

## IN THIS CHAPTER

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# Chapter 1

## Focusing on the Basics

**Y**ou're reading this book because you're interested in learning Italian or brushing up on what you already know — **molto bene!** (great!) You're in the right place: **Benvenute/Benvenuti!** (Welcome!)

What are some essential first steps in getting your feet wet in another language? This chapter introduces you to important Italian skills that aid in everyday spoken and written communication as it walks you through pronunciation, greetings, numbers, time, basic parts of speech, and gender. Although you need to approach the language holistically and in context, you also have to grasp the individual parts of the whole, which is where this book comes in.

Italian is a living language. I can't emphasize enough how important it is for you to practice saying and hearing Italian while you go through this book. I highly recommend finding sources online, from the alphabet to podcasts, to music, to television series. I also suggest you consult the latest edition of *Italian For Dummies* by Giuseppe Cavatorta and me, and my *Italian Workbook for Dummies* (John Wiley & Sons, Inc.), for more on Italian pronunciation and direct application of skills and practice dialogues.



REMEMBER

# Mouthing Off: Basic Pronunciation

Italian provides many opportunities for your tongue to do acrobatics. This is really fun, because the language offers you some new sounds. In this section, I give you some basic pronunciation hints that are important both for surfing through this book and for good articulation when you speak Italian. If you learn the correct pronunciation in this chapter, starting with the alphabet, you'll be reading and speaking like a real Italian in no time.

These sections provide you with a rough phonetic spelling of the Italian pronunciation, just to get you started. Place extra *umph* on the stressed (*italicized*) syllables.

## The alphabet

What better way is there to start speaking a language than to familiarize yourself with its alphabet? Table 1-1 shows you all the letters as well as how each one sounds. Note that there are only 21 letters in the Italian alphabet: missing are *j, k, w, x, and y* (which have crept into some Italian words now used in Italy, such as the words **kiwi** and **yogurt**).

**TABLE 1-1** **Alfabeto (ahl-fah-beh-toh)**

Letter	Pronunciation	Letter	Pronunciation	Letter	Pronunciation
<b>a</b>	ah	<b>h</b>	<i>ahk</i> -kah	<b>q</b>	kooh
<b>b</b>	bee	<b>i</b>	ee	<b>r</b>	<i>ehr</i> -reh
<b>c</b>	chee	<b>l</b>	<i>ehl</i> -leh	<b>s</b>	<i>ehs</i> -seh
<b>d</b>	dee	<b>m</b>	<i>ehm</i> -meh	<b>t</b>	tee
<b>e</b>	eh	<b>n</b>	<i>ehn</i> -neh	<b>u</b>	ooh
<b>f</b>	<i>ehf</i> -feh	<b>o</b>	oh	<b>v</b>	vooh
<b>g</b>	jee	<b>p</b>	pee	<b>z</b>	<i>dzeh</i> -tah

# Vowels

I start with the tough ones: vowels. The sounds aren't that new, but the connection between the written letter and the actual pronunciation in Italian isn't quite the same as it is in English.

Italian has five written vowels: **a**, **e**, **i**, **o**, and **u**. The following sections tell you how to pronounce them. The stress goes on the *italicized* syllable.

## The vowel a

In Italian, the letter *a* has just one pronunciation. Think of the sound of the *a* in the English word *father*. The Italian **a** sounds just like that. I transcribe the Italian *a* as (ah), as in **casa** (*kah-zah*) (*house*) and **sale** (*sah-leh*) (*salt*).

## The vowel e

Try to think of the sound in the French word *gourmet* (you don't pronounce the *t*). This sound comes very close to the Italian **e**. I transcribe the *e* sound as (eh). For example, **sole** (*soh-leh*) (*sun*).

## The vowel i

The Italian **i** is simply pronounced (ee), as in the English word *see*. Here are some examples: **cinema** (*chee-neh-mah*) (*cinema*) and **vita** (*vee-tah*) (*life*).

## The vowel o

The Italian **o** is pronounced as in the English *piano* generally. I list the pronunciation as (oh). Try it out on the following words: **domani** (*doh-mah-nee*) (*tomorrow*) and **piccolo** (*peek-koh-loh*) (*little; small*). However, the **o** can also sound like the **o** in *off*. The word **botte**, for example, has different meanings (*beating/barrel*).

