

# Norway: Language

There are four official languages: *bokmål* and *nynorsk*, developed in the mid-1800s after independence from Denmark (Norwegians learn both), sami and kvennish. *Bokmål* (book language), formerly *riksmål* derived from written Danish, is the main language, used in most education, newspapers, radio and TV. *Nynorsk* (new Norwegian, in contrast to pre-1500 Old Norse of North Germanic origin), formerly *landsmål*, is a dialect form with different spelling. Used by 50% of people in 1971, it has declined to 14% (2007), mostly in rural western fjord and central mountain areas. There are many dialect variations that developed when mountainous terrain made communication difficult in the past. The Sami people have their own Finno-Ugric language in 3 versions with 9 dialects, but also speak Norwegian. North Sami is spoken by around 15,000 people, Lule Sami by around 500 and South Sami by around 300; Pite Sami is nearly extinct. Sami is the official language in six municipalities; Kvennish, also Finno-Ugric and spoken by about 8000 people in Troms and Finnmark, is the official language in one. Romani (gipsy) dialects of Indo-European origin include Tavringer Romani (spoken by 6 000), Vlax Romani (by 500), Scandoromani (indigenous to Norway and Sweden) and Rodi or Norwegian Traveller (based on Norwegian with heavy borrowings from Northern Romani and Rotwelsch).

Alphabet & Pronunciation (approximate): Letters are the same as English with three extra vowels Æ, Ø, Å. Adopted foreign words use C, Q, W, X, Z, usually retaining their original pronunciation. Words are pronounced as spelled, all letters sounded (some exceptions). Vowels are usually long in stressed syllables, as the final letter or before a single consonant.

## Vowels:

a short as in 'but'  
long as in 'barn'  
e short as in 'bed'  
long as in 'bay'  
unstressed as in 'ago'  
i short as in 'bit'  
long as in 'beet'  
o short as in 'bob'  
long as in 'boom'  
u short as in 'put'  
long as in 'boom'  
y between 'ee' and 'oo',  
similar to German ü  
æ short as in 'bed'  
long as in 'bay'  
ø as in 'fur', like German ö  
å short as in 'bob'  
long as in saw  
au, eu between 'load' and 'loud'  
eg, ei between 'bait' and 'bite'  
oi, øy as in 'boy'

## Consonants:

d d as in 'dog', often silent at word end and after l, n, r  
g g as in 'go' before a, e, o, u, æ, ø, å  
y as in 'yes' before ei, i, øy, y, final n  
silent before j  
silent at word end after e, i  
h h as in 'her' but silent before j, v  
j y as in 'yes'  
k soft ch as in German 'ich' before ei, i, j, y, øy  
otherwise k as in 'keg'  
ng ng as in 'singer', barely audible g  
nt ng as in 'singer', French-derived words ending -ant  
r r as in 'rag', slightly trilled  
rs sh as in 'fish'  
sj sh as in 'she'  
sk sh as in 'she' before ei, i, j, y, ø, øy  
otherwise sk as in 'skate'  
t t as in 'top', but silent in the word 'det' (it, that)  
and the neuter definite article ending -et  
v v as in 'vat', silent at word end after l  
c as s or k in original foreign word  
q as kv; w as v; x as s or ks; z as s

## Telephone Spelling Alphabet:

|   |     |          |   |     |         |   |             |           |
|---|-----|----------|---|-----|---------|---|-------------|-----------|
| A | aa  | Anna     | K | kaw | Karin   | U | oo          | Ulrik     |
| B | bay | Bernhard | L | el  | Ludvig  | V | vay         | enkelt-V  |
| C | say | Cæsar    | M | em  | Martin  | W | dobbelt-vay |           |
| D | day | David    | N | en  | Nils    |   |             | dobbelt-V |
| E | ay  | Edith    | O | oh  | Olivia  | X | eks         | Xerxes    |
| F | ef  | Fredrik  | P | pay | Petter  | Y | ewe         | Yngling   |
| G | gay | Gustav   | Q | kew | Quintus | Z | set         | Zakarias  |
| H | haw | Harald   | R | air | Rikard  | Æ | ay          | Ærlig     |
| I | ee  | Ivar     | S | es  | Sigrid  | Ø | ur          | Ørn       |
| J | yod | Johan    | T | tay | Teodor  | Å | aw          | Åse       |

