

Korean Syllables

Korean is written by syllables.

You should be able to write the syllables correctly if you remember three major and three minor rules.

Before these are reviewed, several introductory points may be helpful: (1) There are three basic shapes of vowels, which I will call “vertical vowels,” “horizontal vowels,” and “w-vowels.” (2) Within the syllable, one must distinguish between an initial consonant (one before the vowel) and a final consonant (one after the vowel).

Three Major Rules

1. A “vertical vowel” (one of the tall and narrow vowels: ㅏ ㅑ ㅓ ㅕ ㅗ ㅛ ㅜ ㅠ ㅡ) is always written to the right of the initial consonant in the syllable, as in English: ㅏㅑ (*ka*).
2. A “horizontal vowel” (one of the wide and short vowels : ㅓ ㅕ ㅗ ㅛ ㅜ ㅠ ㅡ) is always written under the initial consonant in the syllable: ㅓ (*no*).
3. If there is a final consonant in the syllable, it always goes on the bottom: ㅏㅑ (*kak*), ㅓㅑ (*nok*).

Three Minor Rules

The three minor rules are just special cases of the three major rules.

1. In Korean, the first *character* in a syllable is never a vowel. If the first *sound* in a syllable is a vowel, you must use “ㅇ” as a silent place-holder first (in the position of an initial consonant).¹

Thus, either Major Rule 1 or 2 would apply, depending on the vowel, for example: ㅏㅑ (*a*), ㅓㅑ (*o*).

2. Each of the “w-vowels” (ㅓㅑ ㅕㅑ ㅗㅑ ㅛㅑ ㅜㅑ ㅠㅑ ㅡㅑ) is in fact simply a combination of a “horizontal vowel” and a “vertical vowel.” For example, notice that “ㅓㅑ”(wa) is constructed from “ㅓ”(o) and “ㅑ”(a). As one might expect, the horizontal component of the “w-vowel” (for example, the “ㅓ” part of “ㅓㅑ”) goes under the initial consonant, and the vertical component (the “ㅑ” part of “ㅓㅑ”) goes to the right: ㅏㅑ (*kwa*), ㅓㅑ (*wa*).²

3. ‘Double consonants’ (ㅃ ㅆ ㄸ ㅉ ㅊ ㅋ ㆁ ㄷㄷ ㄱㄱ ㄴㄴ ㄹㄹ ㄷㄷ ㄱㄱ ㄴㄴ ㄹㄹ ㄷㄷ ㄱㄱ ㄴㄴ ㄹㄹ ㄷㄷ ㄱㄱ ㄴㄴ ㄹㄹ) are treated as single consonants. This is true regardless of whether they are in the initial position in the syllable (ㅃ ㅆ ㄸ ㅉ ㅊ) or in the final position (ㄷㄷ ㄱㄱ ㄴㄴ ㄹㄹ ㄷㄷ ㄱㄱ ㄴㄴ ㄹㄹ).

As you may have noticed in the examples, each individual character changes shape in order to “fit well” with the other characters in the syllable; the overall shape of the syllables should be such that squares can be drawn around them of approximately equal size.

The three major and three minor rules are summarized in the following charts, through examples:

Major Rules

	vertical	horizontal
no final consonant	가 (<i>ka</i>)	노 (<i>no</i>)
final consonant	각 (<i>kak</i>)	녹 (<i>nok</i>)

Minor Rules

	vertical	horizontal	w-vowel
no final consonant	아 (<i>a</i>), 까 (<i>kka</i>)	오 (<i>o</i>)	과 (<i>kwa</i>), 와 (<i>wa</i>)
final consonant	앙 (<i>ang</i>), 업 (<i>ôps</i>)	온 (<i>on</i>)	괵 (<i>kwak</i>), 왓 (<i>wass</i>)

¹Remember that “ㅇ” sounds like “ng” when it is a final consonant in the syllable, but that it is silent if it is an initial consonant.

²One way to remember which vertical and horizontal components go together in order to make a particular “w-vowel” is that “right” goes with “up” and “left” goes with “down.” In other words, the right-facing vowels (ㅏ ㅑ ㅓ ㅕ) are preceded by ㄱ, and the left-facing vowels (ㅛ ㅜ ㅝ ㅟ) are preceded by ㅋ. “Right” and “up” are thought of as being *yang* (bright, positive) and “left” and “down” are *ûm (yin)* (dark, negative).