

Arabic FOR DUMMIES®

by Amine Bouchentouf



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About the Author

Amine Bouchentouf is a native English, Arabic, and French speaker born and raised in Casablanca, Morocco. Amine has been teaching Arabic and lecturing about relations between America and the Arab world in his spare time for over 4 years and has offered classes and seminars for students at Middlebury College, the Council on Foreign Relations, and various schools across the United States. He runs and maintains the Web site www.al-baab.com (which means “gateway” in Arabic).

Amine graduated from Middlebury College and has always been interested in promoting better relations between the West and the Middle East through dialogue and mutual understanding. Amine published his first book, *Arabic: A Complete Course* (Random House), soon after graduating college in order to help Americans understand Arabic language and culture. He has written *Arabic For Dummies* in an attempt to reach an even wider audience with the aim of fostering better relations through education.

He holds a degree in Economics from Middlebury and has extensive experience in the arena of international investing. He is a registered investment advisor and is a member of the National Association of Securities Dealers. Amine is currently working on his third book, *Investing in Commodities For Dummies* (Wiley Publishing).

Amine is an avid traveler and has visited over 15 countries across the Middle East, Europe, and North and South America. Aside from his interest in languages, business, and travel, Amine enjoys biking, rollerblading, playing guitar, chess, and golf. He lives in New York City.

Dedication

This book is dedicated to my greatest and most steadfast supporters — my family. To my mother for her infinite and unwavering support, and to my sister, Myriam, for her enthusiasm and passion — you are my greatest inspirations.

To my father and grandfather, may you rest in peace, thank you for instilling in me such a deep respect and awareness of my roots and culture. I am honored to be part of the Bouchentouf family.

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Introduction

Arabic, the official language of over 20 countries, is the mother tongue of over 300 million people. It's spoken throughout the Middle East, from Morocco to Iraq. Additionally, because Arabic is the language of the Koran and Islam, it's understood by more than 1.2 billion people across the world.

Due to recent geopolitical events, Arabic has catapulted to the top of the list of important world languages. Even in countries where Arabic isn't the official language, people are scrambling to master this important and vital global language.

For people in North America and Europe, at first glance Arabic seems like a difficult language to master; after all, it isn't a Romance language and doesn't use the Latin alphabet. However, like any other language, Arabic is governed by a set of rules, and when you master these rules, you're able to speak Arabic like a native speaker!

Arabic For Dummies is designed to identify and explain the rules that govern the Arabic language in the easiest and most interactive way possible. I organize each chapter in a straightforward and coherent manner and present the material in an interactive and engaging way.

About This Book

Unlike most books on the Arabic language, *Arabic For Dummies* is designed in a way that gives you the most accurate and in-depth information available on the composition of the language. The book is modular in nature; every chapter is organized in such a way that you don't have to read the whole book in order to understand the topic that's discussed. Feel free to jump through chapters and sections to suit your specific needs. Also, every grammatical and linguistic point is explained in plain English so that you can incorporate the concept immediately. I took great care to explain every concept clearly and succinctly.

To provide the best foundation and the widest usage for students of Arabic, *Arabic For Dummies* focuses on Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), which is the most widely used form of Arabic in the world. There are basically three different types of Arabic: Koranic Arabic, local dialects, and MSA.

- ✔ **Koranic Arabic** is the Arabic used to write the Koran, the holy book for Muslims. This form of Arabic is very rigid and hasn't changed much since the Koran was written approximately 1,500 years ago. Koranic Arabic is widely used in religious circles for prayer, discussions of Islamic issues, and serious deliberations. Its usage is limited primarily within a strict religious context. It's the equivalent of Biblical English.
- ✔ **The regional dialects** are the most informal type of Arabic. They tend to fall into three geographical categories: the North African dialect (Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, and Libya); the Egyptian dialect (Egypt, parts of Syria, Palestine, and Jordan); and Gulf Arabic (Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Iraq, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates). Even though the words are pronounced differently and some of the everyday expressions differ dramatically from region to region, speakers from different regions can understand each other. The common denominator for the regional dialects is that they're all based on MSA.
- ✔ **Modern Standard Arabic (MSA)** is the most widely used and understood form of Arabic in the world. It's less rigid than Koranic Arabic but a bit more formal than the local dialects. MSA is the language that Arabic anchors use to present the news, professionals use to discuss business and technical issues, and friends and families use to socialize with one another.

