

If you look at Russian grammar from a traditional perspective with the tables, etc, it can seem incredibly confusing and a near impossible task to master. However, if you take it step by step and learn to use it at the same time, then it's really not that difficult. It's the same for people learning English. The grammar is terribly confusing and if approached from the rules instead of the idea being expressed then they almost never get it right.

So, let's get started, and this will probably be useful for Russian speakers learning English also. It's best if you have learned some Russian already in order to follow this more easily since we don't show meanings or pronunciation of basic words, but you can still manage without it.

The first point, especially for Russian speakers, is that Russian doesn't use articles like 'a', 'an' and 'the'. Easy for us, very difficult for them, and to avoid the mistake in English, you really have to make it 'automatic' through proper 'physical training'. The same goes for Russian grammar; it needs to become 'automatic' which ending to put on words. You don't have time to think of the rules. They're best used as a backup when you're not sure.

Also, Russian does have an equivalent word for the verb 'to be' but it's not used extensively like in English, and is more for future and past tense.

In our lesson one, which takes less than 10 minutes for a first time ever student, you learn the basics.

- Что это? [What's this/that?]
- Чо? (Где?) [What? (Where?)]
- Это. [This. / That.]
- Это книга. [It's a book.]

In Russian, and many languages, the response "What?" is often more commonly expressed as "Where?" or "Which?". In English it's also common to say "What's what?" which in Russian would be 'where' or 'which'. The Russian expression, Чо чо?, ("What what?" or "What's what?" since the verb 'to be' isn't used) means "Pardon?" and is used when you don't hear what someone says.

Russian also makes no distinction for 'this', 'that', 'these' and 'those' in the simple question "What's this/that?" (What are these/those?), so it's very easy to get started. You later discover that they do make a distinction in other situations but for now, simply enjoy the fact that it's super easy with just one word 'это'. Also, remember that it's spelled with an 'э' and not 'e'. Most people find it easy to remember the 'o', even though it's pronounced as 'a'.

Russian does however have a similar concept to 'it' and it changes based on whether it's 'masculine', 'feminine', 'neuter' or 'plural'. No need to memorize which words are masculine, feminine and neuter since the pattern will rapidly become apparent and then practice will make it 'automatic'.

- Что это? [What's this/that?]
- Это книга. [It's a book.]
- Где она? [Where is it?]
- Она здесь. [It's here.]

It's pretty simple to recognize that Russian follows a similar pattern to English where we use 'it' after the object has been identified. In English, we'd normally say "It's a book." but in Russian you still use 'this'.

When this routine is repeated many times, and interchanged with 'who' (кто), then the grammar aspect becomes 'automatic' and you don't have to think about it, which is the basic aim of our learning approach.

It's also useful to limit the number of nouns to a minimum. After all, in short term memory, there's only room for 5 – 7 things, so keep the number small and learn to use them well. We typically start with 'book' (книга), 'magazine' (газета), 'newspaper' (журнал), 'letter' (письмо), 'house' (дом), 'apartment' (квартира), and 'apple' (яблоко). This group also introduces the concept of 'masculine', 'feminine' and 'neuter' nouns and gives some practice with them.

English learners often forget to change the word order for a question, usually because in their language there is no order change.

"This/That is a" (Это)

"Is this/that a?" (Это?)

Pretty simple in Russian!! The question is formed simply by the tone of voice which we also do in English, rising at the end to indicate a question.

Это книга. (This is a book.)

Это дом. (That's a house.)

Это книга? (Is this a book?)

Да, это книга. (Yes, that's a book.)

Это дом? (Is that a house?)

Да, это дом. (Yes, that's a house.)

Pretty simple and English is more difficult to learn since there are more variations and the sounds are harder to make, particularly the ...s th... but it's an extremely important sound to learn since it's so common. (Is th...? / Does th..? / What's th...? / Where's th...?)

The negative answer is also fairly simple to learn and understand, and simply needs some practice to make it 'automatic'.

Это книга? (Is this a book?)

Нет, это не книга, это журнал.

Russian gets difficult because the ending of words can change in a myriad of ways, but to begin with, when the root word gets changed, there's no need for any explanation if the idea is clear.

- Кто это? (Who's this/that?)

- Это Брад. (That's Brad.)

- Где он. (Where is he?)

- Он дома. (He's at home.)

After learning 'house' (дом), it's pretty simple to understand 'дома' as 'at home', and there's no need for any grammar explanation. It says in the dictionary that it's an adverb and the same word, дома, is used for three different cases (genitive singular, nominative plural, and accusative plural), but it doesn't really matter what 'rule' or 'term' is applied, the idea is completely clear and it's easily and quickly learned with no explanation at all. Trying to explain too much too early simply creates confusion. Simply 'get a feel for it' to begin with.

