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HUNGARIAN LESSON

Hungarian Alphabet 1 • Chapter 10 • Vowel Harmony 3

Hungarian Alphabet 1

Chapter 10 · Vowel Harmony 3: Mixed Words, Neutral Vowels and Exceptions

The Tricky Cases

So far every word had vowels from one family, so choosing the ending was easy. Real Hungarian also has words that **mix** back and front vowels (papír, hotel, iroda), words with only neutral vowels, and a handful of **exceptions**. This chapter gives you a simple decision guide for all of them, and finishes with a one-page cheat sheet of the whole harmony system.

The Neutral Vowels — i í e é

The four front unrounded vowels **i í e é** are called **neutral** (or "transparent"), because they're easy-going: they can sit in a word with back vowels without turning the whole word "front". Think of them as see-through: when a back vowel comes before a neutral vowel, the back vowel still decides the ending.

The Decision Guide

1

Only back vowels

→ **back** ending. ház → házban, autó → autóban.

2

Only front vowels

(including the neutral ones) → **front** ending. kert → kertben, víz → vízben, tévé → tévében.

3

Back vowel + i / í / é

→ **back** ending: the neutral vowel is "see-through". papír → papírban, taxi → taxiban, kávé → kávéban.

4

Back vowel + e, or an ö/ó/ü/ű at the end

→ usually **front** ending. hotel → hotelben, sofőr → sofőrben. If the last vowel is a clear back vowel, it wins: iroda → irodában, fiú → fiúban.

A Rule of Thumb for Mixed Words

Look at the last vowel. If it's a clear back vowel, or an *i / í / é* after a back vowel, use the back ending. If it's *e* or a front rounded vowel (*ö ő ü ű*), use the front ending. This covers nearly all words, but mixed words are a famous source of hesitation, even for native speakers, so when in doubt, check a dictionary.

Words to Practise

Flags on the new letters: **x** is said "ks" (Chapter 17), **s** is "sh" (Chapter 13) and **c** is "ts" (Chapter 14).

WORD	SAY IT	VOWELS	ENDING FAMILY	IN	TO
papír (paper)	<i>PAW-peer</i>	a · í	back (a + í)	papírban	papírhoz
taxi (taxi)	<i>TAWK-sih</i>	a · i	back (a + i)	taxiban	taxihoz
kávét (coffee)	<i>KAH-vay</i>	á · é	back (á + é)	kávétban	kávétához
iroda (office)	<i>IH-ro-daw</i>	i · o · a	back (last vowel a)	irodában	irodához
fiú (boy)	<i>FIH-oo</i>	i · ú	back (last vowel ú)	fiúban	fiúhoz
hotel (hotel)	<i>HO-tehl</i>	o · e	front (o + e)	hotelben	hotelhez
tévé (TV)	<i>TAY-vay</i>	é · é	front (only front)	tévétben	tévétéhez
sofőr (driver)	<i>SHO-feur</i>	o · ő	front rounded (last ő)	sofőrben	sofőrhöz

Compare **kávét** and **tévé**

kávét and **tévé** look almost the same, but they take different endings: *kávétban* (back, because of the **á**) and *tévétben* (front, because both vowels are front). The first vowel is what makes the difference, which is why you must look at the *whole* word.

The Exceptions — **híd** and **cél**

About fifty short words that contain only *i*, *í* or *é* break the "only front vowels → front ending" rule: they take **back** endings. You learn them as you meet them. Two common ones (a × marks a form Hungarian does not use):

WORD	SAY IT	EXPECTED (FRONT)	ACTUAL (BACK)	IN · ON · TO
híd (bridge)	HEED	×hídben	hídban	hídban · hídon · hídhöz
cél (goal, aim)	TSAYL	×célben	célban	célban · célon · célhoz

By contrast, look at regular words with the same vowels, which take front endings as expected:

REGULAR WORD	IN	ON	TO
víz (water)	vízben	vízen	vízhez
kéz (hand)	kézben	kézen	kézhez
hír (news)	hírben	híren	hírhez

The Harmony Cheat Sheet

Everything from Chapters 8 to 10 on one page.