Conventions Used in This Book

Throughout the book, each new Arabic word appears in **boldface**, followed by its proper pronunciation and its English equivalent in parentheses.

Because this is a language book, I include some sections to help you master the linguistic concepts with greater ease. Here's a description of the specialty sections you find in each chapter:

- ✔ **Talkin' the Talk dialogues:** Here's where you get to see Arabic in action. These common Arabic dialogues show you how to use important vocabulary words and terms you should be aware of. Select Talkin' the Talk dialogues have accompanying audio versions on the book's CD.
- ✔ **Words to Know blackboards:** An important part of mastering a new language is becoming familiar with important words and phrases. Key terms that I recommend you memorize are included in these sections, which present the transcription of the Arabic word, the pronunciation, and the translation.
- ✔ **Fun & Games activities:** The aim of *Arabic For Dummies* is to help you master the Arabic language in an interactive and engaging way. With that in mind, each chapter ends with a Fun & Games that lets you review the key concept covered in the chapter in a fun but effective way.

What I Assume About You

In writing *Arabic For Dummies*, I made the following assumptions about my likely readers:

- ✓ You've had very little exposure (or none at all) to the Arabic language.
- ✓ You're interested in mastering Arabic for either personal or professional reasons.
- ✓ You want to be able to speak a few words and phrases so that you can communicate basic information in Arabic.
- ✓ You've been exposed to Arabic but are interested in brushing up on your language skills.
- ✓ You're not looking for a dry book on Arabic grammar; you want to discover Arabic in a fun and engaging manner.
- ✓ You're looking for a practical course that will have you speaking basic Arabic in no time!

How This Book Is Organized

Arabic For Dummies is organized into five different parts, with each part divided into chapters. The following part descriptions give you a heads-up on what to expect in each part.

Part I: Getting Started

The first part of *Arabic For Dummies* is a must-read if you've never been exposed to Arabic. I introduce the Arabic script and present the 28 letters of the Arabic alphabet before explaining the difference between consonants and vowels, which have a very peculiar relationship in Arabic. In addition, in this part you get a detailed and thorough overview of Arabic grammatical and linguistic constructs; for instance, you find out how nouns, verbs, and adjectives interact with each other to create phrases and sentences. Finally, you discover some of the most basic forms of greetings and are introduced to basic words and phrases.

Part II: Arabic in Action

This part exposes you to key words and phrases that allow you to interact with Arabic-speaking folks in a variety of different settings (such as in a

restaurant, around town, at the office, or even at the mall). You discover how to make small talk and how to ask for basic information about people you speak to, such as their names, where they're from, and their occupations.

Part III: Arabic on the Go

This part gives you the tools you need to take Arabic on the road with you. Find out how to open a bank account, how to plan a trip, how to make a reservation at a hotel, and how to ask for directions.

Part IV: The Part of Tens

The chapters in this part share some of the nonverbal methods of communication that help you to better interact with Arabic-speaking people. For example, you discover ten of the greatest Arabic proverbs, and you find out proper ways to interact with people if you're in an Arabic-speaking country. I also share my recommendations on the best ways to acquire Arabic as quickly as possible.

Part V: Appendixes

This part is a useful reference if you need information quickly. One of the appendixes in this part is a detailed list of regular and irregular verbs to help you conjugate verbs in the past, present, and future tenses. I also include a mini-dictionary in both Arabic–English and English–Arabic formats for quick reference. Finally, you find an appendix that guides you through the audio tracks on the CD.

Icons Used in This Book

In order to help you get in and get out of this book easily and efficiently, I use icons (little pictures) that identify important pieces of information by category. The following icons appear in this book:



When you see this icon, make sure you read carefully. It points to information that will directly improve your Arabic language skills.



I use this icon to bring to your attention to information that you definitely want to keep in mind when studying and practicing Arabic.



Discovering a new language can be a wonderful experience. However, there are always potential pitfalls to avoid, whether grammatical, linguistic, or cultural. This icon points out important notions about Arabic that may trip you up.



Grammar is the glue that binds a language together. Even though this isn't a grammar book, it does include important grammar lessons you need to be aware of. This icon is attached to major grammar points that will help you master the Arabic language.



