

# YORUBA ORTHOGRAPHY

## I THE ALPHABET

A a	B b	D d	E e	Ẹ ẹ
F f	G g	GB gb	H h	I i
J j	K k	L l	M m	N n
O o	Ọ ọ	P p	R r	S s
Ş ş	T t	U u	W w	Y y

The Yoruba Alphabet has a LATIN-BASED character set just like English. A few letters in English do not occur in Yoruba. They are:

**C c, Q q, V v, X x and Z z.**

On the other hand, three letters in Yoruba are not in the English alphabet. However, they are variants of letters in English. They are:

**Ẹ ẹ, Ọ ọ and Ş ş.**

These three letters incorporate a short vertical bar below. Another acceptable conventional way of representing these three letters is with a 'dot' under, but separate from the main body. These are written like this:

Ẹ ẹ Ọ ọ Ş ş

One other letter that occurs in Yoruba but not in English is the letter 'GB gb' which is the combination of letters 'g' and 'b' into one 'character' and is more appropriately termed a diagraph.

Yoruba is a **TONAL language**. This means that the **PITCH** (tone) with which words are pronounced dictates the meaning of such words. Words can therefore have the same basic spelling, but the pitch with which they are pronounced confers on them entirely different meanings.

There are **THREE** distinct tones in Yoruba; a high pitch represented with an acute accent mark ( ´ ), a mid tone that is usually left unmarked but in certain circumstances marked with a macron ( ¯ ) and a low pitch indicated with a grave accent ( ` ). The accent marks are placed on the vowels in each syllable of a word.

The vowels of the Yoruba alphabet are:

A a	E e	Ẹ ẹ	I i	O o	Ọ ọ	U u
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There is also a group of vowels referred to as ‘nasalized vowels’ where all the above vowels except “ e ” have an additional letter “ n ” after them to constitute a distinct vowel. More about this later.

The vowels with their tonal marks are represented thus:

A a	À à	Á á
E e	È è	É é
Ẹ ẹ	Ẹ̃ ẹ̃	Ẹ́ ẹ́
I i	Ì ì	Í í
O o	Ò ò	Ó ó
Ọ ọ	Ọ̃ ọ̃	Ọ́ ọ́
U u	Ù ù	Ú ú

It should be noted that the letters ‘m’ and ‘n’ behave like a syllable at times and are called ‘syllabic nasal’. Appropriate tone marks are indicated under these circumstances thus:

M m	Ẹ̃ m̃	Ṁ m̄	Ẹ́ ḿ
N n	Ẹ̃ ñ	Ṁ n̄	Ẹ́ ń

To keep things simple, this is probably all the average student of Yoruba needs to know about the basic Yoruba alphabet and its ‘extended’ characters. It is also pertinent to note that the letters **Ẹ ẹ, Ọ ọ and Ẹ̃ ẹ̃** are not universally available in the character repertoire of computers. This is the main reason for the difficulty in rendering Yoruba text correctly and complete with all the required diacritics. This makes it necessary to have special font software to provide for this deficiency.

However, for the sake of completeness, there are also historical aspects of the development of Yoruba orthography that needs to be addressed. This requires the availability of the appropriate characters that have been or continues to be used in Yoruba text. These have to be provided for in any font software that can boast of having the complete character repertoire of the Yoruba language.

### The mid-tone mark on regular vowels.

According to convention, the mid tone is usually unmarked in Yoruba text when the high or low tones are marked. However, it is sometimes necessary, at the discretion of an author for clarity of meaning, to indicate the mid tone on regular vowels when all the syllables of a word are pronounced with the mid tone. It may be necessary to clarify ‘āwō̄’ as opposed to ‘àwo’.

The mid tone is represented with a macron.

Ā ā	Ē ē	Ĕ ĕ	Ī ī	Ō ō	Ū ū	Ū ū
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Although we have said that there are three basic pitches with which Yoruba words are pronounced, in practice spoken Yoruba does not adhere totally to this condition. It is instructive to note here that a time-honored method of appreciating Yoruba intonation has been to liken the sound to the three musical tones ‘do – re – mi’. ‘Do’ is the low pitch sound, ‘re’ is mid tone and ‘mi’ is the high pitch.

### Low-rising tone (assimilated low tone)

A full discussion of this phenomenon is not intended here, but suffice it to say that my reading of the decision of the Yoruba Orthography Committee is that it remains inconclusive. Many authors continue to use the ‘low-rising’ tone mark (ˇ) in their writing. I particularly prefer to write my own family name as **Ōnăyemí** rather than distorting it by doubling the ‘a’

Ă ă	Ě ě	Ě ě	Ĭ ĭ	Ŏ ŏ	Ū ū	Ū ū
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### A word of caution; the ‘tilde’.

Current accepted Yoruba Orthography has **done away with** the use of the tilde to indicate a combination of tones in some words where this situation exists. The words in question are now written with a doubling of the vowel and application of distinct tone marks to each vowel. An example is the word ‘ōr̀ùn’ which may stand for either “smell” or “sun”. Writing it as ‘óór̀ùn’ for ‘smell’ and ‘òòr̀ùn’ for ‘sun’ to make their meaning clear and unambiguous. Extant Yoruba texts with the tilde in use abound. It is instructive for the Yoruba student to be aware of this, and useful for the typeface to represent the tilde to continue to be available for academic discourse.

Ãã	Ēē	Ĕĕ	Īī	Ōō	Ūū	Ūū
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References: Orthographies of Nigerian Languages Manual I  
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## Special Note

It was pointed out earlier that the two conventions of appending an ‘under-bar’ or ‘dot’ to the letters ‘e’ ‘o’ and ‘s’ to form a different and distinct set of letters of the Yoruba alphabet are both acceptable in Yoruba orthography. Individual Yoruba language authors have a preference for one or the other and an academic discussion of the merits of that choice is beyond the scope of this writing. It is however instructive to note that this situation has profound implications for the character code assignment for computer text. Font developers need to be fully conversant with this state of affairs. Is it possible to assign the same code to the two variants of a letter and leave it to the installed font to render it one way or the other according to its underlying style?

The following table shows the two ways of rendering these letters.

È	ẹ	È	ẹ	É	é	Ē	ē	Ě	ě	Ê	ê
È	ẹ	È	ẹ	É	é	Ē	ē	Ě	ě	Ê	ê

Ò	ọ	Ò	ọ	Ó	ó	Ō	ō	Ǫ	ǫ	Õ	õ
Ò	ọ	Ò	ọ	Ó	ó	Ō	ō	Ǫ	ǫ	Õ	õ

Ş	ş
Ş	ş