to worry about all the subtleties at first.

The most dramatic changes are:

broad **d** is pronounced /d/ as in "door"

slender **d** is pronounced /dj/, like the "dg" in "edge"

broad **s** is pronounced /s/ as in "say"

slender **s** is pronounced /sh/ as in "sheep"

broad **t** is pronounced /t/ as in "talk"

slender **t** is pronounced /tch/ as in "tchah!" or "hatch"

Aside from that, broad consonants have a slight "w" sound associated with them, and slender consonants have a slight "y" sound. This is usually not noticeable except when you change from slender to broad within a word, or vice versa.

For more information, see:

[Vowels \(IGTF\)](http://www.irishgaelictranslator.com/translation/viewtopic.php?p=397104#397104),

<<http://www.irishgaelictranslator.com/translation/viewtopic.php?p=397104#397104>>

[Consonants: Broad and Slender \(IGTF\)](http://www.irishgaelictranslator.com/articles/?p=6),

<<http://www.irishgaelictranslator.com/articles/?p=6>>

[Practice Thread: Pronunciation \(IGTF\)](http://www.irishgaelictranslator.com/translation/viewtopic.45728.html),

<<http://www.irishgaelictranslator.com/translation/viewtopic.45728.html>>

[Pronunciation/Dialect Chart \(IGTF\)](http://www.irishgaelictranslator.com/articles/?p=10)

<<http://www.irishgaelictranslator.com/articles/?p=10>>

## Initial Mutations

Words change to reflect the role they play in a particular sentence. In English, it's usually just the endings of words that change (such as adding -ed to form the past tense of a verb, or adding 's to indicate possession). In Irish, the beginnings of words often change as well. There are two main types of changes that occur:

- *Lenition* softens an initial consonant sound.
- *Eclipsis* replaces one initial sound with another.

For more information, see:

[Initial mutations \(Bitesize Irish Gaelic\)](http://www.bitesizeirishgaelic.com/lesson/14/)

<<http://www.bitesizeirishgaelic.com/lesson/14/>>

## Lenition (Séimhiú)

This table shows how a word is affected by lenition. If a word begins with a letter not listed below, it is not changed.

Initial consonant	Lenited form	Pronunciation
p	ph	<i>f</i>
t	th	<i>h</i>
c	ch	<i>kh</i>
b	bh	<i>w</i> (broad), <i>v</i> (slender) *
d	dh	<i>gh</i> *
g	gh	<i>dh</i> *
f	fh	silent
m	mh	<i>w</i> (broad), <i>v</i> (slender) *
s	sh	<i>h</i>

\* See the section on pronunciation for an explanation of this sound.

For more information, see:

[Lenition \(IGTF\)](#)

<<http://www.irishgaelictranslator.com/articles/?p=17>>

## Eclipsis

This table shows how a word is affected by eclipsis. If a word begins with a letter not listed below, it is not changed.

Initial consonant	Eclipsed form	Pronunciation
p	bp	<i>b</i>
t	dt	<i>d</i>
c	gc	<i>g</i>
b	mb	<i>m</i>
d	nd	<i>n</i>
g	ng	<i>ng</i> *
f	bhf	<i>w</i> (broad), <i>v</i> (slender) *

\* See the section on pronunciation for an explanation of this sound.

 **Tip:** When there's an unpronounceable consonant pair at the beginning of a word, usually only the first consonant is pronounced.

## Word Order

It's important to realise that Irish expresses ideas differently than English does. For example, in Irish the verb (action word) usually comes first.



There are several other important differences between English and Irish. That's why it's not a good idea to try to translate sentences directly from English to Irish. A better approach is to learn patterns for sentences and phrases. Once you understand a pattern, you can use it to express a wide variety of thoughts.

## The Article

Irish has only one article: the **definite** article. The article has two forms, **an** and **na**. **an** is used with singular nouns (with the exception of feminine nouns in the genitive case, but we'll discuss that later), and **na** is used with plural nouns.

For more information, see:

[Practice Thread: The Definite Article, Noun Gender \(IGTF\)](http://www.irishgaelictranslator.com/translation/viewtopic.php?p=400727#400727)

<<http://www.irishgaelictranslator.com/translation/viewtopic.php?p=400727#400727>>

[The definite article an \(the\) \(Bitesize Irish Gaelic\)](http://www.bitesizeirishgaelic.com/lesson/16/)

<<http://www.bitesizeirishgaelic.com/lesson/16/>>

## Pronouns

The personal pronouns in Irish are listed below. Unlike some languages, Irish doesn't have separate formal and informal words for "you".