This icon points out nonverbal methods of communication common in Arabic-speaking countries and among Arabic speakers. I use this icon to fill the gap between language and culture so that you know the cultural contexts in which you can use newly discovered words and phrases.



Just about every chapter of this book contains Talkin' the Talk sections with real-world conversations and dialogues. Some of these dialogues are included as audio tracks on the CD that accompanies the book. When you come across this icon, pop in your CD and listen to the conversation as you read along.

Where to Go from Here

This book is organized so that you can jump around from topic to topic. You don't have to read the whole thing. Want to know how to ask for directions in Arabic? Jump to Chapter 12. Need to exchange money in an Arabic country? Check out Chapter 11. Care to venture into the realm of Arabic grammar? Chapter 2 is for you.

Part I

Getting Started

The 5th Wave

By Rich Tennant



"We're still learning our demonstrative pronouns, although most of what Dave says in Arabic is somewhat demonstrative."

In this part . . .

I introduce the Arabic script and present the 28 letters of the Arabic alphabet before explaining the difference between consonants and vowels, which have a very peculiar relationship in Arabic. In addition, in this part you get a detailed and thorough overview of Arabic grammatical and linguistic constructs. You find out how nouns, verbs, and adjectives interact with each other to create phrases and sentences. Finally, you discover some of the most basic forms of greetings and are introduced to basic words and phrases.

Chapter 1

You Already Know a Little Arabic

In This Chapter

- ▶ Discovering English words that come from Arabic
- ▶ Figuring out the Arabic alphabet
- ▶ Sounding like a native speaker

marHaba (*mahr-hah-bah*; welcome) to the wonderful world of Arabic! Arabic is the official language of over 20 countries and is spoken by more than 300 million people across the globe! It's the language in which the Koran, the Holy Book in Islam, was revealed and written, and a large majority of the over 1.3 billion Muslims across the world study Arabic in order to read the Koran and to fulfill their religious duties. By speaking Arabic, you get access to people and places from Morocco to Indonesia. (For more on Arabic's role in history, see the sidebar "Arabic's historical importance.")

In this chapter, I ease you into Arabic by showing you some familiar English words that trace their roots to Arabic. You discover the Arabic alphabet and its beautiful letters, and I give you tips on how to pronounce those letters so that you can sound like a native speaker! Part of exploring a new language is discovering a new culture and a new way of looking at things, so in this first chapter of *Arabic For Dummies*, you begin your discovery of Arabic and its unique characteristics.

Taking Stock of What's Familiar

If English is your primary language, part of grasping a new **lougha** (*loo-rah*; language) is creating connections between the **kalimaat** (*kah-lee-maht*; words) of the **lougha**, in this case Arabic, and English. You may be surprised to hear that quite a few English words trace their origins to Arabic. For example, did you know that "magazine," "candy," and "coffee" are actually Arabic words? Table 1-1 lists some familiar English words with Arabic origins.

Arabic’s historical importance

During the Middle Ages, when Europe was plunged into the Dark Ages, Arab scholars and historians translated and preserved most of the works of the Greek scholars, thereby preserving some of the greatest intellectual achievements that are the cornerstone of Western civilization!

Table 1-1 Arabic Origins of English Words

English	Arabic Origin	Arabic Meaning
admiral	amir al-baHr	Ruler of the Sea
alcohol	al-kuHul	a mixture of powdered antimony
alcove	al-qubba	a dome or arch
algebra	al-jabr	to reduce or consolidate
almanac	al-manakh	a calendar
arsenal	daar As-SinaaH	house of manufacture
azure	al-azward	lapis lazuli
candy	qand	cane sugar
coffee	qahwa	coffee
cotton	quTun	cotton
elixir	al-iksiir	philosopher’s stone
gazelle	ghazaal	gazelle
hazard	az-zahr	dice
magazine	al-makhzan	a storehouse; a place of storage
mattress	matraH	a place where things are thrown
ream	rizma	a bundle
saffron	za’fran	saffron
Sahara	SaHraa’	desert
satin	zaytuun	Arabic name for a Chinese city

<i>English</i>	<i>Arabic Origin</i>	<i>Arabic Meaning</i>
sherbet	sharaba	to drink
sofa	Sofaa	a cushion
sugar	sukkar	sugar
zero	Sifr	zero

As you can see from the table, Arabic has had a major influence on the English language. Some English words such as “admiral” and “arsenal” have an indirect Arabic origin, whereas others, such as “coffee” and “cotton,” are exact matches! The influence runs the other way, too, especially when it comes to relatively contemporary terms. For example, the word **tilifizyuun** (*tee-lee-fee-zee-yoon*; television) comes straight from the word “television.” As is often the case with languages, Arabic and English tend to influence each other, and that’s what makes studying them so much fun!

