

Basic spelling and pronunciation rules

The diacritic symbols used in Czech are called: ˇ hacek hook (symbol for softening consonants), ˘ čárka length mark (long vowels) and ° kroužek circle (long vowel).

1. We divide vowels into short a, e, i/y, o, u and long á, é, í/ý, ó, ú/ů. Long vowels are about 1.75x longer than their short counterparts. In Czech there are also three diphthongs: ou, au, eu.
2. The vowels i and y (or í and ý) are pronounced the same way.
3. The vowels ú and ů are pronounced the same way. Their spelling only reflects differences that existed between them in the past.

Note that the vowel ú is always written at the beginning of a word or after a prefix (úkol, úředník, zúčastnit se) while the vowel ů is written in the middle or at the end of a word (dům, domů). However, ů can be found in the middle of a word in words of foreign origin (túra).

4. In some Czech words there are the pairs of vowels ie, ia, ii, io, iu. We read them as follows:
ie [ije] – Itálie, ia [ija] – fialový, ii [iji] – v Anglii, io [ijo] – rádio, iu [iju] – v rádiu.

5. Czech consonants are divided into hard (h, ch, k, r, d, t, n, g), soft (ž, š, č, ř, d', t', ň, c, j) and ambiguous (b, f, l, m, p, s, v, z). Also note that ch counts as a single letter and has a special place in the Czech alphabet, after the letter h.

The division of consonants into hard and soft is important for spelling. After hard consonants the letter y can be written, after soft consonants the letter i is written, and after ambiguous consonants either y or i (foreign words, e.g. kino, chirurgie, historie, are exceptions to this rule). Czechs learn by heart the words with ambiguous consonants which are followed by y. They are called listed words (vyjmenovaná slova). The consonant division is also important for declensions: nouns ending in a consonant without a hook belong to the 1st declension group (hard declension), while nouns ending in consonants with a hook or in c or j belong to the 2nd declension group (soft declension). Tables containing all the declension patterns can be found on p. 202 and 203.

6. The pronunciation of ř is derived from the palatal r. Purse your lips, push your lower jaw forward slightly, clench your front teeth and, whispering, repeat, e.g.: tri, tri, tri... or just r. The tip of the tongue should stay in contact with your clenched teeth. After a little while you will start saying tři, tři, tři correctly... If this does not work, ask your teacher for help. But don't worry – Czechs know that this sound does not exist in other languages and are tolerant about how foreigners pronounce it.
7. The letter j is typically not pronounced when it is at the beginning of a word, e.g.: jsem [sem], jsme [sme].

8. Unlike in languages such as English the consonants p, t, k are unaspirated, i.e. they are pronounced without a puff of air, in other words, without aspiration.

9. How should d', t', ň [ď, ť, ň] be pronounced? Put the middle of your tongue up to the roof of your mouth. The tip of your tongue should point down, behind your lower front teeth.

10. When should d', t', ň [ď, ť, ň] be pronounced?

If there is d', t', ň in the text, as in the words: ďábel, ťukat, Plzeň.

If there is d, t, n + ě in the text, as in the words: děkuju, těžký, někdo.

If there is d, t, n + í/í in the text, as in the words: divadlo, tisknout, nikdo, tatínek, dítě, inteligentní.

Exceptions are words of foreign origin, e.g. tenis [tenis], dialog [dijalok], tip [tip].

11. How should the syllables bě, pě, vě, mě be pronounced?

Bě, pě, vě, mě are read [bje, pje, vje, mně], as in the words: běžet, pět, člověk, město.

12. When voiced paired consonants are at the end of a word before a pause, they are pronounced like their unvoiced counterparts: For example: b > p: Jakub [jakup], d > t: oběd [obje't], d' > t': teď [teč], g > k: Oleg [olek], v > f: Václav [václaf], z > s: kvíz [kvís], ž > š: když [gdiš], h > ch: břeh [břečh].

13. If a group of paired consonants occurs together in a word, the last consonant changes the pronunciation of the previous consonants, e.g.: polévka [polé'fka], knížka [kní'ška], kde [gde], sbor [zbor]. This phenomenon is called assimilation. This also occurs with certain prepositions, e.g. z Francie [sfrancije], k domu [gdomu].

There are regional differences for this rule, e.g. na shledanou goodbye is pronounced [nasch'ledanou] in Bohemia, while in Moravia you can hear [nazh'ledanou].

Note: If a word which starts with a vowel comes after a voiced non-syllabic/single letter preposition, the consonant is pronounced as unvoiced, after the preposition there is something called a glottal stop, which is marked ʔ, e.g. z Itálie [sʔitálije].

14. The vast majority of Czech words has its stress on the first syllable, e.g. námě'stí. The only exception is the group of unstressed words, which in Czech are placed in a special order in the second position of a sentence (for more information, see p. 209).

Note: When monosyllabic prepositions are connected with another word, the stress is put on the preposition, e.g. ve škole.

15. The longer form of single-letter prepositions

The single-letter prepositions k, v, s and z are sometimes used in a longer form ke, ve, se and ze before a group of two or more consonants, before the same consonant or before their voiced/unvoiced counterpart. Compare: k > ke (ke škole, ke kamarádovi, ke galerii), v > ve (ve škole, ve vlaku, ve Francii), s > se (se školou, se sestrou, se zahradou), z > ze (ze školy, ze zahrady, ze stadionu)