

Making a Living Language, Not Just a Word List

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Introduction

This guide is to help anyone on their conlanging journey. It walks through how to start a constructed language (conlang) and how to make it into a living language—something that feels real and usable, not just a collection of words with a few rules.

Overview

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2. Foundations of Your Conlang
3. Starting Your Lexicon: 7 Basic Words
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Foundations of Your Conlang

Your conlang is likely a human-like language, so it uses **phones** (units of sound) to convey meaning. The building blocks are **consonants** and **vowels**.

I recommend learning the **International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA)**. It helps with understanding how sounds are made and how they relate to each other. But don't rely on it for everything—it's a tool, not a rulebook.

Start with your language's **sound**. Ask yourself:

- What do you want your language to sound like?
- Harsh and throaty? Light and airy? Smooth and mellow?

A good starting point is to create a **phoneme inventory**:

- Around **15–20 consonants**
- At least **2 vowels**, ideally not more than 5 or 6 if you're thinking about long-term sound evolution

Next, decide on your **syllable structure**:

- English prefers CVC or CCVC, but don't let it limit you.
- Look at Slovene, Icelandic, Russian, or Irish for ideas—they allow clusters and sounds that are tricky for English speakers.
- Or even make it **simple**. Make it like Hawaiian, have all syllables be one consonant and one vowel.

Starting Your Lexicon

You'll begin your vocabulary using the **7 Basic Words Exercise**. This helps you create a base for your grammar and syntax.

How It Works

You'll do five rounds labeled A through E. Each one asks you to invent 7+ words in specific categories. Here's the table:

| | Nouns | Verbs | Adpositions | Pronouns | Adjectives | Suffixes |
|---|-------|-------|-------------|----------|------------|--------------------------|
| A | 2 | 2 | 1 | 1 set | 1 | — |
| B | 3 | 1 | 1 | 1 set | 1 | Verbal |
| C | 1 | 3 | 0 | 2 sets | 1 | Nominal |
| D | 2 | 2 | 0 | 2 sets | 1 | Attributive |
| E | 2 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 3 | Collective, Deficient |

Instructions

- Start with A. Don't reuse words across exercises.
- Where a suffix is added, apply it to one of the seven words to create an eighth.
- Try to make 2–3 simple sentences per exercise.
- The goal isn't logical storytelling—it's to see how your words interact and grow naturally.

Example

A:

- Water, Wolf, Drink, Swim, in, I/me/my, big

B:

- Mushroom, Leaf, Root, grow, on, you/you/your, green, + -ise

C:

- Snake, kill, eat, bite, it/it/its, they/them/their, long, + -ing

Don't worry if the sentences are weird. This is about function, not sense!

Writing It Out

Many guides say “create your writing system last,” but you still need a way to **write your language** while building it.

Suggestions

- Start with a **basic Latinized orthography**.
- Don't copy English spelling rules.
Example: If you have /k/ and /ts/, use **k** for /k/ and **c** for /ts/. Later you can modify it—maybe c changes into č /tʃ/.

Your orthography can show **how your language changes over time**, just like how English's “ea” went from /ea/ to /i/ (like in “meat”).

Grammar

This is where your language becomes *usable*.

Word Order

Start by experimenting with different word orders:

- Subject-Verb-Object (SVO, like English)
- Subject-Object-Verb (SOV, like Japanese)
- Verb-Subject-Object (VSO, like Irish)

Use the words from the 7-word exercises to test how sentence structure feels in your conlang.

More Grammar Help

There are many things to decide: tense, mood, aspect, agreement, plurals, definiteness, and so much more.

Highly recommended:

Check out [Biblaridion's Feature Focus series on YouTube](#)

It explains tons of grammar features in fun, clear ways!

Refinement

Now it's time to **refine** your grammar and sound rules (phonotactics).

If you don't have a fictional world, you might skip **phonological evolution**. But I still recommend it—it adds realism.

Simulating Evolution

Let your conlang *change* over time:

- Keep your original words and forms
- Add new versions that feel like natural evolution

Example:

Your word for “eat” is *tua*, and your verb past tense suffix used to be *-di*. Over time, you create a new one, *-the*.

But your speakers have said *tuadi* for so long, they keep it—and *tuathe* evolves to mean something else, like “consume entirely.”