## Basic Words & Phrases:

|                      |                                |             |                         |
|----------------------|--------------------------------|-------------|-------------------------|
| Do you speak English | <i>Snakker De engelsk?</i>     | zero        | <i>null</i>             |
| Where is the toilet? | <i>Hvor er toaletten?</i>      | one         | <i>en</i>               |
| gentlemen, men       | <i>herrer, menn</i>            | two         | <i>to</i>               |
| ladies, women        | <i>damer, kvinner</i>          | three       | <i>tre</i>              |
| to the left          | <i>til venstre</i>             | four        | <i>fire</i>             |
| to the right         | <i>til høyre</i>               | five        | <i>fem</i>              |
| straight ahead       | <i>rett fram</i>               | six         | <i>seks</i>             |
| yes                  | <i>ja</i>                      | seven       | <i>sju</i>              |
| no                   | <i>nei</i>                     | eight       | <i>åtte</i>             |
| please               | <i>vær så snill, vennligst</i> | nine        | <i>ni</i>               |
| thank you            | <i>takk</i>                    | ten         | <i>ti</i>               |
| good day, hello, hi  | <i>goddag, hallo, hei</i>      | eleven      | <i>elleve</i>           |
| goodbye              | <i>adjø, ha det</i>            | twelve      | <i>tolv</i>             |
| open                 | <i>åpen</i>                    | thirteen    | <i>tretten</i>          |
| closed               | <i>stengt, lukket</i>          | fourteen    | <i>fjorten</i>          |
| second               | <i>sekund</i>                  | fifteen     | <i>femten</i>           |
| minute               | <i>minutt</i>                  | sixteen     | <i>seksten</i>          |
| hour                 | <i>time</i>                    | seventeen   | <i>syttten</i>          |
| day                  | <i>dag</i>                     | eighteen    | <i>atten</i>            |
| week                 | <i>uke</i>                     | nineteen    | <i>nitten</i>           |
| month                | <i>måned</i>                   | twenty      | <i>tjue</i>             |
| year                 | <i>år</i>                      | twenty one  | <i>tjuéen</i>           |
| spring               | <i>vår</i>                     | twenty two  | <i>tjueto</i>           |
| summer               | <i>sommer</i>                  | thirty      | <i>tretti</i>           |
| autumn               | <i>høst</i>                    | forty       | <i>førti</i>            |
| winter               | <i>vinter</i>                  | fifty       | <i>femti</i>            |
| morning              | <i>morgen, formiddag</i>       | sixty       | <i>seksti</i>           |
| afternoon            | <i>ettermiddag</i>             | seventy     | <i>sytti</i>            |
| evening              | <i>aften, kveld</i>            | eighty      | <i>åtti</i>             |
| night                | <i>kveld, natt</i>             | ninety      | <i>nitti</i>            |
| yesterday            | <i>i går</i>                   | hundred     | <i>hundre</i>           |
| today                | <i>i dag</i>                   | thousand    | <i>tusen</i>            |
| tomorrow             | <i>i morgen</i>                | what        | <i>hva</i>              |
| north                | <i>nord</i>                    | when        | <i>når</i>              |
| east                 | <i>øst</i>                     | where       | <i>hvor</i>             |
| south                | <i>sør, syd</i>                | which       | <i>hvilken, hvilket</i> |
| west                 | <i>vest</i>                    | who         | <i>hvem</i>             |
| pull                 | <i>trekk</i>                   | why         | <i>hvorfor</i>          |
| push                 | <i>trykk</i>                   | how         | <i>hvordan, hvor</i>    |
| arrival              | <i>ankomst</i>                 | big         | <i>stor</i>             |
| departure            | <i>avgang</i>                  | small       | <i>liten</i>            |
| entrance             | <i>inngang</i>                 | a little    | <i>litt</i>             |
| exit                 | <i>utgang</i>                  | a lot, much | <i>mye</i>              |
| I don't understand   | <i>Jeg forstår ikke</i>        | many        | <i>mange</i>            |

Time: Transport timetables, media schedules and shop/business opening hours use the 24-hour clock. For 12-hour time, minutes are quoted up to 14 after (*over*) or before (*på*) the hour or half hour; the half hour is before, not after, the hour; quarter hours (*kvart*) are after or before the hour. Examples: *halv ti* is 9.30, *kvart på ti* is 9.45, *fjorten over halv ti* is 9.44.

