

4 • From Alpha to Omega

- Vowels.** Of Greek's seven vowels (α , ϵ , η , ι , \omicron , υ , ω), ϵ and \omicron are always short; η and ω are the long versions of ϵ and \omicron ; α , ι , and υ are sometimes short, sometimes long. "Short" and "long" refer to the vowel's quantity, i.e., the duration of its sound. In the Classical age long vowels were held out about twice as long as short ones. Apparently the quality, i.e., the sound, of α , ι , and υ , did not change much when those vowels were held out; η and ω , on the other hand, were not only longer but also more open in pronunciation than their short counterparts, ϵ and \omicron .
- A diphthong is two vowels combined in pronunciation; the sound of the first either merges with or glides into the sound of the second. The two vowels together form one long syllable.

Classical Greek has eleven diphthongs. The first eight listed below are called "proper diphthongs" because, in each of them, both vowels continued to be pronounced. The last three in the list are called "improper diphthongs" because the second letter (iota) in each of them eventually became silent. In the Classical age, however, the iota was still pronounced.

Diphthongs

Proper

			Pronounced like the italicized letter(s) in the English word:
AI	$A\iota$	$\alpha\iota$	<i>aisle</i>
AY	$A\upsilon$	$\alpha\upsilon$	<i>ouch</i>
EI	$E\iota$	$\epsilon\iota$	<i>eight</i>
EY	$E\upsilon$	$\epsilon\upsilon$	<i>etch</i> gliding into French <i>u</i> [or <i>you</i>]
HY	$H\upsilon$	$\eta\upsilon$	<i>error</i> gliding into French <i>u</i> [or <i>hey you</i>]
OI	$O\iota$	$\omicron\iota$	<i>oil</i>
OY	$O\upsilon$	$\omicron\upsilon$	<i>ooze</i>
YI	$Y\iota$	$\upsilon\iota$	French <i>u</i> gliding into <i>ee</i> [or <i>wee</i>]

Improper

			Pronounced like the italicized letter(s) in the English word:
$\bar{A}\iota$	$\bar{A}\iota$	$\bar{\alpha}$ or $\bar{\alpha}\iota$	<i>ah</i> gliding into <i>ee</i> [or same as $\bar{\alpha}$]
HI	$H\iota$	η or $\eta\iota$	<i>error</i> gliding into <i>ee</i> [or same as η]
$\Omega\iota$	$\Omega\iota$	ω or $\omega\iota$	<i>aw</i> gliding into <i>ee</i> [or same as ω]

In an improper diphthong the iota may be written either next to the other vowel or beneath it. When it is written next to it, the iota is called an iota adscript; when it is written beneath it, it is called an iota subscript. The ancient Greeks always wrote the iota as an adscript; the subscript did not come into use until the eleventh or twelfth century. Today the iota is still written as an adscript if the $\bar{\alpha}$, η , or ω is capitalized. If both vowels are in lower-case letters, the practice varies, but a subscript is far more common. This textbook prints the iota as a subscript unless the iota is combined with a capitalized vowel.

During the Classical period the letters omicron, omega, epsilon, and upsilon had the names $\omicron\iota$, $\omega\iota$, $\epsilon\iota$, and $\upsilon\iota$. The expanded names they now have (meaning "small o," "big o," "plain e," and "plain u") were created for clarity's sake by grammarians in the Byzantine age. By then the pronunciation of Greek had