

ا Alif ألف

How to say it: a long "aa", as in "father"

Never joins the next letter | Dots: no dots

Hear it

THE LETTER IN A WORD · READ FROM RIGHT TO LEFT ←

End	Middle	Start	Alone
ـا	ـا	ا	ا

WITH THE SHORT VOWELS

أُ إِ أَ

TRACE

ا ا ا ا ا ا ا

WRITE

WORDS WITH ALIF

أناناس	أسد	أرنب
Pineapple	Lion	Rabbit

The letter's story · Family أَهْل

When a guest arrives, Arabs say ahlan wa sahlan: you have come to your family (ahl) and to smooth, easy ground (sahl). To a desert traveller, nothing sounded kinder.

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ب Baa باء

How to say it: b, as in "bed"

Joins the next letter · Dots: 1 dot below

Hear it

THE LETTER IN A WORD · READ FROM RIGHT TO LEFT ←

End	Middle	Start	Alone
بـ	ـبـ	بـ	ب

WITH THE SHORT VOWELS

بَ	بِ	بُ

TRACE

ب ب ب ب ب ب ب

WRITE

WORDS WITH BAA

بطة	بيت	باب
Duck	House	Door

The letter's story · Tent, home, and a verse بَيْت

The same word means a home and a line of poetry. A verse holds its words the way a tent holds a family, so its parts are named after tent ropes and pegs.

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ت Taa تاء

How to say it: t, as in "top"

Joins the next letter · Dots: 2 dots above

Hear it

THE LETTER IN A WORD · READ FROM RIGHT TO LEFT ←

End	Middle	Start	Alone
ـت	ـتـ	تـ	ت

WITH THE SHORT VOWELS

تُ	تِ	تَ

TRACE

ت ت ت ت ت ت ت

WRITE

WORDS WITH TAA

تاج	تفاحة	تمر
Crown	Apple	Dates

The letter's story · Dates تَمْر

When Arabic met a sour fruit from India, it called it tamr hindī, "the date of India". English still says tamarind.

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ث Thaa ثاء

How to say it: th, as in "think"

Joins the next letter

Dots: 3 dots above

Hear it

THE LETTER IN A WORD · READ FROM RIGHT TO LEFT ←

End	Middle	Start	Alone
ـث	ـثـ	ثـ	ث

WITH THE SHORT VOWELS

ثَ	ثِ	ثُ

TRACE

ث ث ث ث ث ث ث

WRITE

WORDS WITH THAA

ثعلب	ثلج	ثوب
Fox	Snow	Robe

The letter's story · The Pleiades الثُّرَيَّا

A small cluster of stars, named for "many stars in a small space", a sign of abundance. Its dawn rising in early June opens the Gulf summer. Soraya is the Persian form of this name.

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ج Jeem جيم

How to say it: j, as in "jam"

Joins the next letter | Dots: 1 dot below

Hear it

THE LETTER IN A WORD · READ FROM RIGHT TO LEFT ←

End	Middle	Start	Alone
جـ	ـجـ	ـج	ج

WITH THE SHORT VOWELS

جُ	جِ	جَ

TRACE

ج ج ج ج ج ج ج

WRITE

WORDS WITH JEEM

جزر	جبل	جمل
Carrots	Mountain	Camel

The letter's story · Algebra الجَبْر

Al-jabr meant setting broken parts back together. Al-Khwārizmī used it in the title of his 9th-century book on equations, and the world still says algebra.

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ح Haa حاء

How to say it: a deep, breathy h from the throat ★

Joins the next letter | Dots: no dots

Hear it

THE LETTER IN A WORD · READ FROM RIGHT TO LEFT ←

End	Middle	Start	Alone
ح	ـحـ	حـ	ح

WITH THE SHORT VOWELS

حُ	حِ	حَ

TRACE

ح ح ح ح ح ح ح

WRITE

WORDS WITH HAA

حديقة	حليب	حصان
Garden	Milk	Horse

The letter's story · A newborn camel حُوَار

Arabic names a camel for every year of its life: a ḥuwār from birth, a faṣīl at one year, a ḥiqq in its fourth year, when it can carry a load. A family album in words.