And getting a 'feel' for what words are masculine, feminine and neuter is also accomplished easily with this exercise and then learning the 'rules' later is easier because you already have something to help it 'stick'. Taking time at the beginning to explain the rules is really a waste of time since it simply gets forgotten, and besides, it's more important to build up your 'reflexes' and make things 'instinctive' right from the beginning. The rules then play a supportive role when you're not sure and have to think about it.

Similarly, learning when to use 'и' (and) and 'а' (and, but) becomes mostly instinctive after hearing it and using it many times in a variety of situations.

Это книга и это (тоже) книга. (This is a book and this (also) a book.)

Бrad и Мери дома. (Brad and Mary are at home.)

Это книга, а это журнал. (This is a book and this is a magazine.)

"И" means that there is something in common, so if there is nothing in common and you use "и", a Russian speaker will automatically begin trying to find what is in common. So saying, "Это книга, и это журнал." is completely wrong and will create immediate confusion. It's pretty simple to learn and it's important to make it 'automatic', so you never make the mistake.

The same rule of ‘commonality’ applies when ‘and’ is used at the beginning of a sentence, but again, focusing on rules will result in errors, whereas as proper ‘training’ to make it ‘automatic’ will avoid errors.

Как дела? (How are you?)
Хорошо! А ты? (А у тебя?) (Good! And you?)

And here's a little bit from the movie, "Beauty and the Beast".

She's so beautiful and I'm...
Well, look at me!

Она такая красивая, а я...
Посмотрите на меня!

And it definitely takes a while to come to terms with all the various forms of 'me' and it's very important to first learn: Я тоже. (Me too.) And later learn: Мне тоже. (Me too.)

If you learn “Мне тоже.” first, then it’s very likely you’ll use it when you should use “Я тоже.” simply because you’ve made an ‘m’ connection to English and are thinking in English.

Plus, if you simply want to play the odds, “Я тоже.” is more common. In a collection of film subtitles, it appeared 117 times versus 20 times for “Мне тоже.” And, since you’re replying to something just said, you can simply follow the pattern. If they say, “мне нравится....” (I like...) then obviously you’d say “Мне тоже.”

But that's all getting ahead of ourselves. Rather than begin learning 'me' and its many variations, it's simpler to continue with more practice with он, она, они (he, she, they) and introduce the possessive pronouns.

Since they each have only one form, like English, they get learned quickly, and by sticking with just 'he', 'she' and 'they' / 'his', 'her', 'their' (он, она, они / его, её, их) it's kept to a manageable size and builds up confidence in the new student, and the 'natural' repetition, back and forth with other expressions allows it to 'settle in' and become thoroughly learned.

That's another key element when learning a language, or anything for that matter. 'Deep' learning. And like learning basic skills in a sport or playing a musical instrument: practice makes perfect. Just because you 'know' how, doesn't mean you'll do it correctly, and you have to not only do it correctly, but smoothly, quickly and easily. You won't have time to think about it when you're 'playing' for real.

It's amazing how many Russian speakers make the mistake typing 'you' instead of 'your' and I finally realized that it's again a physical problem, not a mental one. They type 'you' with their right hand, then hit the space bar without getting the left hand into the picture. They know the rule. It's very simple and in Russian 'you' changes to 'your' so it should be easy. It's simply a matter of 'physical training'. And they typically don't make the mistake when speaking.

When I was still a beginner, I could type the word ‘пожалуйста’ (you’re welcome) easily since I’d done it many times while making the lessons, but if you asked me to consciously spell it, I couldn’t. My fingers simply ‘did it’.

And further along in your first 20 minutes ever of learning Russian, you learn:

Сейчас Брайан в Индонезии.
Он живёт там.
Он живёт в Индонезии.

А его отец, где он живёт?
Он живёт здесь.
Он живёт в Канаде.

And there's no need for any explanation of the ending change after the word 'в' since you then hear and read:

Где сейчас Блайн? (Сейчас Блайн где?)
Сейчас Блайн в школе.

Что это?
Это школа.

It's pretty obvious that Канада becomes Канаде, and школа becomes школе, when the idea is 'in/at ..', similar to 'дом' and 'дома'.

Time spent explaining in English is time taken away from hearing and reading more examples that make it more and more 'instinctive' and 'automatic'. Trying to memorize all the rules for all words and countries is a monumental task, but learning them one by one as you progress while learning other new material, slowly plants the understanding deeper and deeper.

Russian speakers often make the mistake of when to use 'in' and 'to' since the pattern in English is different from the pattern in Russian. Clearly, if you think in one language and try to speak (or write) in the other, you'll easily make such mistakes, but if you learn them as a 'pair' and they become 'second nature' through the learning method, then you won't make many/any mistakes.