Discovering the Arabic Alphabet

Unlike English and other Romance languages, you write and read Arabic from right to left. Like English, Arabic has both vowels and consonants, but the vowels in Arabic aren’t actual letters. Rather, Arabic vowels are symbols that you place on top of or below consonants to create certain sounds. As for consonants, Arabic has 28 different consonants, and each one is represented by a letter. In order to vocalize these letters, you place a vowel above or below the particular consonant. For example, when you put a **fatHa**, a vowel representing the “ah” sound, above the consonant representing the letter “b,” you get the sound “bah.” When you take the same consonant and use a **kasra**, which represents the “ee” sound, you get the sound “bee.”

All about vowels

Arabic has three main vowels. Luckily, they’re very simple to pronounce because they’re similar to English vowels. However, it’s important to realize that Arabic also has vowel derivatives that are as important as the main vowels. These vowel derivatives fall into three categories: *double vowels*, *long vowels*, and *diphthongs*. In this section, I walk you through all the different vowels, vowel derivatives, and vowel combinations.

Main vowels

The three main Arabic vowels are:

- ✓ **fatHa:** The first main vowel in Arabic is called a **fatHa** (*feht-hah*). A **fatHa** is the equivalent of the short “a” in “hat” or “cat.” Occasionally, a **fatHa** also sounds like the short “e” in “bet” or “set.” Much like the other vowels, the way you pronounce a **fatHa** depends on what consonants come before or after it. In Arabic script, the **fatHa** is written as a small horizontal line above a consonant. In English transcription, which I use in this book, it’s simply represented by the letter “a,” as in the words **kalb** (*kah-leb*; dog) or **walad** (*wah-lahd*; boy).
- ✓ **damma:** The second main Arabic vowel is the **damma** (*dah-mah*). A **damma** sounds like the “uh” in “foot” or “book.” In Arabic script, it’s written like a tiny backward “e” above a particular consonant. In English transcription, it’s represented by the letter “u,” as in **funduq** (*foon-dook*; hotel) or **suHub** (*soo-hoob*; clouds).
- ✓ **kasra:** The third main vowel in Arabic is the **kasra** (*kahs-rah*), which sounds like the long “e” in “feet” or “treat.” The **kasra** is written the same way as a **fatHa** — as a small horizontal line — except that it goes underneath the consonant. In English transcription, it’s written as an “i,” as in **bint** (*bee-neht*; girl) or **‘islaam** (*ees-lahm*; Islam).

Double vowels

One type of vowel derivative is the double vowel, which is known in Arabic as **tanwiin** (*tahn-ween*). The process of **tanwiin** is a fairly simple one: Basically, you take a main vowel and place the same vowel right next to it, thus creating two vowels, or a double vowel. The sound that the double vowel makes depends on the main vowel that’s doubled. Here are all possible combinations of double vowels:

- ✓ **Double fatHa:** **tanwiin** with **fatHa** creates the “an” sound, as in **‘ahlan wa sahlan** (*ahel-an wah sahel-an*; Hi).
- ✓ **Double damma:** **tanwiin** with **damma** creates the “oun” sound. For example, **kouratoun** (*koo-rah-toon*; ball) contains a double **damma**.
- ✓ **Double kasra:** **tanwiin** with **kasra** makes the “een” sound, as in **SafHatin** (*sahf-hah-teen*; page).

