

FREE GUIDE · NO EMAIL REQUIRED

Zero to A1:

The Honest Beginner's Roadmap to Learning Russian

Start with one useful goal

If Russian still looks like a wall of unfamiliar letters, start here. This guide will help you recognise Cyrillic, read your first words, understand a few useful patterns, and try a short story with support.

RussianReading's graded stories begin at A1. This is the bridge before them. You can read the whole guide online or keep the PDF beside you while you practise. No email address is needed.

Your first goal is reading readiness. You do not need perfect pronunciation or a complete grammar system to begin. You do need a growing connection between letters, sounds, and meaning.

A1 is a broader language level. The Council of Europe's framework includes understanding familiar language and using simple expressions in everyday interaction. Its A1 reading description allows very short texts, slow progress through phrases, and rereading. Pre-A1 includes recognising familiar words with visual support.¹

Treat the stages below as a route you can revisit. There is no promise that you will reach A1 in a particular number of days.

1. A roadmap you can adjust

Stage	What to practise	A useful sign of progress
Recognise	Connect printed upper- and lowercase letters with sounds.	You can identify most letters out of alphabetical order.
Decode	Read small groups of letters, then short real words.	You can work through an unfamiliar short word using the chart.
Understand	Attach meanings to common words and complete phrases.	You recognise a phrase without translating every letter.
Connect	Follow several simple sentences about one situation.	You can say who is there and what happens, with help.
Read with support	Try a short A1 story with audio and translation.	A second reading feels more familiar than the first.

These stages overlap. Begin learning meanings immediately, and keep listening while you learn letters. Move forward when the next task feels possible, then return to anything that still causes trouble.

Choose one dependable beginner course or teacher for the broader language journey. Use this guide for the reading bridge. A notebook, a source of clear Russian audio, and a little regular attention are enough to start the exercises here.

2. Meet the 33 Cyrillic letters

Russian uses 33 letters: 10 vowel letters, 21 consonant letters, and two signs. The chart shows sounds to aim toward, not letter names. English cues are approximate; listening is essential.²

For an audio starting point, open the [Golosa alphabet recordings](#), hosted by George Washington University. Follow the alphabet links and listen while looking at Cyrillic.⁶

LETTER	STARTING SOUND CUE	LETTER	STARTING SOUND CUE
А а	ah, roughly the vowel in father	Р р	a tapped or rolled r
Б б	b	С с	s
В в	v	Т т	t
Г г	hard g, as in get	У у	oo, roughly as in food
Д д	d	Ф ф	f
Е е	ye, subject to the note below	Х х	friction like ch in Scottish loch
Ё ё	yo, subject to the note below	Ц ц	ts, spoken together
Ж ж	near the s in measure, made farther back	Ч ч	a soft ch
З з	z	Ш ш	a hard sh, made farther back than English sh
И и	ee, roughly as in see	Щ щ	a longer, softer sh sound
Й й	a brief y sound, as in yes	Ъ ъ	hard sign; no sound of its own
К к	k	Ы ы	no exact English equivalent; learn it with audio
Л л	l; listen for its hard and soft forms	Ь ь	soft sign; no sound of its own
М м	m	Э э	eh, roughly as in bed
Н н	n	Ю ю	yoo, subject to the note below
О о	a rounded o when stressed; avoid an English oh glide	Я я	ya, subject to the note below
П п	p		

A note on е, ё, ю, я: the initial y cue applies at the beginning of a word and commonly after a vowel or a separating sign. After many consonants, these letters instead help indicate that the preceding consonant is soft. They are not a command to add a separate y after every consonant.³

The vowel letters are а, е, ё, и, о, у, ы, э, ю, я. The signs Ъ and Ь are not vowels.²

Learn in small groups

Start with А, К, М, О, Т. Then watch the familiar-looking traps: В sounds like v, Н like n, Р is r, С is s, and У is oo. Add a few new letters each session.

Practise both cases: Б б, Д д, Р р. Shuffle them. Recognising a letter inside a word is more useful than remembering its place in the alphabet. Focus on ordinary print first; cursive can come later.

3. Four pronunciation habits to start now

Notice the stressed vowel

In кнѐга (book), the accent shows the stressed vowel. Give that syllable more prominence. These accents are learning aids; ordinary Russian writing usually omits them. Learn a new word with its stress and audio, because spelling alone often does not tell you where stress falls.²

Keep the dots on ѐ

In ordinary beginner vocabulary, ѐ carries the stress: вѐсѐ means “everything” or “all.” Everyday print sometimes uses e where the word has ѐ. Check a dictionary or recording when needed; the dots can distinguish words, including все (everyone/all) and вѐсѐ.^{2 5}

Expect sounds to change in words

In standard pronunciation, unstressed o is reduced. Listen to молоко́ (milk) rather than giving all three vowel letters the same sound. Some consonants change sound too: the final б in хле́б (bread) sounds like п.³

Two common words have surprises: что sounds like што, and the р in еро́ sounds like в.

