

Mastering Arabic 1: Arabic root and verb system

Arabic root system

The Arabic root shows the core meaning of a word. This core can usually be identified by three root consonants (non-vowels). Much of Arabic grammar is concerned with how the root is manipulated to create different but related meanings. As you become more familiar with the patterns and structures, you will be more able to identify the roots and to manipulate them yourself.

Standard roots

Standard roots consist of three different consonants. Here are some of the most common standard roots with their related meanings (the Arabic root letters read right to left):

م/ل/ع to learn	م/ر/س to draw	ث/ح/ب to search
ل/م/ع to work	ب/ر/ك to ride	ك/ر/ت to leave
ح/ف/ت to open	ق/ر/س to steal	س/ل/ج to sit
ل/ع/ف to do	ر/ف/س to travel	ز/ح/ج to reserve
م/ه/ف to understand	ن/ك/س to reside/ to live	ث/د/ح to happen
ل/س/غ to wash	ع/م/س to hear	ر/ح/ض to attend
ب/ك/ت to write	ب/ش/ر to drink	ج/ر/خ to go out
ر/س/ك to break	ر/ش/ك to thank	ل/د/خ to come in
س/ب/ل to wear	ع/ن/ص to make	س/د/ر to study
ب/ع/ل to play	خ/ب/ط to cook	ب/ذ/ه to go
ر/ظ/ن to look	ف/ر/ع to know	ع/ر/ج to return

Non-standard roots

Some roots can be classified as 'non-standard'. They fit into one of the following categories:

Weak

One of the three root letters is و wāw or ي yā' (two 'weak' letters that can be a consonant or a vowel). Weak roots are the largest non-standard category. Examples include:

ل/و/ص to arrive	ي/ط/ي to fly	و/ح/و to wake
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Doubled

The second and third roots are the same letter. Doubled roots are a significant non-standard category. Examples include:

ب/ح/ب to love	م/ح/م to bathe	د/د/د to reply
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Hamzated

One of the roots is hamza. Hamzated roots are less common than weak or doubled roots. Examples include:

ل/ء/ك to eat	ء/ر/ق to read	ل/ء/س to ask
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Quadriliteral

The root is made up of four consonants, rather than the usual three. Quadriliteral roots are relatively uncommon. Examples include:

م/ج/ر/ت to translate	ر/ث/ر/ث to chatter	ج/د/ح/ر/ج to roll
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As you progress in your study of Arabic, you will learn more about non-standard roots and how they affect word patterns.

Arabic verb system

The Arabic verb system is based on the root system. Verbs are categorised into 'basic' and 'derived' forms. Basic verbs are 'no frills' verbs generally based around the three root consonants. Derived forms manipulate the root consonants, adding extra letters before and between them, to create different but related meanings (see table, *Mastering Arabic 1*, pages 286).

Verbs with non-standard roots produce irregular patterns in both the basic and derived forms. You will be introduced to these in *Mastering Arabic 1*. The follow-on course, *Mastering Arabic 2*, provides more detail.

Arabic tenses

There are two tenses in Arabic:

- *past* (الماضي al-māḍī)
- *present/future* (المضارع al-muḍāriʿ)

Verbs in the two tenses have different endings and prefixes depending on the subject (see tables, *Mastering Arabic 1*, pages 284–85).

The past tense is used to talk about completed actions. ذَهَبَ (dhahaba) means both 'he went' and 'he has gone'; كَتَبْتُ (katabtu) means 'I wrote' and 'I have written'. There is no direct equivalent of the English 'has/have gone', 'has/have written', etc.

The present tense is used to express both the habitual ('I drink') and the continuous ('I am drinking'). This tense can also be used to express the future, usually with the addition of the prefix سَ (sa-) or the independent word سَوْفَ (sawfa).