Basic Grammar: Norwegian and English have the simplest grammatical forms of all European languages. Both grammar and word order are alike as English had its origins in the similar West Germanic Angle and Saxon languages with later Viking additions. Nouns are masculine/common, feminine or neuter. The indefinite article as in a car, an apple (*en*

*bil, et eple*) is added to the end of a noun to form the definite article: the car, the apple (*bilen, eplet*). Plurals are formed by adding *-r* or *-er* for indefinite nouns: cars, apples (*biler, epler*), except for one-syllable neuter nouns which do not change; and *-ne* or *-ene* for definite nouns: the cars, the apples (*bilene, eplene*). Adjectives add *-t* with neuter singular nouns (some exceptions) and *-e* for plurals. Possessives add *-s*, comparatives add *-re* or *-ere*, superlatives add *-st* or *-est* but some adjectives use *mer* and *mest* without changing the ending, like English. Present tense verbs add *-r* or *-er*; other tenses and other rules of grammar are a little more complex. There are some irregular nouns, verbs and adjectives, many the same ones as English, eg *mann, menn; springe, sprang, sprunget; god, bedre, best ...* which you can guess! Some words are identical in spelling and meaning, eg arm, egg, finger, flat, land; some have slight spelling differences, eg blood (*blod*), book (*bok*), knife (*kniv*), come (*komme*), self (*selv*), shall (*skal*); other spellings are not so obvious, eg neighbour (*nabo*), own (*egen*), sea (*sjø*), while some words have changed meaning, eg *bein* means leg as well as bone, *kinn* means cheek, not chin and *stol* means chair, not stool.

Most of the modern Norwegian vocabulary comes from Old Norse with loanwords from Middle Low German, which influenced Norwegian vocabulary and grammatical structures from the late Middle Ages. Currently, the main source of new loanwords is English, eg rapper, e-mail, catering, juice, bag (originally a loan word to English from Old Norse). Norwegian is not influenced by English as much as Swedish and Danish are. Both English and Norwegian have French and Latin loanwords. Some loanwords have their spelling changed to reflect Norwegian pronunciation rules, but in general Norwegianised spellings take a long time to establish, eg *sjåfør* (from French chauffeur) and *revansj* (from French revanche) are now the common Norwegian spellings, but juice is more often used than the Norwegianised form *jus*, catering more than *keitering*, service more than *sørvis*.

There is an official advisory body *Språkrådet* (Norwegian Language Council) that determines, subject to approval from the Ministry of Culture, official spelling, grammar and vocabulary for both *bokmål* and *nynorsk*. Major spelling reforms occurred in 1907, 1917, 1938 and 1959. There was a move to bring both versions of Norwegian together as one language *samnorsk* but this was officially abandoned in 2002. The board's work has always been subject to bitter controversy from purists. The last major revision in 2005, allowed all *Bokmål* feminine nouns to be written as masculine (common). All official publications are in both *bokmål* and *nynorsk*.

Most Norwegians speak good English (it's a compulsory school subject) but some older people in rural areas don't. Norwegians, Danes and Swedes can understand each other's languages, all descended from Old Norse. Danish has the same alphabet as *bokmål*, but is pronounced with dropped consonants and slurred syllables. Swedish pronunciation and spelling is similar but uses *ä* and *ö* instead of *æ* and *ø*. Icelandic and Færøese, close to Old Norse, are more difficult to understand.

Language Courses: Academic courses are available at the Universities of Edinburgh, Glasgow, East Anglia, Hull, Surrey, Westminster and Goldsmiths, Morley and University Colleges in London, Specialist language colleges have short courses at various levels, eg the Brasshouse Centre in Birmingham. Some Norwegian universities offer intensive summer courses that include Norwegian culture and social life; they are intended mainly for foreign students starting studies in Norway.

Books: Norwegian Phrase Book (Berlitz 2004 ISBN 978-981-246-986-3) £4.99, essential in emergencies and for translating signs and menus.

Norwegian Pocket Dictionary (Berlitz 2008 ISBN 978-981-246-989-5) £6.99

For other language books and dictionaries, see <<http://www.norsk.org.uk>>.