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خ Khaa خاء

How to say it: ch, as in Scottish "loch"

Joins the next letter | Dots: 1 dot above

Hear it

THE LETTER IN A WORD · READ FROM RIGHT TO LEFT ←

End	Middle	Start	Alone
خ	ـخـ	خـ	خ

WITH THE SHORT VOWELS

خُ	خِ	خَ

TRACE

خ خ خ خ خ خ خ

WRITE

WORDS WITH KHAA

خبز	خروف	خيمة
Bread	Sheep	Tent

The letter's story · The algorithm's name الخُوَارِزْمِيّ

Al-Khwārizmī wrote in Arabic in 9th-century Baghdad. Latin scribes turned his name into algorismus, and every computer today runs on algorithms, his name in disguise.

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د Daal دال

How to say it: d, as in "dog"

Never joins the next letter | Dots: no dots

Hear it

THE LETTER IN A WORD · READ FROM RIGHT TO LEFT ←

End	Middle	Start	Alone
ـد	ـد	د	د

WITH THE SHORT VOWELS

دُ	دِ	دَ

TRACE

د د د د د د د

WRITE

WORDS WITH DAAL

دجاجة	دب	دلة
Hen	Bear	Coffee pot

The letter's story · The follower الدَّبَرَان

Desert watchers saw a bright orange star that always follows the Pleiades, so they called it "the follower". Astronomers everywhere still call it Aldebaran.

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ذ Dhaal ذال

How to say it: th, as in "this"

Never joins the next letter

Dots: 1 dot above

Hear it

THE LETTER IN A WORD · READ FROM RIGHT TO LEFT ←

End	Middle	Start	Alone
ـذ	ـذـ	ذـ	ذ

WITH THE SHORT VOWELS

ذُ ذِ ذَ

TRACE

ذ ذ ذ ذ ذ ذ ذ

WRITE

WORDS WITH DHAAL

ذئب	ذرة	ذهب
Wolf	Corn	Gold

The letter's story · Tail ذَنَب

The bright star at the end of the Swan was named dhanab al-dajāja, "tail of the hen". Its short form, Deneb, is on every star map in the world.

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ر Raa راء

How to say it: a rolled r, with the tip of the tongue

Never joins the next letter

Dots: no dots

Hear it

THE LETTER IN A WORD · READ FROM RIGHT TO LEFT ←

End	Middle	Start	Alone
ـر	ـر	ر	ر

WITH THE SHORT VOWELS

رُ	رِ	رَ

TRACE

ر ر ر ر ر ر ر

WRITE

WORDS WITH RAA

ريشة	رمان	رمل
Feather	Pomegranate	Sand

The letter's story · Wide, spacious رَحْب

Marḥaba comes from raḥb, "wide open space". Saying it tells a guest: here you have room, not narrowness. A generous person is "wide of chest".

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ز Zaay زاي

How to say it: z, as in "zoo"

Never joins the next letter | Dots: 1 dot above

Hear it

THE LETTER IN A WORD · READ FROM RIGHT TO LEFT ←

End	Middle	Start	Alone
ـز	ـزـ	زـ	ز

WITH THE SHORT VOWELS

زُ	زِ	زَ

TRACE

ز ز ز ز ز ز ز

WRITE

WORDS WITH ZAAY

زيتون	زهرة	زرافة
Olives	Flower	Giraffe

The letter's story · Giraffe زَرَافَة

English giraffe comes, through Italian, from Arabic zarāfa. Medieval English writers struggled with it and spelled it jarraf.

