

Accent Help for Greek 1 Students

(Created by Regan L. Barr for Greek Students at The Lukeion Project)

The long and short of it

In English, we have both long and short versions of our vowels: compare the sound that “a” makes in the words *cap* (short) and *cape* (long). But if you think about it, the terms “long” and “short” aren’t very accurate when talking about English. We’re really talking about *different* sounds rather than long and short versions of the *same* sound.



The terms “long” and “short” make more sense the way they’re used in Greek or Latin. In Greek, the difference between a long and a short vowel is not the sound that it makes, but rather the time that you take to say it. A *long* vowel takes *twice as long* to say as the short version of the same vowel.

Some vowels in Greek can *only be short*, some can *only be long*, and some can be *either*. We also have to think about vowel pairs (called diphthongs or digraphs). The chart below indicates which Greek vowels and pairs can be long, short, or both.



Vowel or Pair	short	l o n g	notes
ε	✓		lengthens to η
ο	✓		lengthens to ω
η		✓	long form of either ε or α
ω		✓	long form of ο
αυ		✓	
ευ		✓	
ηυ		✓	
υι		✓	
ει		✓	
ου		✓	
α	✓	✓	lengthens to either ᾱ or η
ι	✓	✓	
υ	✓	✓	
αι	✓	✓	only short if LAST in the word
οι	✓	✓	only short if LAST in the word

Accent Help for Greek 1 Students

Have you named your syllable yet?

Some people have names for their pet rocks, some have names for their cars, and some have names for even stranger things. You should know that **only the last three syllables of a word can have an accent**, and someone decided to name them:



- The last syllable is called the **ultima** (“last”)
- The next to last syllable is called the **penult** (“almost last”)
- The third to last syllable is called **antepenult** (“before almost last”)

Types of accents

Greek accents were originally pictures that aided pronunciation – they indicated the pitch of your voice when you pronounced a Greek word correctly. So ...

- An accent that slants up (´) indicates that the pitch of your voice should go up on that syllable.
- An accent that goes down (`) indicates that the pitch of your voice should go down on that syllable.
- An accent that goes up and then back down (ˆ) means that you should do that with your voice. It makes sense, then, that this last kind of accent (the circumflex) can **ONLY** appear on a long syllable.



Although most people don’t concentrate on the “pitch” aspect of Greek accents anymore, simply putting stress on the accented syllable accomplishes nearly the same thing. Here’s a brief introduction to the 3 types of Greek accents:

1. Acute Accent (´)

An acute accent can occur on **any of the last three syllables** in a word, and it can stand on either a short or a long vowel.

Δικαιόπολις	third to last syllable (antepenult)
πόνος	next to last syllable (penult)
φυγή	last syllable (ultima)

2. Circumflex Accent (ˆ)

A circumflex accent can occur on **either of the last two syllables** of a word, but it can **ONLY** occur on a **LONG** syllable.

σπεῦδε	next to last syllable (penult)
πολλῆς	last syllable (ultima)

3. Grave Accent (`)

A grave accent can occur **ONLY on the last syllable (ultima)**; and in reality, a grave accent is just a *mutated acute accent*. **No Greek word has a grave accent when written alone.** You’ll **ONLY** see grave accents in the context of a Greek phrase, and even then, it’s replacing an acute.

τό	the neuter article written alone
τὸ δεῖπνον	the neuter article followed by another Greek word

Accent Help for Greek 1 Students

Accents on Words

Hee, hee!



The first thing that beginning Greek students need to know is that accents are not some impenetrable mystery thought up by medieval monks just to torture you – **accents actually follow rules**. Really! They do! So it's not impossible to master them. And understanding accents can help you understand a Greek sentence.

Second, you need to know that **accents aren't static - they change**. There are rules that govern how and when accents change, but you shouldn't be baffled when you see the word *καλός* written like this: *καλὸς*. Yes, that accent did change, but it's still the same word. You'll even see a different form of this word, *καλοῦ*. These are all valid spellings of this word, in the right context.

