

# The Sounds of Choctaw

## A GUIDE TO SPELLING AND PRONUNCIATION

The following are the letters of the Choctaw alphabet.

A	a	M	m
Ū	ʋ (represents short sound of a)	N	n
B	b	O	o
Ch	ch (there is no c)	U	u (refer to Rule Three)
F	f	P	p
H	h	S	s
I	ɪ	Sh	sh
E	e (refer to Rule Three, Minor Rule)	T	t
K	k	W	w
L	l	Y	y
Hl	hl (refer to Rule Four; Minor Rule)		

Choctaw spelling is much more regular than English spelling but it does have minor complications. The rules below give the main rules for spelling and pronunciation.

Rule One – The basic vowels are usually written with the letters *a*, *i* and *o*.

*a* sounds like (1) *a* in the word water, or  
(2) *a* in the word sofa

*i* sounds like (1) *i* in the word pit, or  
(2) *i* in the word machine (e sound)

O has a very unique sound. There is not an English word which equates this unique sound. You will learn to produce this sound by listening to the Sound of Choctaw CD. As you listen to the Sounds of Choctaw, you will imitate the sounds by pronouncing the picture word cards as I pronounce the words.

a	as in:	achi	to say	ampo	plate
		chaha	tall	anumpa	word/language

anchi	quilt	tanchi	corn
lawa	many	tahli	finish
hattak	person, man	halite	hello
taloa	to sing	osapa	field

i	as in:	pinak	groceries, food	hokli	to catch
		nita	bear	mahli	wind
		ofi	dog	ishi	to grasp
		iti	tree	koni	skunk
		ishko	to drink	okhlili	dark, dusk
		ikbi	to build, to make	weki	heavy

o	as in:	ofi	dog	okti	ice
		oka	water	topa	bed
		tohto	elm	homma	red
		koni	skunk	homi	bitter
		oksak	hickory	tohbi	white
		noti	tooth	okchi	juice
		ola	to ring	hoponi	to cook

Rule Two – In many words, *u* is written for *o* and *v* is written for *a*. That is, *u* and *o* has the same sound but sometimes *u* is written to represent the short sound of *o*. Listen to the sound of *u*. Do you hear the short sound? Listen to the short sound of *u* in these words:

chula	fox	anumpa	language/word
hushi	bird	chumpa	to buy
ushi	offspring	nusi	sleep
shukka/shukha	pig	shukcha	pocket, bag

In the same way, *v* and *a* have the same sound but *v* is sometimes written to represent the short sound of *a*. You can hear the short sound of *a* in these words.

hvshi	sun	pvla	light	vlla	child
tvli	rock	vba	upward	nvni	fish
hvpi	salt	vla	arrive	pvlhki	fast

Modern Choctaw tend to use a and o where in the past v and u were used.

Here are some examples:

Modern—Past

chompa/chumpa	buy
homma/humma	red
sholush/shulush	shoes
nosi/nusi	sleep
anompa/anumpa	word, language
pala/pvla	light
oshi/ushi	offspring

Modern—Past

hapi/hvpi	salt
hashi/hvshi	sun
tali/tvli	rock
ammi/vmmi	mine
kata/kvta	who
katos/kvtus	cat
hattak/hattvk	man, person

Rule Three – Some words are accented. Although they are not accented in the traditional spelling, the accented vowels will be accented to show that it will have a higher pitch than the unaccented vowels. Listen closely to the accented vowels as opposed to the unaccented words.

oka	water	Chahta	Choctaw	koni	skunk
opa	owl	bahta	sack	foni	bone
okti	ice	ishi	to grasp	shukha	hog
okchi	juice	hishi	fur	shukcha	bag, pocket
shinuk	sand	nvnih	fish	shakba	arm

Minor Rule – The letter e is written for long i. As in English e says its name.

Listen to the pronunciation of these words. Listen to the sounds of e.

weki	heavy	sheik	buzzard	tek	female
Me	May	ahe	potatoes	tuchena/tuchchena	three

Rule Four – The consonant hl has two pronunciations, one old and the other recent. The modern pronunciation is the easiest to learn; it is the same as the th sound in *think*, *thought* and *health*. The older pronunciation is like the th and l spoken at the same time: thl.

I will use the modern pronunciation, the th sound, as I pronounce the following words. These words are written hl before a vowel.

hlampko	strong	bihlibli	to point
okhlili	dusk	okhlilika	dark
vhleha	plural	hlioli	chase
hihla	dance	tihlili	to send out

Minor Rule – When hl is followed by a consonant, it is written lh.

vlhtaha	ready	pvlhki	fast	ilhpa	groceries, food
ulhti	district	ilhkoli	go in a group	vlhtoka	elected

But there are exceptions concerning hl. Compare mah-li (wind) and vhleha (plural). In mahli, the letter h is pronounced separate from l. In vhleha, the sound of hl is the th sound.

Rule Five – When a double consonant is written, both are pronounced. This gives the effect of one long, drawn out consonant. Listen closely to the pronunciation of the double consonants.

atobbi	to pay	ibbak	hand	homma	red
libbi	to burn	sokko	thick	tiwwi	to open
issish	blood	illi	die	vlla	child
kullo	hard	vmmi	mine	pokkoli	ten

Minor Rule – The white missionaries often did not hear the double consonants because English does not have them; in English, tt sounds the same as t. The missionaries often wrote a single consonant where they should have written a double. Allen Wright, a Choctaw, carefully wrote all double consonants in his dictionary.

Here are some words which the missionaries wrote with single consonants.

hattak/hatak	person, man	nittak/nitak	day
iyyi/iyi	foot	issi/isi	deer
katimma/katima	which way	pokkoli/pokoli	ten
hoppi/hopi	to bury	chukka/chuka	house
hashshuk/hashuk	grass	tuchchena/tuchena	three

Rule Six – Double yy is written iy after o and a.

kaiya	full	haiyip	pond	baiyi	white oak
oiya	climb	yaiya	cry	hoiyokli	to finally catch

Rule Seven – Usually owa and owi were written oa and oi; also iya and iyo were written ia and io.

nia	fat	ia	to go	fiopa	to breathe
fowi	bee	kowi	lion	lua	burn
taloa	to sing	nukoa	mad	nukwia	bashful
kiyo	not	kania	to leave or be lost		



Example: Is that black dog sleeping?

Translated as: Ofi lusa mvt nusi ho?

*Sleeping* is the action word, so you would use the question marker ho.

#### Question marker yo

Look for a word that is describing someone or something. It could be a color, size or number word. That will be the word that tells you to use the question marker yo.

Example: Is that a brown shoe?

Translated as: Yvmmvt shulush lusakbi yo?

The word that describes the noun (*shoe*) is the word *brown*. The question marker yo would be used. Remember, the question marker yo follows descriptive words.

#### Question marker o

This question marker follows consonants. Consonants are not your vowels (a, i, o, v), as you can see in the sentence example. If the question is asking about something, or someone, you would use the question marker o:

Example: Is that a cat?

Translated as: Yvmmvt katos o?

Example: Did you go?

Translated as: Ish ia tuk o?