Regular		Emphatic	
<b>mé</b>	I, me	<b>mé</b>	mise
<b>tú</b>	you (singular)	<b>tú</b>	tusa
<b>sé</b>	he, it	<b>sé, é</b>	seisean, eisean
<b>sí</b>	she, it	<b>sí, í</b>	sisé, isé
<b>muid</b>	we, us	<b>muid, sinn</b>	muidne, sinne
<b>siad</b>	they	<b>siad, iad</b>	siadsan, iadsan
<b>sibh</b>	you (plural)	<b>sibh</b>	sibhse

For more information, see:

[The Pronoun \(GNAG\)](http://nualeargais.ie/gnag/)

<<http://nualeargais.ie/gnag/person.htm>>

## Prepositions

There isn't an exact correspondence between Irish prepositions and English prepositions, but the table below gives a rough guide. Prepositions are very important in Irish because they often affect the meaning of a verb. For that reason, it's a good idea to think of the verb and the preposition together when trying to understand the meaning of a sentence.

ag	at	idir	between
ar	on	le	with
as	out of	ó	from
chun, chuig	to	roimh	before
de	of, off	thar	over
do	to, for	trí	through
faoi	under	um	about
i	in		

For more information see:

## Prepositional pronouns

Prepositions and pronouns combine to form *prepositional pronouns*, as shown in the table below.

ag	agam	agat	aige	aici	againn	agaibh	acu
ar	orm	ort	air	uirthi	orainn	oraibh	orthu
as	asam	asat	as	aisti	asainn	asaibh	astu
chun, chuig	chugam	chugat	chuige	chuici	chugainn	chugaibh	chucu
de	díom	díot	de	di	dínn	díbh	díobh
do	domh	duit	dó	di	dúinn	daoibh	dóibh
faoi	fúm	fút	faoi	fúithi	fúinn	fúibh	fúthu
i	ionam	ionat	ann	inti	ionainn	ionaibh	iontu
idir	-	-	-	-	eadrainn	eadraibh	eatarthu
le	liom	leat	leis	léi	linn	libh	leo, leofa
ó	uaim	uait	uaidh	uaithi	uainn	uaibh	uathu
roimh	romham	romhat	roimhe	roimpi	romhainn	romhaibh	rompu
thar	tharam	tharat	thairis	thairsti	tharainn	tharaibh	tharstu
trí	tríom	tríot	tríd	tríthi	trínn	tríbh	tríothu
um	umam	umat	uime	uimpi	umainn	umaibh	umpu

The preposition ionsar has the same endings as ar.

For more information, see:

[Prepositions and Pronouns \(IGTF\)](http://www.irishgaelictranslator.com/articles/?p=19)  
[<http://www.irishgaelictranslator.com/articles/?p=19>](http://www.irishgaelictranslator.com/articles/?p=19)

## Nouns

Irish has a case system as in Latin. Here are the main cases you need to know about:

Case	Use
nominative	The ordinary or common form of the noun when it is the subject or object of a sentence.
genitive	Used when one noun directly follows another noun, a compound preposition, a quantity word, or one of a few

	special prepositions.
vocative	Used when addressing someone.

For more information, see:

[The Noun \(GNAG\)](http://nualeargais.ie/gnag/subst2.htm)

<<http://nualeargais.ie/gnag/subst2.htm>>

## Gender

Nouns in Irish are either masculine or feminine. There used to be a neuter gender, but it is no longer used, although you can see the remnants of it in certain placenames. Some grammatical changes work differently for masculine and feminine nouns, so knowing the gender of a noun is important.

Most Irish nouns are masculine, but the following types of nouns are usually feminine:

- nouns ending in a slender consonant (but not -aeir, -éir, -eoir, -óir, -úir, -ín)
- nouns ending in -eog, -óg, -lann
- multi-syllable nouns ending in -acht or -íocht
- names of countries and languages
- abstract nouns ending in -e or -í

Those rules work most of the time, but it's best to learn a noun's gender along with the noun itself. The best way to remember a noun's gender is to practice using the noun with the definite article. That's because the article can cause a change to the noun depending on its gender.

For more information, see:

[Masculine and Feminine \(IGTF\)](http://www.irishgaelictranslator.com/articles/?p=18),

<<http://www.irishgaelictranslator.com/articles/?p=18>>

[Practice Thread: The Definite Article, Noun Gender \(IGTF\)](http://www.irishgaelictranslator.com/translation/viewtopic.php?p=400727#400727),

<<http://www.irishgaelictranslator.com/translation/viewtopic.php?p=400727#400727>>

[Practice Thread: Guessing a noun's declension and gender \(IGTF\)](http://www.irishgaelictranslator.com/translation/viewpost.392137.html)

<<http://www.irishgaelictranslator.com/translation/viewpost.392137.html>>

## Slenderisation and Broadening

There are situations in Irish where you have to make the final consonant of a word broad or slender. For example, to form the genitive of some nouns you make the final consonant slender; for others, you make the final consonant broad.