## The vowel u

The Italian **u** sounds always like the English (ooh), as in *zoo*. I use (ooh) to transcribe the Italian **u**. Here are some sample words: **luna** (*loo-h-nah*) (*moon*) and **frutta** (*frooh-tah*) (*fruit*).

# Consonants

Here are some consonants that are pronounced differently in Italian than they are in English.

## The consonant c

The Italian **c** has three sounds, depending on which letter follows it:

- » **Hard c:** When **c** is followed by **a, o, u**, or any consonant, pronounce it as in the English word *cat*. I transcribe this pronunciation as (k). Examples include **casa** (kah-zah) (*house*), **colpa** (kohl-pah) (*fault/guilt*).
- » **Soft c:** When **c** is followed by **e** or **i**, pronounce it as you do the first and last sound in the English word *church*. Examples include **cena** (cheh-nah) (*dinner*), **cibo** (chee-boh) (*food*).
- » **Soft sh sound** (as in *shame*): When you have **sc** followed by **e** or **i**, pronounce it like you do in the English word *show*. Examples include **scena** (sheh-nah) (*scene*), and **capisci** (kah-pee-shee) (*you understand*).

This pronunciation scheme sounds terribly complicated, but in the end, it's not that difficult. And it's super important. Here I present it in another way, which you can take as a little memory support:

Follow a scheme like this:

**C + i, e = ch**

**C + h, o, u, a = k**

**Sc + i or e = sh**

The Italian **g** behaves essentially the same as the **c**, with hard and soft sounds:

**G + i, e = g** as in **Gina** (jee-nah) and **gelato** (geh-lah-toh) (*ice-cream, sort of*)

**G + h, o, u, a = g** as in **spaghetti** (spah-ghet-tee) (*spaghetti*), **gondola** (gohn-doh-lah) (*a type of boat in Venice*), **figura** (fee-gooh-rah) (*figure*), and **gala** (gah-lah).



REMEMBER

The consonant **h** is *always* silent! It appears in some forms of the verb **avere** (ah-veh-reh) (*to have*), such as **io ho** (ee-oh oh), **tu hai** (tooh i), and some words of foreign origin, such as **hobby** (ohb-bee).

## Consonant clusters

Certain consonant clusters have special sounds in Italian: it's important to get these down as well. Here are a couple to get you started:



WARNING

- » **gn** is pronounced as the English *ny* sound in *canyon*. You may already know the Italian words **gnocchi** (nyohk-kee) (a delicious dumpling type of pasta) and **signora** (see-nyoh-rah) (*Mrs.*).
- » **gl** is pronounced in the back of the throat like the English word *million* in words like **gli** (lyee) (*the, masc. pl.*) and **famiglia** (fah-mee-lyah) (*family*).  
Don't ever say anything like the English **g as in glamour** with the **gl** consonant cluster.

## Stressing words properly

*Stress* is the audible accent that you put on a syllable as you speak it. One syllable always gets more stress than all the others.

Some words give you a hint as to where to stress them because they have an accent on the last syllable. Only vowels have accents. Here are some examples with the stressed syllable italicized:



TIP

- » **caffè** (kahf-feh) (*coffee*)
- » **città** (cheet-tah) (*city*)
- » **perché** (pehr-keh) (*why*)
- » **però** (peh-roh) (*but*)
- » **università** (ooh-nee-vehr-see-tah) (*university*)

With words that do not have an accent mark, you are left on your own to figure out where to place the stress. A good rule of thumb is to place the stress on the penultimate (second-to-last syllable). But there are too many exceptions and rules to list them all here! When in doubt, and you have a burning desire to know — check

the dictionary or ask your handy AI app how to pronounce something. Here are a few examples:

» **melanzane** (meh-lahn-zah-neh) (*eggplant*)

» **bambino** (bahm-bee-noh) (*baby*)

But . . .

» **macchina** (mahk-kee-nah) (*car*) (here, the stress is on the first syllable)

## Addressing Folks: Greetings and Salutations

The first step toward communicating meaningfully involves being able to greet someone, introduce yourself, and employ some polite conventions, such as please and thank you!

The Italian language clearly recognizes and requires two different conventions of address, formal and informal, depending on whom you're addressing and also the situation. When you understand what convention to use, you're better equipped to interact and to also show regard for cultural differences.



REMEMBER

Formal and informal usage distinctions inform your use of everything from possessive adjectives to verbs in all tenses. You can't get away from this convention — but of course, it's okay to make mistakes!