Hear softness before trying to master it

Many consonants have hard and soft versions. “Soft” describes tongue position, not volume. Ь often marks softness; ь acts as a separator before certain vowel letters. Neither has its own sound. Use recordings of whole words to hear what the signs do. You can improve these distinctions while you keep reading.³

Use transliteration briefly. Latin spellings can help you begin, but they hide distinctions in Russian. Cover them whenever you can. Read from Cyrillic, listen, and return to Cyrillic again.

4. Read your first words

Work through one row at a time. Identify the letters, blend them slowly, then check the meaning. Repeat in a different order. A recording or a teacher can check pronunciation; these written drills mainly train recognition.

Try м + а → ма, then ма + ма → ма́ма (mum/mom). Use the consonant sound, not its letter name.

Read in Russian	Check the meanings
мак · кот · там · ма́ма	poppy · male cat · there · mum/mom
дом · нос · сок · парк	house/home · nose · juice · park
метрó · таксі́ · ко́фе · молоко́	metro/subway · taxi · coffee · milk
кнѐга · стол · чай · до́ма	book · table · tea · at home

Try three tiny sentences:

- Вот кот. Here is a cat.
- Кот до́ма. The cat is at home.
- Где кот? Where is the cat?

Now cover the English. Which word asks “where”? Which tells you the cat's location? Answers: где and до́ма.

If you keep mixing up two letters, practise those two in words. You do not have to restart the whole alphabet. If you can decode a word but do not know its meaning yet, the decoding still counts as progress.

5. Learn phrases you can reuse

Start with small chunks whose meanings you understand. Read the Russian first, use the English to check, then cover it.

Russian	Natural English meaning
Приве́т!	Hi! Informal.
Здра́вствуйте!	Hello! Polite, or addressed to more than one person.
Спаси́бо.	Thank you.
Пожáлуйста.	Please / You're welcome, depending on context.
Да. / Нет.	Yes. / No.
Меня́ зову́т А́нна.	My name is Anna.
Я не понима́ю.	I don't understand.
Повтори́те, пожа́луйста.	Please repeat. Polite or plural.
Что э́то?	What is this?
Где кни́га?	Where is the book?

Try your own name in Меня́ зову́т It is useful to learn this as a complete introduction before analysing every part.

Four sentence patterns

Point something out: Э́то кни́га. means "This is a book." Russian has no articles corresponding directly to English a and the.

Say where someone is: А́нна до́ма. means "Anna is at home." In simple present-tense statements like this, Russian normally leaves out the word corresponding to English is.

Recognise an action: Я чита́ю. means "I read" or "I am reading." А́нна чита́ет. means "Anna reads" or "Anna is reading." The verb ending changes with the subject.

Make it negative: Я не чита́ю. means "I am not reading." Here не goes before the verb.

Word endings will change too. Compare Э́то кни́га. (This is a book.) with Я чита́ю кни́гу. (I am reading a book.) The book is the thing being read in the second sentence. Notice the pattern now; learn the case system gradually through a beginner course.

6. Your first supported mini-story

А́нна и ко́т · Anna and the cat

Before reading, meet these useful pieces. The story repeats several words you have already seen.

Russian	Meaning here
и	and
он	he; here, the cat
на столе́	on the table
тут	here
его́ зову́т	his name is
спит	is sleeping
смóтрит на	is looking at
тепе́рь	now

Read once for the people, animal, and objects. On the second pass, work out what everyone is doing.

Э́то А́нна. А́нна до́ма. Вот стол. На столе́ кнѐга и чай. Тут ко́т. Его́ зову́т Ма́кс. Ма́кс не спит. Он смóтрит на кнѐгу. А́нна чита́ет. Тепе́рь Ма́кс спит.

Check your understanding

1. Where is Anna?
2. What is on the table?
3. What is the cat's name?
4. Is Max sleeping at the start?
5. What is Anna doing?

English support

This is Anna. Anna is at home. Here is a table. There is a book and tea on the table. Here is a cat. His name is Max. Max is not sleeping. He is looking at the book. Anna is reading. Now Max is sleeping.

Answers: 1. At home. 2. A book and tea. 3. Max. 4. No. 5. Reading.

Look again at кнѐга and кнѐгу, and at стол and на столе́. Their endings change with their role in the sentence. You can understand this scene with support before you can produce every form yourself.

For one small writing task, copy А́нна чита́ет. Then change the name. For one speaking task, say your new sentence after checking the verb's pronunciation. Keep the task small enough to repeat comfortably.