Most Greek words have **one** accent, but what kind of a language would Greek be if there weren't any exceptions? Without going deeply into the rules at this time, here are the 3 circumstances in which a Greek word might not have a single accent:

- An **enclitic** is a word that attaches itself to the word before it (the term *enclitic* means “leans on”), and the two are pronounced as though they were a single word. In most cases, the enclitic will have *no accent*.
- A **proclitic** is a word that attaches itself to the word after it (the term *proclitic* means “leans forward”), and the two are pronounced as though they were a single word. In most cases, the proclitic will have *no accent*.
- Some words, when they have an enclitic “leaning on” them, may receive a *second accent*.

Accent Rules

1. Final acute (´) changes to grave (`) when followed by a non-enclitic word

Acute accents on the last syllable of a word are polite; they don't point at the word behind them; instead, they change to grave. Look how the acute accent on the first word changes when these two words come together in a phrase:

ἀλλά	written by itself, it has an acute accent
καλός	written by itself, it has an acute accent
ἀλλὰ καλός	the acute on ἀλλά changes to grave when followed by a non-enclitic word

But this change doesn't take place when the following word is an enclitic. Why? Remember, grave accents can **ONLY** be on the last syllable of a word. When an enclitic grabs on to the preceding word, it's like they become a single word – that syllable with the acute isn't the last syllable anymore! It can't have a grave accent.

ἀγρός	written by itself, it has an acute accent
τις	this enclitic normally has no accent, but instead leans on the preceding word
ἀγρός τις	when they're pronounced like one word, it's as though the accented syllable is in the middle of the word – so the acute doesn't change to grave

Accent Help for Greek 1 Students

Acute accents also don't change when they come last in their phrase. Anytime a word with an acute accent on the last syllable is followed by some sort of pause (any form of punctuation, or they're simply last), the acute won't change. Notice how the accents change on these two words, depending on what follows them:

ἄγρόν	written by itself, it has an acute accent
καλόν	written by itself, it has an acute accent
βλέπω ἄγρόν καλόν	the acute on ἄγρόν changes to grave
βλέπω καλόν ἄγρόν	the acute on καλόν changes to grave

The acute accent easily changes to grave and back again, based on what follows it in the sentence.

2. Nouns and Adjectives have *persistent* accent

Simply put, they try to stay just like they are in the nominative singular form. Now sometimes this isn't possible, but just like a stubborn mule, they do everything they can to stay put!



Because accents on nouns and adjectives are **persistent**, knowing where that accent is in the nominative singular is a tremendous help for many nouns. This is why it's important to learn your vocabulary words with their accents. Look at how persistent the accent is on the word λίθος:

	Singular	Plural	
Nominative	λίθος	λίθοι	Accent begins as acute on next-to-last syllable
Genitive	λίθου	λίθων	No change here, in either the singular or plural
Dative	λίθῳ	λίθοις	Not here, either
Accusative	λίθον	λίθους	Nope – still right where it started
Vocative	λίθε	λίθοι	Easy, right?

Exception Alert! There are some rules that can force those accents to change. One of those comes up very early in learning Greek. Most Greek study programs introduce nouns of the *omicron-declension* first because they're very regular, and because the endings are practically the same as those for the definite article. **Whenever an omicron-declension noun has an acute accent on the last syllable (ultima), it changes to a circumflex in the Genitive and Dative:**



	Singular	Plural	
Nom	ἄγρός	ἄγροί	Begins as acute on the final syllable
Gen	ἄγροῦ	ἄγρῶν	Changes to circumflex in the Genitive
Dat	ἄγρῳ	ἄγροῖς	Changes to circumflex in the Dative
Acc	ἄγρόν	ἄγρούς	Back to acute on the final syllable
Voc	ἄγρέ	ἄγροί	Back to acute on the final syllable

Accent Help for Greek 1 Students

3. Finite verbs have recessive accent

If accents on nouns are solid, immovable objects (for the most part), then accents on finite verbs are an entirely different kind of beast: they *recede*. That means that they try to move as close as possible to the beginning of the word. (By *finite* verbs, we mean verbs that have person and number; so that excludes infinitives, participles, and gerunds – but you haven't even had those last two yet.)



Now this doesn't mean that verbs always have the accent on their first syllable. You've already learned that only the last 3 syllables of a word can have an accent. So in long words like *πεπολυπραγμονήκαμεν* (8 syllables!), the first few syllables are out of luck; they can't get the accent.

