

THE CAPITAL LETTER

EARLY FORMS			CURRENT FORMS			EARLY FORMS			CURRENT FORMS	
Phoenician	Greek	Etruscan	Roman (Latin)	roman	italic	Roman cursive	Roman uncial	Carolingian minuscule	roman	italic
𐤀	Α	𐌀	N	N	N	𐌆	N	𐌺	n	n
⊙	⊙⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙	o	o
𐤁	ΑΠ	𐌁	P	P	P	𐌇	P	𐌻	p	p
𐤂	𐌖	𐌂	Q	Q	Q	𐌈	Q	q	q	q
𐤃	𐌗	𐌃	R	R	R	𐌉	R	r	r	r
W	ΣΣ	𐌄	S	S	S	𐌊	S	S	s	s
+	XT	T	T	T	T	𐌋	T	τ	t	t
Y	4Y	Y	V	U	U	U	U	u	u	u
Y	4Y	V	V	V	V	U	Y	U	v	v
Y	4Y	Y	V	W	W		W		w	w
⌘	⌘X⌘		X	X	X	X	X	X	x	x
Y	4Y	Y	V	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	y	y
I	I Z	I	Z	Z	Z	Z	Z	Z	z	z

THE SMALL LETTER

# A

■ A, a

[Called ay, rhyming with say]. The 1st LETTER of the Roman ALPHABET as used for English. It descends from the Phoenician symbol for a GLOTTAL STOP, the sound at the beginning of its name, 'aleph ('ox'). This letter, a consonant in Phoenician, was adopted by the Greeks as a vowel, A, to which they gave the name alpha. It was later adopted as A first by the Etruscans, then the Romans.

**Sound values.** (1) Short, as in *hat, lack, apple*. (2) Long, as in *hate, lake, maple, chaos*. In many accents of English, this sound is a diphthong, /eɪ/, often in RP with a special value before r, /eə/, as in *vary, scarce*. (3) In RP and related accents, phonetically long and open, /a:/, in such words as *clam, dance, far, father*. (4) SCHWA in weak syllables, as in *avoid, prevalent, viable, vital, relevant, vicar, villa*. In RP, the weak form sometimes has the value of short i, /ɪ/, as in *private, village*. (5) After /w/ and before /l/, a phonetically long, open value of o, /ɔ:/, as in *wall, war, water, quarter, tall*; in RP, after w, a short o-sound, /ɒ/, as in *swamp, swastika*; likewise in *yacht*. (6) In any, many, the short e-sound in *hen*.

**Digraphs and other combinations.** With the value of long a in cases 1-3. (1) a-e, where one or more consonants separate a and e: *hate, pale, waste*. (2) ai, initially and medially: *aid, pail, maintain*. The value of short e is often heard in *again, against, said*. (3) ay, in final positions: *day, dismay, relay*. The value of short e is often heard in *says*. (4) au, initially and medially: *sauce, author, because, laurel*. These have values of o that tend to be accent-dependent: for example, /ɔ/ in RP, and /ɒ/ in AmE, sometimes with length variation. (5) aw, in all positions, but especially finally: *awful, drawl, saw* (with various values, many comparable to those of au). (6) aa, only in loans, such as: names from Hebrew, with the long-a value in *Aaron, Canaan*, and schwa in *Isaac*; from Afrikaans, with the value of phonetically long, open a (*aardvark, kraal*). (7) ae, in diverse loans, usually with the value of long a: *maelstrom*, from Dutch; *Gael*, from Celtic; *Ishmael, Israel*, from Hebrew. (8) As second

element in a digraph (*ea, oa*), a usually indicates a special value for the first vowel, but is not itself pronounced: long e in *east, beat, cheated*, long o in *oats, boat, soaked*, with a glide effect before r in non-rhotic accents, as in *fear, boar*. (9) In four words, ea has the value of long a: *break, great, steak, yea*. (10) In many common words, the digraph ea is pronounced as short e: *bread, meadow, ready, sweat, zealous*. (11) The letter a combines in unusual, sometimes unique ways with other vowel letters in: *aisle, aunt, beauty, broad, guinea, laugh, quay*. (12) Distinctive values in loanwords are usually preserved: *bureau, gauche, gauch, naive/naïve*. For the symbol æ, see DIGRAPH.

**Variations.** (1) In some pairs of derivationally associated words, a has been replaced or has disappeared in unstressed syllables (*abstain/abstinence, maintain/maintenance, float/flotation*); in others, it alternates with other letters (*appearance/apparent, comparative/comparison, message/messenger*). (2) There is variation in the endings -ant/ent, -ance/ence, -ancy/ency, producing such forms as *assistant, concomitant, consistent, insistent, persistent, resistant*. These differences relate to the historical derivation of the words in question: whether they were acquired directly from Latin or through French. If taken straight from Latin, the words derive from the participles of verbs that have either an a-stem (as with *concomitant*, from *concomitans* accompanying) or an e-stem (as with *consistent, insistent, and persistent*, from variations on the base form *-sistens* standing, setting). If, however, they are taken from French, they derive from participles all of which end in -ant, regardless of verb class (as with *assistant and resistant*). Sometimes, a distinction in meaning and use arises, as in *dependant/dependent*, but in *ambiance/ambience* there is no such distinction.

■ ABBREVIATION

The shortening of words and phrases (*kilogram to kg, Imperial Chemical Industries to ICI*) and a result of such shortening (*MA for Master of Arts, sitcom for situation comedy*).