7. A practical 15–20 minute routine

This is a suggested routine, not a tested timetable for reaching A1. Adjust it to your attention, schedule, and learning needs.

Time	Task
3 minutes	Recall yesterday's letters or phrases before checking your notes.
4 minutes	Learn a few new letters or useful words. Include meaning, stress, and audio.
5 minutes	Read a few sentences or part of a short story. Try first, then use support.
3 minutes	Reread. Say or write one sentence using something you noticed.
Optional 5 minutes	Listen again, practise an exchange, or revisit a difficult word.

On your first sessions, spend the reading time on the word drills. Later, replace those drills with connected sentences. Change the balance as your needs change.

Keep a small review list. Instead of collecting every unknown word, choose three to five that matter to the text or your life. Record a phrase where possible: на столе is more useful than an isolated ending.

Return to old material. Read today's sentence tomorrow and again after a few more sessions. If you miss a day, resume with a familiar passage. Progress does not depend on protecting a perfect streak.

8. Are you ready to try an A1 story?

Use this as a practical check, not a CEFR assessment:

- I recognise most printed Cyrillic letters without a chart.
- I can slowly decode short words and know how to check their pronunciation.
- I notice stress marks and recognise ё, ъ, and ѓ.
- I understand several common phrases and short sentence patterns.
- With a glossary or translation, I can identify who, where, and a main action in a tiny text.
- I can reread a passage and recognise something that was unfamiliar before.

If most of these feel true, try a short A1 story. You do not need every box to feel effortless. If every word requires a lookup, return to shorter passages and learn the words you keep meeting.

On [RussianReading](#), choose A1 · Beginner and a familiar topic. Read a small section, listen to the audio, reveal its translation when useful, and use Study to explore a sentence. These supports are part of the learning process.⁴

Save a few useful phrases, then reread the same section. Finishing one page with understanding is a better session goal than racing through a story you cannot follow.

9. Keep building toward a balanced A1

Reading can become the centre of your routine while other skills grow alongside it. For a broader A1 goal, also practise understanding clear, slow speech, introducing yourself, asking simple questions, responding to another person, and writing short personal messages.¹

A beginner course should gradually introduce everyday vocabulary, questions, personal pronouns, noun gender, useful verb forms, and common case patterns. Learn numbers, times, family, food, places, and daily activities through situations you can imagine using.

Turn a reading passage into another skill: listen with the text covered, answer a question aloud, or write two sentences about yourself using a familiar pattern. Get feedback from a teacher or proficient speaker when possible, especially on pronunciation and your own sentences.

Keep reading while you learn the grammar, and let the different skills develop together.

10. Beginner questions, answered honestly

How long does it take to learn Russian to A1?

There is no single honest number for everyone. Your previous languages, study time, practice quality, and feedback all matter. Track abilities from one session to the next. Use a course or assessment designed for A1 when you need a formal level judgement.

Should I learn the whole alphabet before reading?

Learn letters and read simple words together. You can begin with a handful of letters, then expand. Keep the full chart nearby as a reference.

Do I need cursive first?

For this guide's goal of reading printed stories, start with print. Add cursive when your course or writing needs call for it. Different printed and italic forms can also take practice.

Beginner questions, continued

Is it cheating to use a translation?

Use it deliberately: try a short section, check its meaning, then read the Russian again. The useful question is whether you understand more on the next pass.

What if I cannot roll my p or pronounce ы yet?

Keep listening and practising while you continue to read. These sounds deserve attention, but you do not need to stop all other learning until they feel comfortable. A teacher can help you adjust what your tongue is doing.

Can I learn just by reading stories?

Stories give you repeated encounters with words and patterns. Add audio, conversation, writing, and a structured introduction to grammar for a balanced beginner foundation. Your next step can still be small: recognise one word, understand one sentence, and return to it tomorrow.

Sources and further reference

1. Council of Europe, CEFR Companion Volume (2020), especially overall reading comprehension, p. 54, and the A1 level and self-assessment summaries. [Official volume](#).
2. Cornell University, [Russian Alphabet](#). The chart above uses original learner-facing cues; English sound comparisons are approximate.
3. Cornell University, [Letters and Sounds, Part 1](#), on softness, vowel reduction, voicing, and е/ё/ю/я.
4. RussianReading, [Stories](#), for the level filter and reader tools.
5. Gramota.ru, [Use of ё in different kinds of texts](#), from the Russian spelling and punctuation reference. In Russian.
6. George Washington University, [Golosa Book 1 audio](#). Alphabet recordings appear at the top of the page.

The exercises, study routine, readiness check, and mini-story in this guide are original teaching material. The readiness check is not an official CEFR test.