MEANING	BACK	FRONT	FRONT ROUNDED	KIND
in	-ban	-ben	-ben	two-way
into	-ba	-be	-be	two-way
out of	-ból	-ből	-ből	two-way
on (surface)	-on (- n)	-en (- n)	-ön (-n)	three-way
onto	-ra	-re	-re	two-way

MEANING	BACK	FRONT	FRONT ROUNDED	KIND
off, about	-ról	-ről	-ről	two-way
at, by	-nál	-nél	-nél	two-way
to, towards	-hoz	-hez	-höz	three-way
from (a person/place)	-tól	-től	-től	two-way
to; for (receiver)	-nak	-nek	-nek	two-way
with	-val	-vel	-vel	two-way; the <i>v</i> copies the last consonant: <i>házzal, kerttel, vízzel</i> ; after a vowel it stays: <i>autóval</i>

The Big Picture

Harmony is not a pile of exceptions: it's one idea applied to about a dozen endings. Learn the *three families* of vowels (back, front unrounded, front rounded), look at the vowels of the word, and pick the matching ending. When you meet a new ending in the conversation courses, it will almost always follow this same pattern.

Mini-Dialogs

① Coffee and Paper — Hol a kávé?

A:

Hol a kávé?

HOL aw KAH-vay?

Where is the coffee?

B:

A hotelben.

aw HO-tehl-behn.

In the hotel.

A:

② On the Bridge — A hídon

A:

Hol a fiú?

HOL aw FIH-oo?

Where is the boy?

B:

A hídon.

aw HEE-don.

On the bridge.

A:

És a papír?

AYSH aw PAW-peer?

And the paper?

B:

Az irodában.

awz IH-ro-daw-bawn.

In the office.

És a sofőr?

AYSH aw SHO-feuur?

And the driver?

B:

Az autóban.

awz AW-u-toh-bawn.

In the car.

③ Going To — Hová?

A:

Hová?

HO-vah?

Where to?

B:

A hotelhez.

aw HO-tehl-hehz.

To the hotel.

A:

És a fiú?

AYSH aw FIH-oo?

And the boy?

B:

Az irodához.

awz IH-ro-dah-hoz.

To the office.

Review: Chapter 9 — The Three Sets

Test yourself: inside is *-ban / -ben, -ba / -be, -ból / -ből*; on a surface is *-on / -en / -ön, -ra / -re, -ről / -ről*; near is *-nál / -nél, -hoz / -hez / -höz, -től / -től*. Cover the table and say the nine forms of *ház* and *kert* out loud.



Try It Yourself — Gyakorlatok

Say each answer out loud first, then click to check.

1. Why are *i, í, e, é* called "neutral" vowels?

▼ Show answer

They're easy-going: they can sit in a word with back vowels without making the word "front". A back vowel before a neutral vowel still decides the ending.

2. Add "in" to: *papír · hotel · kávé · tévé*

▼ Show answer

papírban · hotelben · kávéban · tévében (*papír*: a + í → back; *hotel*: o + e → front; *kávé*: á + é → back; *tévé*: only front vowels → front).

3. Add "in" to *iroda* and *fiú*. What decides the ending?

▼ Show answer

irodában (final *a* lengthens to *á*) and *fiúban*. In both, the **last vowel** is a clear back vowel (*a, ú*), so the back ending wins.

4. Add "in" to *víz* and *híd*. Why are they different?

▼ Show answer

vízben (regular: only a neutral vowel → front) but *hídban* (*híd* is one of about fifty exceptions that take back endings).

5. Add "to" (*-hoz / -hez / -höz*): *sofőr · hotel · papír*

▼ Show answer

sofőrhöz (front rounded) · *hotelhez* (front) · *papírhoz* (back).

6. Why is it *kávéban* but *tévében*?

▼ Show answer

kávé has a back vowel (á) before the é, which is "see-through", so it takes the back ending.
tévé has only front vowels, so it takes the front ending.

Coming Up in Chapter 11

The vowels and vowel harmony are done. Now the **consonants** begin. Chapter 11 covers the letters that look and mostly sound like English: **b p d t g k**, with one important difference in how *p*, *t*, *k* are pronounced.