But there are other factors that can further reign in exactly what that accent can do, and that's where our next rule comes in.

4. The last syllable limits how far forward the accent can go.



The last syllable is a bit of a bully; so while that accent on finite verbs is pulling toward the front of the word, the last syllable might be pulling even harder in the other direction! Here's the rule:

- If the final syllable is **short**, any of **the last three syllables** may have an accent, but ...
- If the final syllable is **long**, only **the last two syllables** may have an accent

Let's consider how this affects *nouns and adjectives* first. You'll remember that these types of words have *persistent* accent – the accent tries to stay exactly as it is in the nominative singular. BUT the endings change in different cases. Some end with long syllables and some end with short. Let's look at a word where the accent starts on the 3rd-to-last syllable (antepenult):

Singular		
Nom	ἄνθρωπος	Nominative singular: acute accent on the antepenult
Gen	ἀνθρώπου	But in the Genitive, the long final syllable pulls that accent back one syllable
Dat	ἀνθρώπῳ	In the Dative, the same thing happens – that long final syllable pulls the accent back toward it
Acc	ἄνθρωπον	But in the Accusative, the final syllable is short again; the accent heads back to where it came from
Voc	ἄνθρωπε	Vocative: the accent stays where it started
Plural		
Nom	ἄνθρωποι	Review the long/short chart; you'll see that this is one of the cases where a diphthong is short (final -οι)
Gen	ἀνθρώπων	Long final syllable
Dat	ἀνθρώποις	Long final syllable
Acc	ἀνθρώπους	Long final syllable
Voc	ἄνθρωποι	The vocative is the same as the nominative plural – the accent moves back to where it started

Now let's look at what happens in a (finite) verb, where the accent is trying to recede. Anytime that final syllable is short, you'll see the accent on the 3rd-to-last syllable (the antepenult). But when that last syllable is long, it will be pulling the accent a little further back in the word.

Accent Help for Greek 1 Students

Singular		
1 st	ἐλάνω	Last syllable is long, accent is on the next-to-last syllable
2 nd	ἐλάνεις	Same in the 2 nd singular ...
3 rd	ἐλάνει	... and in the 3 rd singular
Plural		
1st	ἐλάνομεν	Look carefully – the accent is now on the 3 rd -to-last syllable in the word because the final syllable is short
2nd	ἐλάνετε	Same thing here; 3 rd -to-last syllable has the accent
3rd	ἐλάνουσιν	And here; 3 rd -to-last syllable has the accent

5. The last syllable determines the type of accent on the next-to-last syllable.



Let's begin with a bit of logic – if the next-to-last syllable is *short* and accented, it can **ONLY** have an acute accent, right? Grave can only stand on the *last* syllable, and circumflex can only stand on a *long* syllable. So the only time there's more than one accent option is when that next-to-last syllable is *long*.

Now all this accent stuff is based on pronunciation, and apparently you can hurt yourself if you try to say a long syllable with a circumflex followed by another long syllable. So if the next-to-last syllable (penult) is both **long** and **accented**, the **type** of accent is determined by the last syllable (ultima). (I told you he was a bully!) The accent is determined by the rhythm of the last two syllables: “long-short” or “long-long.”

- **long** – short; the accent is a circumflex: δοῦλος
- **long** – long; the accent is an acute: δούλου

This is best demonstrated in nouns and adjectives, because they have persistent accent. Some cases end with a short syllable, others end with a long one, but the accent doesn't move if it doesn't have to. Consider the noun ὁ οἶκος. The next-to-last syllable is both **long** and **accented**. So while the accent never moves, it does change.

Singular		
Nom	οἶκος	Long – short; the accent is circumflex
Gen	οἴκου	Long – long; the accent is acute
Dat	οἴκῳ	Long – long; the accent is acute
Acc	οἶκον	Long – short; the accent is circumflex
Voc	οἶκε	Long – short; the accent is circumflex
Plural		
Nom	οἶκοι	Long – short; the accent is circumflex
Gen	οἴκων	Long – long; the accent is acute
Dat	οἴκοις	Long – long; the accent is acute
Acc	οἴκους	Long – long; the accent is acute
Voc	οἶκοι	Long – short; the accent is circumflex