### Slenderisation (Caolú)

The most common way to make a final consonant slender is to insert an "i":

bád -> báid

But some vowel combinations require special treatment:

Original	Transforms to...
fear	fir
éan	éin
iasc	éisc
fionn	finn
síol	síl
bacach	baicigh
oifigeach	oifigigh
beithíoch	beithigh

### Broadening (Leathnú)

The most common way to make a final consonant broad is to remove an "i":

máthair -> máthar

But again, some vowel combinations require special treatment:

Original	Transforms to...
greim	greama
mil	meala
báicéir	báicéara

cuid	coda
feadaíl	feadaíola

## Noun Declensions

In Irish, a declension is basically a group of nouns that tend to form the plural and genitive according to a common pattern. (Declensions are more complex in some languages.) Knowing the declension will help you figure out the genitive and plural form of the noun.

This is an area I was afraid at first, because it seemed that there were hundreds of rules. But once I started, I realised that it's not as difficult as it first seems. A few simple guidelines will take care of most of the nouns you meet, and that's what I'm going to focus on in this guide.

First, a quick overview of the declensions. The first declension is almost all male nouns. The second is mostly female. The third and fourth declensions have both male and female nouns. Technically, there are 5 declensions. But the fifth declension contains a small number of common nouns, and I think it's easier to treat them as exceptions.

Now you're ready to learn **Wombat's Simple Declension Guessing Technique**. I think it's easier to consider the declensions in reverse order. Visualise a coin sorter, where the coin goes into the first slot that fits. Ask yourself a series of questions, and stop at the first question with a "yes" answer. Looking at the common (nominative) form of the noun, is it...

- An *abstract* noun ending in -e, -í? Then it's probably **f4**.
- Ends in a vowel or -ín? Then it's probably **m4**.
- Ends in -áil, -úil, -ail, -úint, -cht, -irt? Then it's probably **f3**.
- Ends in -éir, -eoir, -óir, -úir? Then it's probably **m3**.
- Ends in a slender consonant or -eog, -óg, -lann? Then it's probably **f2**.
- Ends in a broad consonant? Then it's probably **m1**.

Note: An abstract noun represents something that you can't see, touch, feel, taste or smell.

 **Tip:** There are exceptions to these guidelines, but most of the exceptions are common nouns. By the time you start learning about declensions, you'll already know a lot of the exceptional forms.

For more information, see:

[Practice Thread: Guessing a noun's declension and gender \(IGTF\)](http://www.irishgaelictranslator.com/translation/viewpost.392137.html)

<<http://www.irishgaelictranslator.com/translation/viewpost.392137.html>>

## Plurals

There are two basic patterns to the way a noun changes. In "weak plurals", the genitive plural is the same as the nominative singular. In "strong plurals", all the plural forms are identical: the genitive plural is the same as the nominative (common) plural and the vocative plural. To summarise:

**weak plurals:** genitive plural = nominative singular

**strong plurals:** genitive plural = nominative plural = vocative plural

This information isn't usually that helpful in figuring out the npl, because if you don't know the npl, you probably don't know the gpl or vpl either. But it certainly comes in handy for figuring out the gpl or vpl. So it's worth knowing the difference:

- Weak plurals usually end in: -(a)igh, -a, or -e
- Strong plurals usually end in: -(e)anna, -ta, -te, -tha, -the, -(a)í, -(e)adh, -(a)í, í, -(e)acha, -lte, -lne, OR they're formed by syncope ("scrunching") the ns and adding -e or -a.

 **Tip:** Think of a very similar word whose plural you *do* know. In this case, "similar" means ending in the same sequence of letters. Chances are the plural for the "new" word is formed in the same way.

For more information, see:

[Practice Thread: Weak vs Strong Plurals \(IGTF\)](http://www.irishgaelictranslator.com/translation/viewtopic.php?p=397104#397104)

<<http://www.irishgaelictranslator.com/translation/viewtopic.php?p=397104#397104>>

[Plural of nouns \(Bitesize Irish Gaelic\)](http://www.bitesizeirishgaelic.com/lesson/19/)

<<http://www.bitesizeirishgaelic.com/lesson/19/>>

## Verbs

Irish has the following verb tenses and moods.

Tense or Mood	Irish Name	Use
Present	Aimsir Láithreach	Describes something that is happening at the moment.
Habitual Present	Aimsir Ghnáthláithreach	Describes something that happens regularly.
Past	Aimsir Chaite	Describes something that happened in the past.
Habitual Past, Imperfect	Aimsir Ghnáthchaite	Describes something that happened regularly in the past.
Future	Aimsir Fháistineach	Describes something that will happen in the future.
Imperative	Modh Ordaitheach	Expresses a command, advice, or a request.
Conditional	Modh Coinníollach	Indicates what would happen under certain circumstances.
Present Subjunctive	Modh Foshuiteach Láithreach	Expresses a wish.

