

## GUIDE TO POLISH PRONUNCIATION

Polish is certainly a difficult language, but its pronunciation appears more difficult to an English speaker because of the letter combinations used to make familiar sounds. Fortunately for the English speaker, Polish is a nearly perfectly phonetic language; once one learns the pronunciation rules, they have nearly universal application. Moreover, nearly all the sounds used in Polish are used in English. There are really only 3 sounds of consequence that are not used in English. The difficult part is that Polish combines many sounds in ways that we do not use them in English, and combining these sounds (such as the English “sh” sound followed immediately by the English “ch” sound) can twist the English tongue a bit. With that said, here are the basic rules.

### The Three Unfamiliar Sounds

The three sounds appearing in Polish that do not appear in English are represented by the following letters (or letter combinations):

- a An “a” with a tail on it. This makes a sound that in English would be closely approximated by the letters “awng.” Imagine saying “ow”! and following it with the “ng” sound at the end of “swing.” That gets pretty close. French speakers would be familiar with the sound as the “amp” combination in Champs Elysee.
- ę An “e” with a tail on it. This is similar to the above except it begins with the short “e” sound—very close to “eng” but a bit more nasal. If you stop short of pronouncing the “g” and the second syllable in “engage” you would be pretty close. Most English speakers simply pronounce the sound “en.”
- ch *Completely unlike* the English “ch” sound. Rather than making the sounds in the English word “church,” the Polish “ch” makes essentially the same guttural sound as the Hebrew “chai” or the letters “ch” in the German “Ich.” Making a breathy “k” sound gets you close enough.

### The Rest of the Alphabet

- a Nearly always pronounced like the “a” in “car”
- b As in English
- c *Completely unlike* English. The “c” in Polish has two sounds. Most commonly, it has the “ts” sound in “tse tse fly.” The English spelling of the Russian “tsar” is spelled “car” in Polish. When followed by the letter “i” the “c” has much the same sound as the English “ch” sound (as in “Ciao”), but softer
- ć Also makes a sound similar to the English “ch” but softer. It is hard for an English speaker to imagine the variations, but the sound made by “ć” is slightly softer than the English “ch” sound (which is formed by the letters “cz” in Polish, as explained below), and the sound made by the letter “c” when it precedes the letter “i” is softer still. An

	English speaker can basically get away with pronouncing “cz,” “ć” and “ci” the same way, but the variations are necessary to sound truly Polish.
d	As in English
e	Has the short “e” sound as in “bed.”
f	As in English
g	Always has the hard “g” sound, as in “gone” (the soft “g” sounds in “giraffe” is formed by the letter combination “dz,” as explained below)
h	Similar to the guttural “ch” sound (the Polish sound of that combination--see above--not the English sound), but softer
i	Makes the “ee” sound as in “Nina” or “marine.”
j	Makes the “y” sound in “young” (as the German “Jung”)
k	As in English
l	As in English
ł	An “l” with a line through it. Makes the same sound as the English “w” in “wood.” Lech Walesa, as we spell it in English, is actually spelled Lech Wałęsa in Polish. We learned above that the “ch” sound in “Lech” has a guttural, breathy “k” sound and that the “ę” has a sound similar to the sound made by the English letters “en” (but a bit softer and more nasal). As a result, Wałęsa is not pronounced “Wah-LESS-ah” (as most Americans believe), but “Vah-WHEN-sah”
m	As in English
n	As in English
ń	To the English ear, this letter sounds almost the same as “n,” but it sharpens the vowel that precedes it. Thus, Gdańsk is pronounced “G’(Dyne)sk” (with a long “i” sound like “diner,” much as an Aussie would pronounce “G’day” as if it were spelled “G’dye”), not “G’Dansk” (with a short “a” sound as in “Dan”)
o	Has the long “o” sound in “hope”
ó	Has the “oo” sound in “boot” (it makes the same sound as “u”--see below. Both the ó/u equivalence, and the ź/rz equivalence (see below) are the source of frequent spelling mistakes, even by Poles--no one knows for sure why there are two letters or letter combinations for exactly the same sound in what is otherwise a nearly perfectly phonetic language, but it is still less confusing than the myriad pronunciations assigned to many English letters or the many letters or letter combinations that make exactly the same sound in English—consider the “f” sound made by the letter “f” in fish, the letters “ff” in baffle, the letters “ph” in phone and the letters “gh” in laugh!
p	As in English
r	Trilled in the same manner as the “r” in the Spanish word “pero” (we skipped “q” because there is no “q” in Polish)
s	As in English, except when it precedes the letter “i” (in which case it makes the “sh” sound in “shoe”)
ś	Like the “sh” sound in “shoe” but softer than in English
u	Has the “oo” sound in “boot”
w	Has the “v” sound in English, as in the German pronunciation of “Wagner.” There is no “v” in Polish (and the Poles tend to pronounce the letter “v” in foreign words with the English “w” sound, as in Latin)
y	Has the short “i” sound as in “bit”
z	As in English, except when it precedes the letter “i” (in which case it makes a sound

similar to the “zh” sound made by the letter “s” in “pleasure,” but a little softer)  
ż Makes the “zh” sound made by the letter “s” in “pleasure

### Letter Combinations

The common English sounds represented by the letter combinations “ch,” “sh,” and “dg” (and the “zh” sound that appears in words such as “measure” or “Asian”) are made by letter combinations in Polish that are different than their English counterparts.

The English “ch” sound (as in “church”) is made by the combination “cz.” Similar sounds that do not exist in English are made by the letters “ci” or “ć,” as explained above, and pronouncing those letters like the English “ch” combination will make the English speaker understood (although the accent will certainly be noticed)..

The English “sh” sound is made by the combination “sz.” As with the English “ch” sound, a sound that is similar to the English “sh” is also made by the letter “s” when it precedes the letter “i” or by the letter “ś,” as explained above, and the English speaker will be understood if he or she pronounces those letters in the same way.

The sound made in English by the “dg” in “badge” or the “j” in “jam” is made by the combination “dż” in Polish. Similar sounds are made by the letter combinations “dz” (without the dot above the “z”) and “dź.” (with an accent instead of a dot above the “z”). As with the Polish letters “ć” and “ś” English does not have similar sounds, and pronouncing them similarly to the “dż” or “rz” combinations will generally suffice.

The English “zh” sound made by the “s” in “pleasure” is made by the combination “rz” in Polish (or by the letter “z” as explained above).

The difficulty in the Polish two-letter-sounds is in combining them. The Polish word “Czesc” (hello) makes the sound “Cheshch” in English. If you can say “wasps’ nests,” you can say “Czesc.”

### Stressing Syllables

Polish nearly always stresses the second-to-last (penultimate) syllable in multi-syllable words. The exceptions are too few to bother with for our purposes and generally relate to words borrowed from other languages.

### Pronouncing the Artists’ Names

The above pronunciation rules give you all that you need to pronounce the names of the artists in this Exhibition. Here they are (the capitalized syllables are stressed):

Darek Pala

DAH-reck PAH-lah

Mikołaj Kasprzyk

meeK-OH-why KASP-zhick

Krzysztof Kokoryn

K'SHISH-toff koh-KOH-rin

Tomasz Karabowicz

TOE-mush kah-roe-BOE-veech

Łukasz Huculak

WOO-kahsh hoot-SUE-luck

Stasys Eidregivicius

STAH-sis (no one ever uses the last name, and it's Lithuanian anyway, so don't bother!)