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س Seen سين

How to say it: s, as in "sun"

Joins the next letter · Dots: no dots

Hear it

THE LETTER IN A WORD · READ FROM RIGHT TO LEFT ←

End	Middle	Start	Alone
سس	سـسـ	سـ	س

WITH THE SHORT VOWELS

سَ	سِ	سُ

TRACE

س س س س س س س

WRITE

WORDS WITH SEEN

سمكة	سفينة	سيارة
Fish	Ship	Car

The letter's story · The star of cooler nights سُهَيْل

When Suhail appears before dawn in late August, Gulf families know the worst heat is starting to retreat. For generations it has promised cooler nights.

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ش Sheen شين

How to say it: sh, as in "ship"

Joins the next letter · Dots: 3 dots above

Hear it

THE LETTER IN A WORD · READ FROM RIGHT TO LEFT ←

End	Middle	Start	Alone
شـ	ـشـ	ـشـ	ش

WITH THE SHORT VOWELS

شُ	شِ	شَ

TRACE

ش ش ش ش ش ش ش

WRITE

WORDS WITH SHEEN

شاي	شجرة	شمس
Tea	Tree	Sun

The letter's story · Poetry شِعْر

A poet, shāʿir, comes from shaʿara, "to perceive". Old dictionaries say a poet is so called because he notices what others do not.

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ص Saad صاد

How to say it: a heavy s ★

Joins the next letter · Dots: no dots · heavy letter

Hear it

THE LETTER IN A WORD · READ FROM RIGHT TO LEFT ←

End	Middle	Start	Alone
ـص	ـصـ	صـ	ص

WITH THE SHORT VOWELS

صُ	صِ	صَ

TRACE

ص ص ص ص ص ص ص

WRITE

WORDS WITH SAAD

صندوق	صحراء	صقر
Box	Desert	Falcon

The letter's story · Zero صِفْر

The Arabic word for "empty" travelled to Europe with the new numbers and became both zero and cipher. The idea came from India; Arabic gave it the name.

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ض Daad ضاد

How to say it: a heavy d ★

Joins the next letter · Dots: 1 dot above · heavy letter

Hear it

THE LETTER IN A WORD · READ FROM RIGHT TO LEFT ←

End	Middle	Start	Alone
ـض	ـضـ	ضـ	ض

WITH THE SHORT VOWELS

ضُ	ضِ	ضَ

TRACE

ض ض ض ض ض ض ض

WRITE

WORDS WITH DAAD

ضباب	ضوء	ضفدع
Fog	Light	Frog

The letter's story · The language of the ḍād الضَّاد

Arabic is proudly called lughat al-ḍād, "the language of the ḍād". Early grammarians believed its sound existed in no other language.

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ط Taa (heavy) طاء

How to say it: a heavy t ★

Joins the next letter · Dots: no dots · heavy letter

Hear it

THE LETTER IN A WORD · READ FROM RIGHT TO LEFT ←

End	Middle	Start	Alone
ـط	ـطـ	طـ	ط

WITH THE SHORT VOWELS

طُ طِ طَ

TRACE

ط ط ط ط ط ط ط

WRITE

WORDS WITH TAA (HEAVY)

طماطم	طبل	طائرة
Tomato	Drum	Plane

The letter's story · The lightest rain طَلّ

Arabic grades rain the way a jeweller grades pearls. The lightest is ṭall, the dew-rain; then drizzle; all the way up to wābil, the downpour.

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ظ Dhaa (heavy) ظاء

How to say it: a heavy th, as in "this" ★

Joins the next letter · Dots: 1 dot above · heavy letter

Hear it

THE LETTER IN A WORD · READ FROM RIGHT TO LEFT ←

End	Middle	Start	Alone
ـظ	ـظـ	ظـ	ظ

WITH THE SHORT VOWELS

ظُ ظِ ظَ

TRACE

ظ ظ ظ ظ ظ ظ ظ

WRITE

WORDS WITH DHAA (HEAVY)

ظرف	ظل	ظبي
Envelope	Shadow	Gazelle

The letter's story · Gazelle ظَبْي

The name Abu Dhabi comes from ẓaby, the gazelle: the story goes that a gazelle led hunters to fresh water on the island, and the place was named after it.