Since we're specifically talking about Russian grammar here, this is the 'Prepositional Case', or 'Case 6', but at this point, it's completely irrelevant and not necessary to know. Simply, when the idea is 'in/at ...' and it's '... в' then the ending will change to 'e' if it was an 'a'. Simple.

And without slowing down since it's all still clear for the student, another grammar point gets introduced with no explanation.

Кто это?
Это Блайн.
Он брат Брайана.
(Брайан его брат.)

Again, there's no need for a complete explanation, and if you tried, most students' brains would explode. There's a natural and immediate understanding and they've learned (been exposed to) all this in just 20 minutes. Trying to explain it would simply stop the natural flow of learning and slow down the entire process.

Lesson 2 ends with more exposure to the basic elements that have already been introduced.

Где Стивен и Дэвид?
Они в парке.

Где живут Анна Петровна и её муж, Иван Иванович?
Они живут в Москве.
Их дочь и сын тоже живут там.
Где они сейчас?
Сейчас они дома.

What's needed later is a handy table or reference to quickly look up words and check the grammatical changes, but, like learning to type 'пожалуйста', if you go through the exercises and develop the proper reflexes, then you won't need the reference table except for new words.

Note that the changes after the word 'в' gets introduced repeatedly with new words and previously learned words, in order to make it 'automatic'. The simple question of "What's that?" also gets thrown in with a picture, in order to show the change.

Что это?
Это парк.

Что это?
Это Москва.

Что это?
Это его книга. (That's his book.)
Это книга Брайана. (That's Brian's book.)

If we consider the grammar, then ‘possession’ (with nouns) uses the ‘Genitive Case’, or ‘Case 2’. Does that make anything clearer? Didn’t think so. ☺

No worries, it will all become clear in time if we continue to take it step by step.

Lesson 3 introduces some new grammar aspects which again require no explanation.

Кто это?
Это Анна Петровна и Иван Иванович.
Где они?
Они дома.

Что делает Анна Петровна?
Она читает.
Что она читает?
Книгу.
Она читает книгу.

А её дочь, Нина? Что она делает?
Она тоже читает.
Что читает Нина?
(Что она читает?)
Письмо.
Она читает письмо.
(Нина читает письмо.)

The change from книга to книги is pretty simple to understand and begin using, without needing to know that it’s the ‘Accusative Case’, or ‘Case 4’. And to quickly emphasize the other ending change we could add the following example:

Где его письмо?
В книге. (In the book.)
(Оно в книге.) (It's in the book.)

And note that it’s not “Это в книге.” which disagrees with the pattern for “Что это?” “Это письмо.” but it sort of makes sense when you think about it and remember the next part “Где оно?” “Оно в книге.”.

I hope you can see that by hearing, reading, speaking and writing this basic material, the changes to the end of words like книга become second nature and you won’t even have to think about it. Following this simple process with 4 nouns: книга, журнал, газета, письмо (book, magazine, newspaper, letter) lays a solid foundation for slowly adding new nouns and then later giving a summary of the rules (which have been intuitively learned already).

The hardest part for me was mixing up журнал and газета. All the rest was easy.

When the idea is clear, the grammar is clear also, even if it’s not explained.

А Максим, что он сейчас делает?
Он не читает.
Он слушает музыку по радио.

You automatically ‘know’ that музыку changed from музыка (like книга) and that радио stays the same (like письмо), and you’ve already learned one of the rules without ever being told: the –a ending changes to –y and the –o ending stays unchanged, and consonant endings like журнал also remain unchanged.

There's no need for a table or explanation, simply practice it to make it automatic. It's easy to understand the English rule that 's' gets added to verbs for third person singular, but without making it automatic through proper training from the very beginning, even advanced students, and the entire country of Singapore, make this mistake. Likewise with plurals and the question: How many books are on the table? - One. Simple practice from the very beginning lays the necessary foundation for all subsequent learning.

And doing 5 or 10 repetitive exercises in a row is also useless. It's too easy, and as soon as you go to the next exercise, the previous one is completely forgotten! You need the 'alternating' aspect, back and forth, and it's best within a dialogue where the idea is clear.

And you slowly build on previous expressions:

Who's this?	Кто это?
That's Blain.	Это Блайн.
He's Brian's brother.	Он брат Брайана.
(Brian is his brother.)	(Брайан его брат.)
Where is he now?	Где он сейчас?
Who? Brian or Blain?	Кто? Брайан или Блайн?
Blain.	Блайн.
He's at school now.	Сейчас он в школе.
Is this is school?	Это его школа?
Yes.	Да.
What's Blain doing now?	Что Блайн сейчас делает?
He's reading a book.	Он читает книгу.