### Formal greetings

Use the following formal phrases when you want to meet and greet a stranger, someone whom you don't know very well, and/or someone to whom you should show respect.

Table 1-2 provides you with some terms generally associated with greetings and salutations. As you go through this table, make a mental note of some of the differences and similarities — there is some overlap — between Table 1-2 and Table 1-3 (in the next section), which provides the informal phrases.

**TABLE 1-2** Formal Greetings and Salutations

Italian	English
<b>Buon giorno/Buongiorno</b>	<i>Hello/Good morning/Goodbye</i>
<b>Salve</b>	<i>Hello</i>
<b>Buona sera/Buonasera</b>	<i>Hello/Goodbye/Good evening</i>
<b>Buona notte/Buonanotte</b>	<i>Good night</i>
<b>Signorina</b>	<i>Miss (young woman)</i>
<b>Signora</b>	<i>Mrs./Ma'am (older married or unmarried woman)</i>
<b>Signore</b>	<i>Mr./Sir</i>
<b>Mi chiamo . . .</b>	<i>My name is . . .</i>
<b>Come si chiama?</b>	<i>What's your name?</i>
<b>Come sta?</b>	<i>How are you?</i>
<b>Bene.</b>	<i>Well.</i>
<b>Molto bene.</b>	<i>Very well.</i>
<b>Così così.</b>	<i>So-so.</i>
<b>Abbastanza bene.</b>	<i>Fair/pretty well.</i>
<b>(Sto) male.</b>	<i>(I'm) not well.</i>
<b>Grazie, e Lei?*</b>	<i>Thank you, and you?</i>
Note that <b>Lei</b> means both <i>you</i> formal and <i>she</i> ; it depends on context!	
<b>Di dov'è?</b>	<i>Where are you from?</i>
<b>Sono di . . .</b>	<i>I'm from . . .</i>
<b>Piacere (di conoscerLa).</b>	<i>Nice to meet you.</i>
<b>Molto piacere.</b>	<i>It's a great pleasure.</i>
<b>Arrivederci.</b>	<i>Goodbye.</i>
<b>A dopo/Ci vediamo.</b>	<i>See you later.</i>
<b>A presto.</b>	<i>See you soon.</i>
<b>A domani.</b>	<i>See you tomorrow.</i>
<b>Buona giornata.</b>	<i>Have a good day.</i>
<b>Buona serata.</b>	<i>Have a good evening.</i>



REMEMBER

You use **buona notte!** when you know it's actually bedtime, and you're taking leave; consider it another way of saying, “(Goodbye and) Sleep well!” Start to use **buona sera** in the late afternoon until you go to bed.

## Informal greetings

The informal is usually designated with the pronouns **tu/voi** (*you sing. and pl.*) and the formal with **Lei** (*you*). You usually use the informal address with family members, friends, pets, people your same age (if you're on the younger side), and children. Refer to Table 1-3 for greetings and salutations.

**TABLE 1-3** **Informal Greetings and Salutations**

Italian	English
<b>Ciao!</b>	<i>Hi!/Bye!</i>
<b>Come ti chiami?</b>	<i>What's your name?</i>
<b>Mi chiamo . . .</b>	<i>My name is . . .</i>
<b>Sono . . .</b>	<i>I'm (meaning My name is . . .)</i>
<b>Come stai?</b>	<i>How are you?</i>
<b>Bene.</b>	<i>Well.</i>
<b>Molto bene.</b>	<i>Very well.</i>
<b>Così così.</b>	<i>So-so.</i>
<b>Male.</b>	<i>Not well.</i>
<b>Non c'è male.</b>	<i>Not bad.</i>
<b>Grazie, e tu?</b>	<i>Thank you, and you?</i>
<b>Piacere (di conoscerti)!</b>	<i>It's a pleasure (to meet you!)</i>
<b>Di dove sei?</b>	<i>Where are you from?</i>
<b>Sono di . . .</b>	<i>I'm from . . .</i>
<b>Che piacere vederti!</b>	<i>How nice it is to see you!</i>
<b>Come va?</b>	<i>How's it going?</i>

Italian	English
<b>Che c'è di nuovo?</b>	<i>What's new?</i>
<b>Niente.</b>	<i>Nothing.</i>
<b>Ci vediamo/A dopo.</b>	<i>See you later.</i>
<b>A presto.</b>	<i>See you soon.</i>
<b>A domani.</b>	<i>See you tomorrow.</i>
<b>Buona giornata.</b>	<i>Have a good day.</i>
<b>Buona serata.</b>	<i>Have a good evening.</i>



TIP

A general rule is that you use the informal when on a first name basis with someone.

