

Want more information?

Although the syllabary is currently in only limited use, it remains a topic of much interest for scholars and Cherokee alike and is considered one of the true litmus tests for citizenship in the Cherokee nation. You can see it in use at <http://www.cherokee.org>, the website for the Cherokee nation, which is a great place to find out more about the language and the syllabary.

Scholars continue to do work on the history of Cherokee and its influence, including the surprising new connections with the Vai syllabary. Konrad Tuchscherer and PEH Hair's article in *History in Africa* has good information on the Vai connections, and Marianne Mithun writes highly technical descriptions of Cherokee grammar and constructions.

Trying to write English in the Cherokee syllabary

Now that you know how to use it, it can be fun to try to write English using the Cherokee syllabary. Keep in mind that it's going to be hard. English has 26 consonant sounds and at least 12 vowel sounds, whereas Cherokee only has 12 consonant sounds and 6 vowel sounds, so there are sounds that occur in English that don't occur in Cherokee at all. It's also hard because every language has its own rules about how sounds go together to make syllables, and the rules for English and Cherokee are pretty different.

However, this obviously became an issue for the Cherokee, who were pretty quickly surrounded by English speakers and often had to adapt and record English words in their own writing system. This was most common with English names. So, the name "Carrie", a popular 19th century girl's name which contains the "r" sound (which does not exist in Cherokee) was transcribed as "ge-wi" and written in the syllabary as ᎠᎾ.

Can you imagine how your own name might be transcribed?

Why a syllabary, anyway?

The Cherokee language is particularly well-suited for a syllabic writing system, or a syllabary. Cherokee syllables only come in a few different "shapes". They all have exactly one vowel and sometimes that's all—those are called "V" syllables, things like "i" or "u". They can have, at most, one consonant at the beginning of each syllable, and those are called "CV" syllables, like "gi" or "tsa". Those are the only two possibilities for Cherokee syllables, V and CV. As mentioned above, there are only about 20 truly distinctive sounds in Cherokee. Because of this, there's a small number of possible syllables in Cherokee—only the 85 syllables represented in the syllabary are possible.

Compare this to English, which allows very complicated syllables, like in the words "string" (CCCVC) and "sixths" (CVCCCC), and it becomes clear that, compared to English, at least, Cherokee is very easily represented by a syllabary with only a small number of symbols for different syllables.

The Cherokee Syllabary



An original indigenous North American writing system

History of the Cherokee writing system



Prior to the arrival of westerners, writing was not a very common linguistic practice among the peoples of North America. In the early part of the 19th century, Chief Sequoyah of the Cherokee (also known as George Gist) introduced a writing system that he had specifically developed for the purpose of recording the Cherokee language. By 1830, literacy rates shot up dramatically and 90% of Cherokee were well-versed and fluent in the writing system, and the system was used to record life within the Cherokee nation. It went on to inform syllabary formation for several other languages and language groups, including the Canadian Aboriginal Syllabic system and the Vai syllabary of west Africa.

Due to forced migrations imposed by the United States Government, the Cherokee language is not as robust and healthy as it once was, but it is still considered an important part of Cherokee identity and life, and the still syllabary is still considered a remarkable achievement.

Kinds of writing systems

Linguists divide writing systems into three major types: alphabetic, logographic, and syllabic. They differ based on the size of the "chunk" of language they try to represent in each character or symbol.

Alphabetic systems, like the Latin alphabet we use to write English, more or less have a different symbol for each sound. That can get complicated (think about the complications of the letters "c", "s" and "k" in English, where sometimes "c" can sound like "k", as in the word "call" and sometimes "c" can sound like "s", as in the word "cell"), but the driving force behind an alphabet is that each symbol should stand for one bit of sound.

Logographic systems like the Chinese writing system or Egyptian hieroglyphics have a different symbol for every word or chunk of meaning. These systems can have thousands of different symbols to learn! Historically, logographic systems originated first and alphabets are most recent, while syllabaries are an intermediate step between them.

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