

Russian Grammar

The most common types of words you'll encounter are prepositions, verbs, adjectives, and nouns.

Prepositions are short words, and usually stay more or less the same however they are used. This is good!

Verbs, adjectives and nouns all change depending on how they are used. Verbs change depending on their tense (past/present/future) and on whether they are being used first/second/third person, and singular or plural. Nouns and adjectives both change in line with each other (remember that adjectives are words that describe nouns) depending on the gender of the noun (masculine/feminine/neuter) and whether they are singular or plural, and the case (choice of six - nominative, accusative, genitive, dative, instrumental, prepositional).

In the case of all of these types of words, the changes to the word occur to the ending. Each word comprises a "stem" and then a series of different endings that can be added to the stem, depending on their usage. While there might seem, at first, to be a bewildering range of different possible endings, the good news is that the endings tend to follow some simple rules most of the time, and that some endings are very uncommon, and so if you remember just a few rules and endings, you'll be in good shape most of the time.

Nouns

Nouns can be masculine, feminine, or neuter. They can be singular or plural. They can have any one of six different cases.

The main case is the "nominative" case, and this is the form in which nouns are usually shown in, eg, a dictionary, and the form in which they are learned (a bit like learning verbs in the infinitive form).

In the nominative case, it is easy to tell what gender a noun may be.

| | <u>Singular ending</u> | <u>Plural ending</u> |
|-----------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Masculine | Ends in a consonant | Add -ы or -и rarely add -а or -я |
| Feminine | Ends in -а or -я | Change to -ы or -и |
| Neuter | Ends in -о or -е or -ё | Change to -а or -я or -я |

Note that nouns that end in a soft sign (ь) might be either masculine or feminine. You just have to learn this!

Verbs

Verbs - "doing" words - words that describe an action, also have a stem and an ending. Their endings (how they are "conjugated") depend on two main considerations. A plain unmodified verb with no changes to its "dictionary" form is called an "infinitive" verb. An example of a verb in English would be the verb "to buy". In English, the infinitive of a verb always has the word "to" before the main part of the verb. In Russian, the infinitive is indicated by the particular type of ending on the stem of the verb (typically -ть).

The first consideration is whether they are to be used in a first, second, or third person form, and whether they are to be used in a singular or a plural form. By first, second and third person, we mean, for first person, the case where you use "I" and then a verb if talking in the singular, and "we" if talking plural (ie me for one person and some other person or persons as well, making more than one). Second person is when we talk about someone else (or several other people) and use the term "you" and then a verb. These days, English uses the same word for "you" if meaning only one person, or if meaning many people. Most other languages have different words for second person singular and second person plural. It is also common in most other languages that the second person singular be reserved for use only with people that you know well, with people that you don't know so well, or with people you want to show respect, you use the second person plural. The third person is when you talk about someone (or something) else not present - you say "he" or "she" or "it" or "they" (singular forms depending on gender, and a common plural form) and then a verb.

Here is an example of the English verb "to buy" conjugated in the present tense :

| | Singular | | Plural | |
|------------------------|-----------|------|--------|-----|
| 1 st person | I | buy | We | buy |
| 2 nd person | You | buy | You | buy |
| 3 rd person | He/she/it | buys | They | buy |

As you can see, there aren't many changes to the verb, are there. There are more changes in Russian (and most other languages), indeed, each of the different situations above has its own special verb ending. This is actually helpful, because you can immediately tell from the verb itself what type of use it is being given, without having to search for the subject of the verb somewhere in the sentence.

Let's look at a typical example of a Russian verb now, and we'll use the same verb, to buy, or, to say it as its Russian infinitive, Покупать, conjugated in its present tense :

| | Singular | | Plural | |
|------------------------|------------|-----------|--------|-----------|
| 1 st person | Я | покупаю | Мы | покупаем |
| 2 nd person | Ты | покупаешь | Вы | покупаете |
| 3 rd person | Он/Она/Оно | покупает | Они | покупают |

Can you guess which part is the stem of this verb? We'll come back and study the different endings soon enough, for now it is shown to you mainly for your interest.

