

# Hamza(h)

The Arabic sign *hamza(h)* (*hamza* from now on) is usually counted as a letter of the alphabet, even though it behaves very differently from all other letters. In Arabic it basically indicates a *glottal stop*, which is the invisible consonant that precedes any vowel that you'd think is just a vowel. When pronouncing the word "uh-oh," for instance, your throat constricts slightly before releasing to produce the vowel. Similarly, the way some British people pronounce "bottle" as "bo"le" is a good example of the glottal stop. Although *hamza* is usually *not* a glottal stop in Urdu, you may find it useful for learning purposes to think of it as one.

## I. Orthography

*Hamza* is unlike any of the other letters in that it rarely appears on its own, but rather, it likes to sit on top of either *wā'o* or a special chair that looks like a *be* (or *te*, or *pe*, etc.) without any dots (sometimes it also climbs on top of the *choṭī he*, see the handout on *izāfat* for this). It is only in the rare instances in which we find it in the final or isolated position in Urdu that it sits on the baseline by itself.

*Hamza* (on top of its special chair):

Isolated	Initial	Medial	Final
ء	ء	ء	ء

*Hamza + wā'o*:

Isolated/Initial	Final/Medial
ؤ	ؤ

Note that *hamza* often appears as a little squiggle instead of an 'ain-type character:

ہم نہیں جائیں گے

I will transliterate *hamza* in Roman script as a backwards apostrophe: '

## II. Uses

### 1. As a vowel glide

We need to use *hamza* whenever we have a vowel glide (a pair of two vowels gliding into one another) that *does not end in alif* – that is, in *ā*. Remember that *ai* and *au* are not vowel glides, but

vowels that each happen to be transliterated using a pair of letters in the Roman script.

When we have a vowel glide not ending in *alif*, a *hamza* must appear *between* the two vowels. For instance, the words *khā'o*, *ā'ūn*, *laṛā'ī*, *ga'ī*, *gā'e* and *nā'ib* are spelled:

کھاؤ آؤں لڑائی گئی گئے ناب

As I have mentioned, if it makes things easier, you may imagine that there is a glottal stop between the vowels – just make sure that you convert it into a glide when you pronounce the word!

Vowel glides can end in *i*, *ī*, *e*, *ū* or *o*. As you can see from the examples in Urdu script above, the chair of the *hamza* changes according to the vowel that follows it (the second vowel in the vowel glide). Here is a list of the common vowel glide endings, showing the proper seat for the *hamza* in each case:

		Examples	
If the glide ends with <i>i</i>	then the <i>hamza</i> sits on a chair	<i>ghā'ib</i> , <i>muṭma'in</i>	غائب مطمن
“ “ “ “ <i>ī</i> “ “ “ “	chair	<i>ko'ī</i> , <i>ga'īn</i>	کوئی گئیں
“ “ “ “ <i>e</i> “ “ “ “	chair	<i>ā'e</i> , <i>jā'en</i>	آئے جائیں
“ “ “ “ <i>ū</i> “ “ “ “	<i>wā'o</i>	<i>batā'ūn</i>	بتاؤں
“ “ “ “ <i>o</i> “ “ “ “	<i>wā'o</i>	<i>ā'o</i> , <i>pā'on</i>	آؤ پاؤں

## 2. As a (silent) glottal stop

There are a few Arabic words in Urdu that contain a *hamza* in its original role as a glottal stop. It is usually not pronounced even in these words, except by people who wish to show off their erudition.

The only common word of this kind is the word *mas'ala(h)* (“problem”), which is usually pronounced *masla*. It is written like this:

مسئلہ

There are several Arabic words that end with *hamza*, such as *nisā'* (women) and *binā'* (foundation). In Urdu, the final *hamza(h)* in these words is never pronounced, and only rarely written. So usually, you

will see:

بنا اور نسا

But very rarely, you may see:

بناء اور نساء

This is probably the only time you will ever encounter final or isolated *hamza*.

### **3. On top of *choṭī he***

*Hamza* on top of *choṭī he* is used to indicate the *izāfat* of Persian words ending in silent *-a(h)*. See the handout on *izāfat* for details.