

Italian A1

— What to Study

Level: **A1 (Breakthrough)** • Language: **Italian** • Audience: **Learners**

A1 is the point where Italian stops being a musical blur and becomes a language you can survive in. Italian is spelled almost exactly as it is pronounced, which makes the start friendlier than most languages — but you are still not aiming for fluency. You are aiming to handle predictable, concrete situations — introducing yourself, ordering at a bar, asking where something is — with a patient speaker who is willing to slow down.

The Common European Framework describes A1 as being able to understand and use familiar everyday expressions and very basic phrases aimed at satisfying concrete needs; to introduce yourself and others; to ask and answer questions about personal details such as where you live, people you know and things you have; and to interact simply provided the other person talks slowly and clearly and is prepared to help.

Everything below serves that description. If a grammar point does not help you do one of those things, it is not an A1 problem yet.

Grammar to master

Nouns, gender and articles. Every Italian noun is masculine or feminine, and the article changes with the first sound of the next word. Learn nouns with their article — *il libro, lo studente, l'amico, la casa*.

- Definite articles: *il, lo, l', la, i, gli, le; lo* and *gli* before *s* plus a consonant, *z, gn* and *ps*
- Indefinite articles: *un, uno, una, un'*
- Regular plurals: *-o → -i, -a → -e, -e → -i* — *il ragazzo, i ragazzi; la casa, le case; il fiore, i fiori*

The present tense. At A1 the present does almost all the work, including talking about the near future: *Domani vado a Roma*.

- Regular *-are, -ere* and *-ire* verbs, including the *-isc-* group: *capire → capisco*
- The irregulars you cannot avoid: *essere, avere, andare, fare, venire, stare, volere, potere, dovere, sapere*
- *C'è* and *ci sono* for "there is" and "there are"

Pronouns and address.

- Subject pronouns, and the fact that Italian normally drops them: *Parlo italiano*
- *tu* for friends, family and other students; *Lei* — with the third-person verb — for strangers and formal situations: *Come si chiama?*

- Possessives, which normally take the article — *il mio libro, la tua casa* — except with a single family member: *mia madre, tuo fratello*

Sentence building.

- Negation with *non* before the verb: *Non capisco*
- Questions by intonation, and with question words: *chi, che cosa, dove, quando, come, quanto, perché*
- Adjective agreement in gender and number, usually after the noun: *una macchina rossa*
- Prepositions combined with articles: *del, nel, al, sul, dal* — *vado al mare, il libro è sul tavolo*
- *Piacere* and its inverted structure: *Mi piace il caffè, Mi piacciono i libri*

Vocabulary areas

Aim for roughly 500 to 800 words you can actually retrieve, not recognise — each noun with its article. Depth in these areas beats breadth across topics you will not use.

- Greetings, farewells and courtesy formulas: *ciao, buongiorno, buonasera, grazie, per favore, scusi*
- Personal information: name, age, origin, nationality, languages, phone number, email
- Family and relationships
- Professions and workplaces
- Physical description and basic personality adjectives
- The home: rooms, furniture, everyday objects
- Food and drink, meals, ordering at a bar or restaurant
- Numbers 0 to 100, prices, telling the time, days, months, dates
- Colours and clothing
- The city: shops, public buildings, directions, public transport
- Daily routine and free-time activities
- Weather and seasons

What you should be able to do

Treat this as the real exit test for the level. Grammar you cannot deploy in these situations is not yet learned.

- Introduce yourself and give your personal details, and ask someone else for theirs
- Spell your name aloud using the Italian alphabet and understand a spelled name
- Describe your family and where you live
- Say what you do for work or study

- Order food and drink and ask what something costs
- Ask for and follow simple directions
- Talk about your daily routine and what you like and dislike
- Fill in a form with your personal data
- Write a short message, postcard or simple personal introduction
- Understand slow, clearly articulated speech on these familiar topics

Common difficulties

Which article? *Il, lo or l'* depends on the sound that follows, not only on gender: *il treno, lo sport, l'aereo*. Say the article aloud with every new noun until the right one sounds natural.

Double consonants change meaning. *Pena* (pain) and *penna* (pen), *caro* (dear) and *carro* (cart). Hold the double consonant slightly longer; it is not optional.

Tu or Lei. The formal *Lei* uses the same verb form as "he" or "she", which feels strange at first. Practise the fixed phrases — *Come sta?*, *Scusi*, *Può ripetere?* — until they are automatic.

Telling the time. *Sono le tre*, but *è l'una* and *è mezzogiorno*. Time is plural except for one o'clock, midday and midnight.

False friends. *La camera* is a room, not a camera. *I parenti* are relatives, not parents. *La libreria* is a bookshop. *Morbido* means soft.

How to know you are ready for A2

You are ready when you can hold a slow, simple conversation about yourself and your immediate surroundings without rehearsing it first, and when the present tense of the common irregular verbs comes out without hesitation. Persistent hesitation over articles and verb endings means more time at A1, not a harder book.

Course hour estimates for each level vary widely; treat any figure you see as a rough scale, not a target.

Next step

Move on to the Italian A2 guide, which brings in the past tenses so you can talk about what already happened.

Written by GongbuLeng. Aligned with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) A1 descriptors. For the official Italian certification at this level, CILS A1, see the Università per Stranieri di Siena's CILS levels page.