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ع Ain عين

How to say it: a voiced sound from a tightened throat ★

Joins the next letter · Dots: no dots

Hear it

THE LETTER IN A WORD · READ FROM RIGHT TO LEFT ←

End	Middle	Start	Alone
ع	ـعـ	عـ	ع

WITH THE SHORT VOWELS

عُ	عِ	عَ

TRACE

ع ع ع ع ع ع ع

WRITE

WORDS WITH AIN

عنب	عصفور	عسل
Grapes	Bird	Honey

The letter's story · Eye and spring عَيْن

One word, many worlds: the eye, a spring of water, the best of something, even rain that lasts for days. The first Arabic dictionary, Kitāb al-ʿAyn, is named after this letter.

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غ Ghain غين

How to say it: a soft gargle, like the French r ★

Joins the next letter · Dots: 1 dot above

Hear it

THE LETTER IN A WORD · READ FROM RIGHT TO LEFT ←

End	Middle	Start	Alone
غ	ـغـ	غـ	غ

WITH THE SHORT VOWELS

غُ غِ غَ

TRACE

غ غ غ غ غ غ غ

WRITE

WORDS WITH GHAIN

غراب	غيمة	غزال
Crow	Cloud	Young gazelle

The letter's story · Rain when it is needed غَيْث

Arabic has a special word for rain that comes after drought, exactly when the land needs it: ghayth.

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ف Faa فاء

How to say it: f, as in "fish"

Joins the next letter · Dots: 1 dot above

Hear it

THE LETTER IN A WORD · READ FROM RIGHT TO LEFT ←

End	Middle	Start	Alone
ـف	ـفـ	فـ	ف

WITH THE SHORT VOWELS

فَ	فِ	فُ

TRACE

ف ف ف ف ف ف ف

WRITE

WORDS WITH FAA

فنجان	فيل	فراشة
Cup	Elephant	Butterfly

The letter's story · Mouth of the fish فَمُ الحُوت

The bright autumn star Fomalhaut is Arabic fam al-ḥūt, "the mouth of the fish", at the mouth of the Southern Fish.

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ق Qaaf قاف

How to say it: a k from far back in the throat ★

Joins the next letter · Dots: 2 dots above

Hear it

THE LETTER IN A WORD · READ FROM RIGHT TO LEFT ←

End	Middle	Start	Alone
ق	ـقـ	قـ	ق

WITH THE SHORT VOWELS

قَ	قِ	قُ

TRACE

ق ق ق ق ق ق ق

WRITE

WORDS WITH QAAF

قمر	قطة	قلم
Moon	Cat	Pen

The letter's story · Coffee قَهْوَة

Arabic coffee is on UNESCO's heritage list for Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Oman and Qatar: it is served with the right hand, and elders and guests are served first. The word even reached Belgium: Flemish koffie began as qahwa.

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ك Kaaf كاف

How to say it: k, as in "kite"

Joins the next letter · Dots: no dots

Hear it

THE LETTER IN A WORD · READ FROM RIGHT TO LEFT ←

End	Middle	Start	Alone
ك	ـكـ	كـ	ك

WITH THE SHORT VOWELS

كُ كِ كَ

TRACE

ك ك ك ك ك ك ك

WRITE

WORDS WITH KAAF

كتاب	كرة	كرسي
Book	Ball	Chair

The letter's story · He wrote كَتَبَ

From three letters, k-t-b, grows a whole family: kitāb (book), kātib (writer), maktab (desk), maktaba (library). Writing joins letters into meaning.

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ل Laam لام

How to say it: l, as in "lemon"

Joins the next letter | Dots: no dots

Hear it

THE LETTER IN A WORD · READ FROM RIGHT TO LEFT ←

End	Middle	Start	Alone
ـل	ـلـ	لـ	ل

WITH THE SHORT VOWELS

لُ	لِ	لَ

TRACE

ل ل ل ل ل ل ل

WRITE

WORDS WITH LAAM

لعبة	ليمون	لؤلؤ
Toy	Lemon	Pearl

The letter's story · Pearl لُؤْلُؤ

Before oil, Gulf families earned their living from the sea's pearls. Arabs even saw pearls in the sky: the middle star of Orion's belt is al-niẓām, "the string of pearls".