The second consideration is whether the verb is to be used to describe an action in the present tense, or in the past tense, or in the future tense. For example, with the verb "to buy", if we are talking about past tense, we would say "I bought" or "I did buy" or "I was buying" (note that there

are slightly different meanings to these different ways of saying this phrase). If we are talking about a future activity, we could say “I will buy” or “I will be buying” (again there are slightly different meanings to each of these two ways of saying this).

Expressing things in the past and future tenses in Russian can be very similar to in English, where we simply take the verb infinitive (eg “buy”) and add a modifying verb before it to indicate the past or future tense (such as **did** buy or **will** buy). They also have distinct past tense forms of verbs (eg bought).

There is an interesting third consideration when choosing a verb and how to use it. This is deciding if an action is perfect or imperfect.

- A perfect action is a completed action, a single action, something with a clear start and finish. An imperfect action is an ongoing action, or a repeated action, or an incomplete action.
- Perfect verbs are used when focusing on results, imperfect verbs when considering processes.
- An interrupted action is imperfect (because it is incomplete), the action that interrupts the previous action is, by contrast, perfect.
- Simultaneous actions are imperfect, consecutive actions are perfect.
- Imperfect verbs focus on open ended processes, conditions, or states; perfect verbs focus on the starting point of an action, or the ending point, or both.

This concept of a different verb for a perfect or imperfect action might seem strange to us, but in English we express the same concept by using a different tense – the “past imperfect” or the “past perfect” tense. For example, the phrase “I read a book” is in the past perfect – it refers to a single, completed action. The phrase “I was reading a book” is in the past imperfect – it refers to an action that doesn’t have a clear start or end, and which has no sense of completion in it. Compare “I read a book, and then the lights went out” with “I was reading a book, and then the lights went out”.

Most Russian verbs exist in verb “pairs” – one relating to the imperfect aspect of the action, and the other to the perfect action. For example, the verb “to buy” has as its verb pair Покупать and Купить with the former being imperfect and the latter perfect. It is common to see, with a verb pair, the imperfect verb listed first.

Many perfect verbs are formed by adding a prefix to the imperfect verb. Sometimes adding a prefix does nothing except change the verb from imperfect to perfect, and sometimes, adding a prefix changes it from imperfect to a specific form of perfect. For example, the verb писать (to write) has as its normal paired perfect verb the verb написать but there can also be other verbs formed, for example, записать which means to make a note.

Now for an interesting thing. By definition, a perfect verb can not be used in the present tense. A perfect verb relates to a completed action, and plainly a present tense action is something that you are in the process of doing. As soon as it is complete, it becomes past tense.

Accordingly, to make things easy, if you use the present tense of a perfect verb, it is understood to mean a future action that you will do, rather than a current action you are presently doing.

Present Tense Conjugation

Good news and bad news. The good news is that most verbs follow one of two different standard patterns for conjugation. The bad news is that some verbs do not follow this pattern. The good news is that it is usually possible to discern the pattern for irregular verbs based on knowing only the first and second person singular forms. The bad news is that many of the irregular verbs are, predictably, the most common ones! The good news is that these common verbs are easy to learn (because they are so common). Confused yet?

Type 1 verbs usually end -ать. Three examples of type 1 verbs would be the verb we've looked at already, покупать, понимать (to understand) and знать (to know). With a type 1 verb, you remove the ть ending and then add the appropriate endings for the usage of the verb.

| | Singular | | Plural | |
|------------------------|------------|-----------|--------|-----------|
| 1 st person | Я | покупаю | Мы | покупаем |
| 2 nd person | Ты | покупаешь | Вы | покупаете |
| 3 rd person | Он/Она/Оно | покупает | Они | покупают |

Type 2 verbs usually end -ить. A familiar type 2 verb is говорить (to speak). With a type 2 verb, you remove the ить ending and then add the appropriate endings for the usage of the verb.

| | Singular | | Plural | |
|------------------------|------------|----------|--------|----------|
| 1 st person | Я | говорю | Мы | говорим |
| 2 nd person | Ты | говоришь | Вы | говорите |
| 3 rd person | Он/Она/Оно | говорит | Они | говорят |

You can see from the two different type endings that they are really very similar. In a worst case scenario, you could probably use either ending (they sound almost the same, anyway!) and you'd be understood.