And simple pictures make it obvious, so you almost don't need the equivalent English written to the left of the Russian text (but it's nice to have).

Of course, with such a limited vocabulary and trying to get lots of repetition, the dialogue is a bit contrived but it's still very useful.

And the repetition builds up the 'habit' of putting words in the most common order. It's true that word order in Russian is flexible but it does follow common patterns that are most natural depending on the idea being expressed and what is being emphasized.

If you 'think' in English you'll likely say "Что Блайн делает сейчас?" (What's Blain doing now?) which is okay, but not common. It's much more natural to say "Что Блайн сейчас делает?" (What's Blain now doing?) and 'thinking in mixed up English' is also pointless. Just get into the rhythm of Russian and follow the sound. Stop thinking and just do, and you'll be much better off.

Like perfecting your tennis or golf swing. Just practice and stop thinking. Get the feel for it.

All of the above is finished in about half an hour of your first ever Russian lesson, and you're feeling pretty good about it all, and you've covered a lot of ground. Then, in Lesson 4, we introduce the remaining pronouns (I, you, we) (я, ты / вы, мы) and by the end of that you feel like you've had a pretty serious workout, but you feel good about what you've accomplished.

Привет, меня зовут Брайан.
Я живу в Индонезии.

There's no need (or benefit) to explaining "меня зовут", simply equate it to "my name is". Later it becomes completely clear when you learn the verb 'звонить' (to call) and you read about the following, taken from a Russian movie:

Хорошая собачка! Как звать? (Nice dog! What's his name? [How to call?])
Свистом! (With a whistle!)
Свист?! Оригинальное имя! (Whistle?! That's an original name!)
Да не имя это! (No, that's not his name!)
Молодой еще - имя не заслужил. (He's still young and doesn't deserve a name.)
А подзывать надо свистом! (To call him you need to whistle!)

A simplified version could be learned very early. It's funny and helps solidify the student's understanding.

Remember that you learned earlier 3 possessive pronouns: *его*, *её*, *их* (his, her, their). The next step is to learn 3 more; each a version of 'my'. Once you've had some practice with that, you can move on to 'your' and 'our'. Step by step with no 'overload'.

Что это?
Это мой дом.

Кто это?
Это мой папа.
(Это мой отец.)

А кто это?
Это моя мама.
(Это моя мать.)

Что это?
Это моя книга и моё письмо.
(Это моя книга, а это моё письмо.)

Кто это?
Это мой брат.

Где он?
Он в Канаде.
Он живёт там.

As always, the physical practice of listening, reading and speaking is the best way to lock it into your memory. Then with a few exercises and typing/writing and the job's done. Like walking from 'A' to 'B', if you simply walk, following the 'path', you'll get to 'B'. There's no need to study a map if there's a clear path to follow.

And note that everything that was learned in Lessons 1 through 3 is being repeated again and again but in a natural way, and with a few extra points slowly added.

Кто это?
Это Стивен и Мери Джонс.
Где они сейчас?
Стивен и его семья дома.

Что они делают?
Мери и её дочь, Джули, читают.
Мери читает журнал, а Джули читает книгу. (incorrect to use *и*.)
А Дэвид.... он тоже читает?
Нет. Он не читает.
Он слушает музыку по радио.
А Стивен, что он делает?
Он работает.

It's sometimes useful to point out and emphasize certain aspects, especially when it can be a common mistake if you 'think in English' and don't follow the pattern that's been introduced already. A full explanation is still not needed (or beneficial). Simply remembering not to use

'и' if there's nothing in common, and more importantly, just building up your reflexes, is the best approach.

So, in one hour, reading through lessons 1-4, the student has learned a lot of Russian for his/her first time ever learning Russian.

Typically during the second lesson (second hour), we start again with Lesson 2; listening, reading and repeating (out loud) and then work up to Lesson 5.

Some books and programs teach “Что это такое?” (What is this?) but we save it for later since it's an extra word that isn't needed and simply adds an element of confusion. The definition is “such, as” (pronoun) which clearly doesn't fit logically within a new student's understanding.

And notice that we equate it to “What is this?” and not “What's this?”. There is a subtle difference in English and we emphasize the word 'is' when we say it, which adds an element of surprise or curiosity. It's a bit like saying “What the heck is this?”.

And later you also learn that “Что такое?” (What is it?) is most commonly used, as it is in English, for “What's the matter?” / “What's wrong?”.

As always, when these concepts are introduced in a natural manner within a dialogue with a clear idea, then there's very little explanation needed, if any.

So, that's a quick introduction to our philosophy and some basic Russian grammar points. Next, we'll look at some of these aspects in more detail and get a clear idea of how the endings change, and begin introducing new concepts and ideas, again, within a limited vocabulary so that you don't get overloaded.