Long vowels

Long vowels are derivatives that elongate the main vowels. Seeing as Arabic is a very poetic and musical language, I believe a musical metaphor is in order here! Think of the difference between long vowels and short (main) vowels in terms of a musical beat, and you should be able to differentiate between them much easier. If a main vowel lasts for one beat, then its long vowel equivalent lasts for two beats. Whereas you create double vowels by

writing two main vowels next to each other, you create long vowels by adding a letter to one of the main vowels. Each main vowel has a corresponding consonant that elongates it. Here are a few examples to help you get your head around this long-vowel process:

- ✓ To create a long vowel form of a **fatHa**, you attach an ‘**alif**’ to the consonant that the **fatHa** is associated with. In English transcription, the long **fatHa** form is written as “aa,” such as in **kitaab** (*kee-taab*; book) or **baab** (*bahb*; door). The “aa” means that you hold the vowel sound for two beats as opposed to one.
- ✓ The long vowel form of **damma** is obtained by attaching a **waaw** to the consonant with the **damma**. This addition elongates the vowel “uh” into a more pronounced “uu,” such as in **nuur** (*noohr*; light) or **ghuul** (*roohl*; ghost). Make sure you hold the “uu” vowel for two beats and not one.
- ✓ To create a long vowel form of a **kasra**, you attach a **yaa’** to the consonant with the **kasra**. Just as the ‘**alif**’ elongates the **fatHa** and the **waaw** elongates the **damma**, the **yaa’** elongates the **kasra**. Some examples include the “ii” in words like **kabiir** (*kah-beer*; big) and **Saghiir** (*sah-reer*; small).

The Arabic characters for the long vowels are shown in Table 1-2.

Table 1-2 Arabic Vowel Characters		
Arabic Character	Name of the Character	Explanation
ا	‘alif	To create a long vowel form of a fatHa
و	waaw	To create a long vowel form of a damma
ي	yaa’	To create a long vowel form of a kasra

Diphthongs

Diphthongs in Arabic are a special category of vowels because, in essence, they’re monosyllabic sounds that begin with one vowel and “glide” into another vowel. A common example in English is the sound at the end of the word “toy.” Fortunately, Arabic has only two diphthong sounds used to distinguish between the **yaa’** (ي) and the **waaw** (و) forms of long vowels. When you come across either of these two letters, one of the first questions to ask yourself is: “Is this a long vowel or a diphthong?” There’s an easy way to determine which is which: When either the **yaa’** or the **waaw** is a diphthong, you see a **sukun** (*soo-koon*) above the consonant. A **sukun** is similar to the main vowels in that it’s a little symbol (a small circle) that you place above

the consonant. However, unlike the vowels, you don't vocalize the **sukun** — it's almost like a "silent" vowel. So when a **waaw** or **yaa'** has a **sukun** over it, you know that the sound is a diphthong! Here are some examples:

- ✓ **waaw** diphthongs: **yawm** (*yah-oom*; day); **nawm** (*nah-oom*; sleep); **Sawt** (*sah-oot*; noise)
- ✓ **yaa'** diphthongs: **bayt** (*bah-yet*; house); **'ayn** (*ah-yen*; eye); **layla** (*lah-ye-lah*; night)

All about consonants

Arabic uses 28 different consonants, and each consonant is represented by a different letter. Because the Arabic alphabet is written in cursive, most of the letters connect with each other. For this reason, every single letter that represents a consonant actually can be written four different ways depending on its position in a word — whether it's in the initial, medial, or final positions, or whether it stands alone. In English transcription of the Arabic script, all letters are case-sensitive.



Thankfully, most of the consonants in Arabic have English equivalents. Unfortunately, a few Arabic consonants are quite foreign to nonnative speakers. Table 1-3 shows all 28 Arabic consonants, how they're written in Arabic, how they're transcribed in English, and how they sound. This table can help you pronounce the letters so that you sound like a native speaker!

Table 1-3 Arabic Consonants				
Arabic Character	Name of the Letter	Pronunciation	Sounds Like . . .	Example
ا	'alif ('a)	ah-leef	Sounds like the "a" in "apple"	'ab (<i>ah-b</i> ; father)
ب	baa' (b)	bah	Sounds like the "b" in "boy"	baab (<i>bahb</i> ; door)
ت	taa' (t)	tah	Sounds like the "t" in "table"	tilmiidh (<i>teel-meez</i> ; student)
ث	thaa' (th)	thah	Sounds like the "th" in "think"	thalaatha (<i>thah-lah-thah</i> ; three)