## Forms of courtesy

It's always good to know how to be courteous when communicating with others. Table 1-4 lists common forms of courtesy.

**TABLE 1-4** **Being Polite**

Italian	English
<b>Per favore/per piacere</b>	<i>Please</i>
<b>Grazie.</b>	<i>Thank you.</i>
<b>Grazie mille.</b>	<i>Thanks so much.</i>
<b>Molte grazie.</b>	<i>Thank you very much.</i>
<b>Grazie, molto gentile.</b>	<i>Thank you, that's very kind (of you).</i>
<b>Prego.</b>	<i>You're welcome.</i>
<b>Mi scusi/Scusi (formal)</b>	<i>Excuse me./I'm sorry.</i>
<b>Mi scusi, un'informazione, per favore.</b>	<i>Excuse me, I need some information, please.</i>
<b>Scusa/Scusami (informal)</b>	<i>Excuse me./I'm sorry.</i>
<b>Mi dispiace.</b>	<i>I'm sorry.</i>



TIP

**Prego** not only means *You're welcome*. It also means, *Please, come this way; Please, by all means, you first; or Here you go!*



TIP

When referring to someone, and also when addressing someone directly with their title, cut off the final e when using a last name with masculine titles:

- » **Signore** becomes **Signor Tarroni**.
- » **Dottore** becomes **Dottor Costa**.
- » **Professore** becomes **Professor Gambi**.

The title *Ms.* doesn't exist in Italian, so you use either **Signora** (*Miss*) or **Signorina** (*Mrs./Ma'am*).

For female professional titles of doctor and professor, you use **Dottoressa** and **Professoressa**.

## Using Everyday Numbers

You use numbers all the time, in any language. If you say that you've seen ten movies, you're using a cardinal number. If you say that you're in the tenth grade, you're using an ordinal number. Here I walk you through cardinal and ordinal numbers in Italian.

### Counting items with cardinal numbers

When written in full, cardinal numbers are invariable in Italian (except for the number *one*, which can also be an indefinite article; see Chapter 2). Starting with 21, you encounter a neat pattern that you then repeat from 30 to 99.

Following are the numbers from 0 through 29:

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» <b>zero</b> (0)</li> <li>» <b>uno</b> (1)</li> <li>» <b>due</b> (2)</li> <li>» <b>tre</b> (3)</li> <li>» <b>quattro</b> (4)</li> <li>» <b>cinque</b> (5)</li> <li>» <b>sei</b> (6)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» <b>sette</b> (7)</li> <li>» <b>otto</b> (8)</li> <li>» <b>nove</b> (9)</li> <li>» <b>dieci</b> (10)</li> <li>» <b>undici</b> (11)</li> <li>» <b>dodici</b> (12)</li> <li>» <b>tre dici</b> (13)</li> </ul>
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- » **quattordici** (14)
- » **quindici** (15)
- » **sedici** (16)
- » **diciassette** (17)
- » **diciotto** (18)
- » **diciannove** (19)
- » **venti** (20)
- » **ventuno** (21)

- » **ventidue** (22)
- » **ventitré** (23)\*
- » **ventiquattro** (24)
- » **venticinque** (25)
- » **ventisei** (26)
- » **ventisette** (27)
- » **ventotto** (28)
- » **ventinove** (29)



Except for the word **tre**, all numbers ending in 3 carry an accent, such as **duecentotré** (203) and **sessantatré** (63).

**REMEMBER**

Table 1–5 lists multiples of 10 and 100.

**TABLE 1-5** **Cardinal Numbers with Double and Triple Digits**

Multiples of 10	Multiples of 100
<b>dieci</b> (10)	<b>cento</b> (100)
<b>venti</b> (20)	<b>duecento</b> (200)
<b>trenta</b> (30)	<b>trecento</b> (300)
<b>quaranta</b> (40)	<b>quattrocento</b> (400)
<b>cinquanta</b> (50)	<b>cinquecento</b> (500)
<b>sessanta</b> (60)	<b>seicento</b> (600)
<b>settanta</b> (70)	<b>settecento</b> (700)
<b>ottanta</b> (80)	<b>ottocento</b> (800)
<b>novanta</b> (90)	<b>novecento</b> (900)

In Italian, 1,000 is **mille**.



A common error for speakers of English is to say **un mille** for *a thousand/one thousand* — rather, you just say **mille**:

**WARNING**

**Vengono mille persone al concerto.** (*A/One thousand people are coming to the concert.*)

Another common error is to use the English convention of pairing the first two numbers with centuries. In English, to say 1929, you group the numbers and say *nineteen twenty-nine*, but in Italian, you say it as one word: **millenovecentoventinove**.



TIP

The plural of **mille** is **mila**.

To form higher numbers, you use — **mila** as follows: **duemila** (2,000), **cinquemila** (5,000), and so on.



TIP

Here's an example of how you talk about money in Italian. The plural of **euro** in Italian is **euro** — it's invariable:

**Una Ferari costa duecentosessantanovemila euro.**

(*A Ferrari costs 269,000 euros.*)

## Putting items in order with ordinal numbers

With ordinal numbers, you set things in order, using them to establish ranking, and also to talk about centuries. They behave like adjectives in that they have to agree in gender and number with the nouns or pronouns they are modifying. The first ten have special forms (here they are in the masculine singular):

» **primo** (1st)

» **secondo** (2nd)

» **terzo** (3rd)

» **quarto** (4th)

» **quinto** (5th)

» **sesto** (6th)

» **settimo** (7th)

» **ottavo** (8th)

» **nono** (9th)

» **decimo** (10th)



REMEMBER

You form ordinal numbers beyond **decimo** by dropping the final vowel from the cardinal number and then adding **-esimo**, **-esima**, **-esimi**, **-esime** (according to the gender and number). The following are some ordinal numbers from 11th to 20th, in the masculine and feminine and singular and plural forms. They follow the same pattern:

» **undicesimo, undicesima, undicesimi, undicesime** (11th)

» **dodicesimo, dodicesima, dodicesimi, dodicesime** (12th)

» **quattordicesimo** (14th)

» **sedicesimo** (16th)



TIP

» **diciottesimo** (18th)

» **ventesimo** (20th)

When you use an ordinal number in the context of a sentence, you usually place it before the word it refers to, accompanied by the article:

**Lei è la sua terza moglie.** (*She's his third wife.*)

## Using the Calendar

Knowing how to create and handle information about dates is important knowledge to have at your fingertips. Here, I explore the days of the week and months.

### Expressing the days of the week

You can use **Che giorno è (oggi)?** to mean *What day of the week is it (today)?* You answer with something like **Oggi è venerdì** (*Today is Friday*).

You don't capitalize the days of the week in Italian. They're all masculine and take **il**, except for **la domenica** (*Sunday*):

» **lunedì** (*Monday*)

» **martedì** (*Tuesday*)

» **mercoledì** (*Wednesday*)

» **giovedì** (*Thursday*)

» **venerdì** (*Friday*)

» **sabato** (*Saturday*)

» **domenica** (*Sunday*)

Other important words to add to your temporal toolbox (for now) include the following:

» **giorno** (*day*)

» **oggi** (*today*)

» **domani** (*tomorrow*)

» **il fine settimana/il week-end** (*the weekend*)

» **anno** (*year*)

» **mese** (*month*)

» **settimana** (*week*)



REMEMBER

You generally use the definite article with days of the week *only* when you're talking about a repeated action. For example, compare the following two sentences:

**Il venerdì sera esco sempre con Emilia.** (*On Friday evenings, I always go out with Emilia.*)

**Venerdì sera esco con Emilia.** (*On Friday evening, I am going out with Emilia.*)

## Managing your calendar

Italy shares the same calendar as the rest of the world. The following sections give you the vocabulary that you can use to talk about **secoli** (*centuries*), **anni** (*years*), **stagioni** (*seasons*), **mesi** (*months*), and **date** (*dates*).

When you need to say “in a certain year,” use the preposition **in**, combined with the article **il**, forming **nel**, like this:

**nel 1945 (milenovecentoquarantacinque)** (*in 1945*)



TIP

As in Vivaldi's *Le quattro stagioni*, the four seasons are **la primavera** (*spring*), **l'estate** (*summer*), **l'autunno** (*fall/autumn*), and **l'inverno** (*winter*).

To see how to talk about weather, see the verb **fare** (*to do or make*) in Chapter 3.

The following sections explore important vocabulary when you're working with months and days, trying to make a date, and figuring out your schedule.

## Mesi e date: Months and dates

Just like the days and the seasons, you don't capitalize the months, which follow:

- » **gennaio** (*January*)
- » **febbraio** (*February*)
- » **marzo** (*March*)
- » **aprile** (*April*)

- » **maggio** (*May*)
- » **giugno** (*June*)
- » **luglio** (*July*)
- » **agosto** (*August*)

- » **settembre**  
(September)
- » **ottobre** (October)

- » **novembre** (November)
- » **dicembre** (December)

## Making a date

When mentioning a particular date, you use cardinal numbers, except for the first of the month, in which case, you use the ordinal number **primo**.



REMEMBER

Word order is important: You write dates in the day-month-year format, without commas. (Unlike the common usage in the United States, which is month-day-year). Refer to these examples:

**Oggi è il primo maggio.** (*Today is May 1st.*)

**John è nato il cinque settembre duemilacinque.** (*John was born on September 5, 2005.*)

**Partiamo il quindici aprile (il 15/4).** (*We will leave on April 15th/on 4/15.*)



TIP

To ask for today's date, you can usually use one of these two options:

**Che giorno è?** (*What day is it?/What's the date?/Qual è la data di oggi?* (*What's today's date?*))

To answer, use this structure:

**Oggi è il ventinove febbraio.** (*Today is February 29th.*)

To find out more about your new Italian friend, you can ask when their birthday is:

**Quando è il tuo compleanno?** (*When's your birthday?*)

**Il sette novembre.** (*November 7th.*)

## Making the Most of Time

If you want to catch a train or a plane, make sure the store is open, or check the movie theater's schedule, you need to know the right time. Here I explain the basics of asking the time and saying at what time something is.

# Asking the time

To ask the time, you say:

**Che ora è?/Che ore sono?** (*What time is it?*)

These two questions are interchangeable.

The answer, however, is not. To respond, you must use the third person singular of the verb **essere** (*to be*) — **è** — with singular time indicators, and the third person plural of the verb **essere** — **sono** — with plural time indicators.

To use the singular form to tell time, follow this pattern for times that start at 1:00, noon, and midnight:

**È + l' + una** (*It's one o'clock/It's 1:00*), **È mezzogiorno** (*It's noon/12 p.m.*), **È mezzanotte** (*It's midnight/12 a.m.*).

You use **e** (*and*) when giving the minutes past the hour. After you pass the half hour, you generally jump to the next hour and use the word **meno** (*minus*) (hour *minus* minutes):

- » **È l'una.** (*It's 1:00.*)/**È l'una e venti.** (*It's 1:20.*)
- » **È l'una e un quarto.** (*It's a quarter past 1:00./1:15.*)
- » **È l'una meno dieci.** (*It's 10 to 1:00./12:50.*)
- » **È l'una e mezzo/a.** (*It's half past 1:00./1:30.*)

To write a plural time, follow this structure:

**Sono + le + hour (any time other than 1:00) + e or meno + a portion of the hour or a number of minutes**

Here are some examples:

- » **Sono le due e dieci.** (*It's 10 past 2:00./2:10.*)
- » **Sono le otto meno un quarto.** (*It's a quarter to 8:00./7:45.*)
- » **Sono le quattro e mezza/o.** (*It's half past 4:00./4:30.*)

When using the 12-hour system, you can add **di mattina** (*a.m./in the morning*), **del pomeriggio** (*p.m./in the afternoon*), **di sera** (*p.m./in the evening*), and **di notte** (*the hours of the night*), to avoid misunderstandings, as in:

**Balliamo fino alle alle quattro di notte.** (*We dance until 4:00 in the morning.*)

Of course, you can always use the 24-hour clock. This system is much more common in Italy than in the United States. You find the 24-hour system printed on Italian train schedules, event programs, class times, and so forth: **Il treno parte alle [ore] 15:45.** (*The train is leaving at 15:45 [3:45 p.m.].*)

## A che ora: saying “at”

To ask *at what time* something begins or ends, you simply say **A che ora** (*at what time?*). To answer, you use a form of the preposition *at* — **a**, **all'**, or **alle** — in your response:

**A che ora vai a dormire?** (*At what time do you go to sleep?*)

**A mezzanotte.** (*At midnight.*)

Use the following to create this:

- » **a** with no article: **A mezzogiorno** (*At noon.*) or **A mezzanotte** (*At midnight.*)
- » **all'** only with 1:00: **All'unica.** (*At 1:00.*)
- » **alle**: When the hour is plural, (meaning it's later than 1:00):  
**Alle due.** (*At 2:00.*)

## Getting into the Parts of Speech

This section leads you through the building blocks of sentences. Consider these blocks as challenging scaffolding that helps you to construct your sentences, piece by piece. I walk you through gender and number, and introduce verbs, adjectives, adverbs, and prepositions.

## Setting up simple sentences

Forming simple sentences is, well, simple. The basic sentence structure of Italian is subject–verb–object — the same as in English. Nouns in Italian are gender specific. In the following example, you can see how this structure works:

**Pietro ha una macchina.** (*Pietro has a car.*)

## Coping with gendered words

You can't get around the use of gender in Italian. Most of the elements that make up a sentence — nouns, definite articles (*the*), indefinite articles (*a/an*), contracted prepositions, adjectives, personal pronouns, direct and indirect object pronouns, past participles — must reckon with gender and number — and also follow some basic rules. Chapter 2 goes into detail about the gender and number of nouns, articles, and possessive adjectives.

Luckily, most of this grammar follows some very cool schemata that you can plug in anywhere as soon as you learn the rules (and some exceptions to those rules). Commit them to memory if you can.

## Nouns and gender

All nouns have a specific gender (masculine and feminine) and number (singular and plural). Learning the gender of nouns as soon as you encounter them is imperative. Check out Chapter 2, where I explain what you need to know about nouns and gender.

## Indefinite articles

An *indefinite article* refers to persons or objects (such as *a dancer* and *an apple*). The indefinite article (see Chapter 2) corresponds to *a/an* (and *one*) in English and is generally a general way to reference something; they are used in a very similar way to their English counterpart. Indefinite articles are only used with singular nouns. There are four different indefinite articles in Italian (**uno**, **un**, **un'**, and **una**).

## Definite articles

A *definite article* is more diverse and specific than an indefinite article and indicates a specific person or thing and agrees with

the noun in gender and number. Many times the definite article corresponds to the English usage of the article *the* (such as, *the cake is in the oven*). There are six definite articles in Italian (**l'**, **lo**, **il**, **la**, **gli**, **i**, and **le**). Refer to Chapter 2 for much more on definite articles.

## Referring to folks with pronouns

A *pronoun* replaces, as the word itself says, a noun. When you talk about Jim, for example, you can replace his name with *he*. You often use pronouns to avoid repetition.

Several types of pronouns exist. The most important ones for you are the subject pronouns (also called *personal pronouns*), which refer to **io** (*I*), **tu** (*you informal*), **lui** (*he*), **lei** (*she*), **Lei** (*you formal*), **noi** (*we*), **voi** (*you all*), and **loro** (*they*). Every verb form refers to one of these pronouns. See Chapter 3 for more on the subject pronouns and verbs, including preferred pronouns and gender inclusivity.

## Introducing regular and irregular verbs

There are so many verbs in Italian! Verbs truly are the glue that bind the different parts of speech together. A *verb* is the part of speech that shows an action or a state of being, and it's generally presented as an infinitive, such as **mangiare** (*to eat*).

Regular verbs follow a certain pattern in their conjugation, which means that you can predict a regular verb's form in any part of any tense. On the other hand, you can't predict irregular verbs in this way — they behave a bit like individualists. Refer to the Appendix for conjugations of verbs, as well as the verb chapters in this book.

## Presenting the simple tenses: present, past, and future

People clearly don't use just one tense. Sometimes you need to report what you did yesterday or outline what you're going to do tomorrow. These three tenses (past, present, and future) aren't high grammar — just basic stuff.

You find more information on some simple tenses in Chapter 3 (present) and Chapter 7 (future), and a compound tense (present perfect) in Chapter 6. Chapter 8 walks you through subjunctive tenses (both simple and compound), the conditional, and the imperative.

## Describing with adjectives

An *adjective* is a word that describes a noun — whether a person, a thing, or whatever — with a quality or characteristic. (You can read more about adjectives in Chapter 2.)

## Clarifying with adverbs

*Adverbs* are another important way of enriching language. In Italian, adverbs are invariable, which means that you don't have to worry about making them agree with the words they modify. Chapter 2 examines adverbs in greater detail.

## Joining with prepositions

*Prepositions* are words that you need to link other words in a sentence in order to create fuller sentences. Chapter 4 explores what you need to know about prepositions in Italian.