The meaning of a verb often depends on the preposition that accompanies it. For example,

Bhuail mé **le** Seán means “I met Seán”

Bhuail mé Seán means “I hit Seán”

## Verbal Adjectives

English has a perfect tense for expressing ideas such as *It is finished* or *I have eaten dinner*. Irish uses a verbal adjective, an adjective formed from a verb, to express this idea.

Tá sé *déanta*.                      It is *finished*.

Tá an dinnéar *ite* agam.            I have *eaten* dinner.

For more information, see:

[Verbal Adjectives \(GNAG\)](#)

<<http://nualeargais.ie/gnag/verbadj.htm>>

## Verbal Nouns

Irish uses a verbal noun, an noun formed from a verb, to express actions which are in progress.

Tá mé *ag ithe*. I am *eating*.  
Tá muid *ag foghlaim* Gaeilge. We are *learning* Irish.

The verbal noun is also used where an infinitive (to eat, to buy) would be used in English.

Ba mhaith liom *imeacht*. I want *to leave*.  
Tá áthas orm tú *a fheiceáil*. I am happy *to see* you.

For more information, see:

[Verbal Nouns \(GNAG\)](#)

<<http://nualeargais.ie/gnag/verbnom.htm>>

## Copula

Irish uses two different verbs that correspond to the English verb is/am. A special verb called the *copula* is used:

- To say what something is (identification and classification).
- With the preposition *le* to express ownership.
- To give your name.
- To mark emphasis by moving words toward the beginning of a sentence.

In other situations, the verb *bí* (*tá*) is used. Here are some examples:

*Tá* mé *sásta*. I *am* happy.  
*Is* muinteoir mé. I *am* a teacher.  
*Is* mé an *múinteoir*. I *am* the teacher.  
*Is* mise Máire. I *am* Máire.

For more information, see:

[The Copula 1 \(IGTF\)](#),

<<http://www.irishgaelictranslator.com/articles/?p=12>>

[The Copula 2 \(IGTF\)](#),

<<http://www.irishgaelictranslator.com/articles/?p=13>>

[The Copula 3 \(IGTF\)](#)

<<http://www.irishgaelictranslator.com/articles/?p=14>>

## Adjectives

Adjectives normally follow the noun they modify:

bean óg	a young woman
teach nua	a new house
sráid fhada	a long street

A few adjectives precede the noun:

seancharr	an old car
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For more information, see:

[The Adjective \(GNAG\)](#)

<<http://nualeargais.ie/gnag/gram.htm?adjekt1.htm>>

## Comparisons

In English, we usually make comparisons by tacking the suffix *-er* or *-est* onto the adjective. Here's how it's done in Irish:

mór	big	níos mó ní ba mhó*	bigger	is mó ba mhó*	biggest
fuar	cold	níos fuaire ní b'fhuairé*	colder	is fuaire ab fhuairé*	coldest
álainn	lovely	níos áille ní b'áille*	lovelier	is áille ab áille*	loveliest

\* past and conditional tenses

Note that the same form of the adjective is used for the relative and absolute comparisons. It's the prefix, **níos** or **is**, that makes the difference. Also note that the comparison is expressed differently for the past tense. (We're only going to worry about the present tense in this thread.)

The most common structures for comparing things are:

Is <i>comparative</i> X ná Y	X is ___er than Y.
Tá X níos <i>comparative</i> ná Y	X is ___er than Y.
Is X an Z is <i>comparative</i>	X is the ___est Z.

You may have notice something unusual about that first structure. I said earlier that **is** is used for absolute comparisons, where we use the '-est' ending in English, but I translate the first structure using an "-er" ending. You probably remember your English teacher saying that you compare two things using "-er"; that "-est" could only be used with three or more things. However, Irish doesn't have this rule. A sentence

such as *Is í an tsúil chlé an tsúil is láidre* literally means "My right eye is the *strongest* eye", where in English we would say "My right eye is the *stronger* eye."

For more information, see:

[Comparisons \(IGTF\)](#)

<<http://www.irishgaelictranslator.com/translation/viewposth.403933.html#403933>>

**\*\* END OF GUIDE \*\***

## About this article

“Wombat's Irish Grammar Guide” is provided free of charge at <http://www.irishgaelictranslator.com/wombat/>.

## Want to learn to speak Irish?

This guide has given you a strong basis for Irish grammar. If you are still a beginner and thirsty for more, you should sign up at [Bitesize Irish Gaelic](http://www.bitesizeirishgaelic.com/) <http://www.bitesizeirishgaelic.com/>.

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