These natural changes help generate *tons* of new vocabulary!

Culture

Language doesn't exist in a vacuum. Think about the world of your speakers.

Ask yourself:

- What kind of **environment** do they live in?

- Do they know about things like fishing? Do they value religion?
- Is reproduction sacred? Taboo?
- Do they use **base-10 math**? Or base-12? Or base-5?

Build a culture that reflects your people, and let the language shape and be shaped by that.

14 Words Exercise

This is like the 7-word exercise but with more structure and reuse of existing vocabulary.

Choose:

- **4 Nouns**
- **4 Verbs**
- **2 Adpositions**
- **2 Pronouns**
- **2 Adjectives**
- **Optional suffixes:** verbal, nominal, collective, diminutive, resultative, deficient, instrumental, perfective

This gives you a playground for testing how your grammar works with new rules and older words.

What's Next?

A truly **naturalistic conlang** takes time. French, Russian, and Hungarian and every other non-constructed living language evolved over **thousands of years**.

Tolkien took **40+ years** to build his languages. Yours will grow over time, too.

There are many more parts to explore, including:

- **Numerals**
- **Adverbs**
- **Idioms**
- **Verb Chains**
- **Particles and Focus Markers**
- **Loanwords**

There will be an extension to this guide for those features. But for now—just keep building. You're making something *alive*.

The following Lists are guidelines and possible words that are essential in an inclusive naturalistic conlang. You do not need to include every single word, but it is a good start. Some lists like the Swadesh list fail at providing words that are functional. These are meant to be optimised to help the beginning stages of a conlang.

Some words like who are not present because words that are human specific are inventions that are created later on. What is who, but non-human.

Think outside the box when reading these. Use suffixes (When I say suffixes you can make infixes, prefixes, suffixes, circumfixes, and other.)

Nouns

- **Nature & Elements:**
Water, Dirt, Wood, Sand, Grass, Mushroom, Leaf, Fruit, Seed, Rock, Mountain, Tree, Lake, Salt, Thorn, Flower, River, Root, Stick, Fire, Ash, Smoke, Egg, Rain, Wind, Ice
- **Celestial:**
Sun, Moon, Star, God, Religion/Faith

Determiners

- This, That
- There, Here
- Not
- On, At, By
- With (locative), With (instrumental)

Pronouns

- I / me / my
- You / you / your
- It / it / its
- We / us / our
- Y'all / y'all / y'alls
- They / them / their
- What, Where, How, When

Other (Misc.)

- One, Two, Three, Four, Five
- All, Few
- Yes, No
- And, If

Animals

- Animal, Fish, Insect, Bird, Human
- Wolf, Wildcat, Mouse, Snake

People & Family

- Mother, Father
- Female, Male
- Child, Baby

Adjectives

- **Colors:** Red, Green, Yellow, Grey, White, Black
- **Size/Shape:** Big, Small, Long, Short, Round
- **Qualities:** Wet, Dry, Sharp, Dull, Hard, Soft, Good, Bad
- **Other:** Light, Dark, Right, Left, Far, Near, Tall, High, Low

Body & Organs

- Blood, Tongue, Mouth, Skin
- Eye, Ear, Nose, Head, Neck
- Chest, Back, Leg, Foot, Hand, Arm, Finger, Glute
- Fingernail, Tooth, Bone, Hair, Stomach, Heart
- Penis, Vagina
- Meat, Fat, Horn
- Feces, Urine

Verbs

- Walk, Run, Kill, Birth, Eat, Hold
- See, Hear, Bite, Burn, Swim, Drink
- Sleep, Think, Speak, Yell, Climb
- Cut, Lay, Grow, Love, Intercourse, Scratch
- Fear, Rain, Bleed, Cook, Die
- Defecate, Urinate, Cough, Break, Fall
- Go, Have, Want, Feel, Weep, Pray

Suffixes

- Verbal, Instrumental, Diminutive, Perfective
- Resultative, Collective, Attributive
- Descriptive, Deficient, Emotional
- Physical, Abstract, Adverbial

Roots (Special Categories)

- Interrogative
- Demonstrative
- Locative

Secondary Word List

These are optional or culturally-specific expansions for a more detailed lexicon.

Nouns

- House, Dog, Shark, Palm, Pine
- Stone, Riverbank, Cave, Sunset
- Temple, Altar, