INTRODUCTION

1 Reading and writing Arabic

Arabic writing seems daunting at first sight, but it doesn't have to remain so.

This book attempts to take the mystique out of it. You learn the alphabet in stages, practising each new letter or combination of letters many times before moving on; at the same time you fit the letters into useful words and phrases commonly seen in any Arab environment.

This book is actual; you learn to read and write today's Arabic. And you learn through practice, right from the start.

That said, nobody can promise that when you have finished this book you'll be able to read a newspaper article or write a report. That requires a knowledge of Arabic grammar going beyond our scope. But you will be able to read important signs and directions – even better, you will know how they are constructed. You will also be able to read and understand many newspaper headlines, to write and pronounce everything you can read, and to use a dictionary.

The book covers an Arabic vocabulary of over 600 words, as well as three important word structures, all chosen for usefulness and frequency.

2 The Arabic language

Arabic is a world language. It is the (or an) official language of nineteen countries spread over North Africa and the Middle East. It is also an official language in the United Nations. Arab culture has a high reputation, and is studied at countless universities in the West.

Most words in Arabic are built on a 'root' of three letters; this root contains the basic idea underlying all the words made from it. A good example is the root consisting of the three letters ***k t b***, which has the basic idea 'writing'. From this root Arabic makes, for example:

- ***k**a**t**a**b*** for 'to write'
- ***k**ā**t**i**b*** for 'writer'
- *ma**kt**ū**b*** for 'written' or for 'letter'
- ***k**i**t**ā**b**a*** for the action of 'writing'
- ***k**i**t**ā**b*** for 'book'
- *ma**kt**a**b**a* for 'library' or 'bookshop', and so on.

The words may have bits added on, or may change internally, but you still find the three root letters, all present and always in the same order, throughout all the derivatives.

Another feature of the language is the fact that words having a similar function tend to have a similar pattern.

Together, the Arabic root and pattern are a great help in understanding words which are so different from any European vocabulary. If you recognise the root, you have the basic meaning; and if you recognise the pattern, you know what kind of word it is, i.e. how it is used. In this book we capitalise on these and other important features of the language.

Written Arabic is standard throughout the Arab world. The Cairo newspaper *al-'ahrām* ('The Pyramids') is read with ease in Casablanca, at the other end of North Africa. This is the Arabic found on all signs, notices, advertisements and so on, and it has a standard pronunciation. It is the form of Arabic which we are about to explore.

You may be aware, or even worried, about the differences between spoken and written Arabic. These differences do indeed exist, but fortunately for us they do not apply to the examples of Arabic studied in this book, which are quoted and pronounced in speech as they stand. There are

in truth a few exceptions. Some occur, clearly marked, in Lessons 9 and 13.

3 The Arabic alphabet

Here are the principles on which the Arabic alphabet is based. Refer here if in doubt later:

- The writing runs from right to left ← .
- There are no capital letters.
- Short vowels (the sounds *a* as in English 'pat', *i* as in English 'pit', and *u* as in English 'put') are most often not written; we usually have to infer them from the context.
- Printed Arabic is originally an imitation of handwriting. Many of the letters (called 'joined letters') are joined to the letter following them in the same word. Other letters ('disjoined letters') are never joined to the letter following them.

All this looks complicated. It is not. Don't attempt to remember it all now; it will become familiar as you read and write.

4 How to use the text

This is a participative book. You do a great amount of reading, listening, speaking, observing and writing. You learn, and remember, by doing.

Arm yourself at the outset with a solid exercise book with lined paper. Do all your practice, exercises and tests in this exercise book. You should also write out your vocabulary somewhere permanent. Writing is a powerful aid to memory.

Follow the text, practising each new letter, group of letters, word or expression as instructed. Pay attention to the notes on handwriting; there are important differences between handwriting and print. In the parts marked '**Write**' in each lesson, you see both. Imitate the handwriting for preference. Read your writing back. Read and write everything several times.

Also in these lessons, your progress is monitored with a series of exercises at each stage; then at the end of the lesson you have tests, which are more difficult and more formal than the exercises.

Lessons 1 to 6 teach you the alphabet, which you practise by reading and writing letters and words. **Lesson 7** teaches you the dual† and plural, and the Arabic numerals; **Lesson 8** gives important word types needed to make meaningful expressions. While following these early lessons, don't force yourself to learn words by rote. Some will stick in your mind anyway. The important thing is that you can by now assemble the letters correctly, and read, write, pronounce and understand most of the words which you see.

Lessons 9 to 14 start with new vocabulary, often divided into 'essential' vocabulary, which you need to learn on the spot, and 'reference' vocabulary, which you should examine and refer to when necessary. You will retain much vocabulary through practice. In these later lessons you learn to identify the different types and patterns of a word, how to manipulate them, and how to link them in common and useful expressions and short sentences. You will begin to read notices, signs, headlines.

5 How to use the media support.

This e-book has two media features which will greatly help you: these are **recorded pronunciation** and **animated handwriting demonstrations**. Both are embedded in the lessons at the appropriate points, and can be activated directly from the text, without connection to the Internet. A sample of each is given on the next page.

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† *dual:* English has singular (= *one*) and plural (= more than *one*); Arabic has singular (= *one*), dual (= *two*), and plural (= more than *two*).



First the **recorded pronunciation**. Double-click on the **loudspeaker icon** in the margin, to listen to the sound file ***S0.wav*****.** After a few seconds (see NB below) you will hear Mahmoud al-Ansary say:

لفظ اللغة العربية لفظ اللغه العربيه *lafẓ al-lugha l-9arabīya*

'the pronunciation of Arabic'

Mahmoud is a graduate of the universities of Cairo and Leuven. It is his recorded voice that you will hear in all 15 lessons.

Don't, at this stage, take fright at the unfamiliar transcription symbols *z, gh, 9* and *ī* shown above. They represent typical Arabic sounds which we shall study; they will soon be familiar to you.

In the lessons, double-click the **loudspeaker icon** and listen to the recording, repeating each word in the pause following it.

In addition, you can use the recording to *check your vocabulary*; instead of repeating each word in the pause after it, *translate* it – without, of course, looking at the text.



Now a **handwriting demonstration**. Double-click on the **pin icon** in the margin; in the dialogue which then opens confirm that you wish to open the file ***W3.pps***, and watch (see NB below) the handwriting of the word باب *bāb* 'a door' in a Powerpoint© frame. The demonstration ends with a thick red arrow in the lower right corner of the frame. To close and return to the text, click twice.

(NB: The first time you open a pronunciation or handwriting file in a lesson (or in this Introduction), it may take a few seconds to start; please be patient. When you subsequently open that type of media support in the same text, it will react more promptly.

Also, with some earlier Powerpoint© players, the handwriting file may open hidden *behind* the page of text. If this happens, immediately click once on the file's icon which will have appeared at the foot of your screen. This will bring the demonstration to the front. For a permanent solution, try installing a later Powerpoint© player.)

Follow the instructions given in the box above throughout the lessons, which have much media content. Double-click on the **loudspeaker icon** to hear pronunciation, and on the **pin icon** to watch the handwriting demonstration of a key word. No Internet connection is needed.

Lesson 15 is a general reading and writing test. The media content is used for dictation.

16 Key to tests. This is self-explanatory.

17 Vocabularies. The preamble to this chapter explains how to use these.

18 Index. This chapter lists, with references, the technical topics covered (e.g. Participle, Vowel).

19 Card. This is a memory aid in bank-card format; its use is explained there.

20 Appendix. This optional chapter shows the writing of the short vowels *a, i* and *u* and other non-alphabetical signs not written in everyday Arabic, but added only in (e.g.) educational and religious texts.

References. References to *text* indicate 'lesson no./paragraph no.', unless stated otherwise. References to *media* appear in the lessons as e.g. ***S1.wav*** for recorded pronunciation and e.g. ***W3.pps*** for a handwriting demonstration.

References in the Vocabularies are explained in the preamble to that chapter.

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NB: This book teaches everyday reading and writing, not *calligraphy*, i.e. the fine art writing found in art books and on monuments.