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م Meem ميم

How to say it: m, as in "moon"

Joins the next letter | Dots: no dots

Hear it

THE LETTER IN A WORD · READ FROM RIGHT TO LEFT ←

End	Middle	Start	Alone
م	ـمـ	مـ	م

WITH THE SHORT VOWELS

مُ	مِ	مَ

TRACE

م م م م م م م

WRITE

WORDS WITH MEEM

مفتاح	موز	مطر
Key	Banana	Rain

The letter's story · The sitting place مَجْلِس

Majlis means "the place where you sit". It is UNESCO heritage of Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Oman and Qatar, where children hear stories and poetry from their elders.

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ن Noon نون

How to say it: n, as in "nose"

Joins the next letter · Dots: 1 dot above

Hear it

THE LETTER IN A WORD · READ FROM RIGHT TO LEFT ←

End	Middle	Start	Alone
نـ	ـنـ	ـنـ	ن

WITH THE SHORT VOWELS

نُ	نِ	نَ

TRACE

ن ن ن ن ن ن ن

WRITE

WORDS WITH NOON

نحلة	نجمة	نخلة
Bee	Star	Palm tree

The letter's story · Eagle نَسْر

Two of the brightest summer stars are eagles in Arabic: Vega is "the swooping eagle", Altair "the flying eagle". Astronomers worldwide still use these names.

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ه Haa (soft) هاء

How to say it: h, as in "hat"

Joins the next letter · Dots: no dots

Hear it

THE LETTER IN A WORD · READ FROM RIGHT TO LEFT ←

End	Middle	Start	Alone
ـه	ـهـ	هـ	ه

WITH THE SHORT VOWELS

هُ هِ هَ

TRACE

ه ه ه ه ه ه ه

WRITE

WORDS WITH HAA (SOFT)

هاتف	هدهد	هدية
Phone	Hoopoe	Gift

The letter's story · The first stirring of the heart هَوَى

A thousand years ago, al-Thaʿālibī ordered the stages of feeling in Arabic, starting with hawā, the heart's first leaning towards something. Arabic gave every degree of feeling its own word.

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و Waaw واو

How to say it: w, as in "water"; also a long "oo"

Never joins the next letter | Dots: no dots

Hear it

THE LETTER IN A WORD · READ FROM RIGHT TO LEFT ←

End	Middle	Start	Alone
ـو	ـو	و	و

WITH THE SHORT VOWELS

وُ	وِ	وَ

TRACE

و و و و و و و

WRITE

WORDS WITH WAAW

ولد	وسادة	وردة
Boy	Pillow	Rose

The letter's story · The mark وَسْم

Wasm is the mark on a family's camel. The first autumn rain is al-wasmī: "it marks the earth with plants". From the same root comes mawsim, season, which sailors carried into English as monsoon.

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ي Yaa ياء

How to say it: y, as in "yes"; also a long "ee"

Joins the next letter · Dots: 2 dots below

Hear it

THE LETTER IN A WORD · READ FROM RIGHT TO LEFT ←

End	Middle	Start	Alone
ـي	ـيـ	يـ	ي

WITH THE SHORT VOWELS

يُ يِ يَ

TRACE

ي ي ي ي ي ي ي

WRITE

WORDS WITH YAA

يد	ياسمين	يمامة
Hand	Jasmine	Dove

The letter's story · Hand يَد

The red giant Betelgeuse was once yad al-Jawzāʾ, "the hand of al-Jawzāʾ". A copyist read the two dots of yāʾ as the one dot of bāʾ, and one misread dot renamed a star. Our biscuits keep every dot.

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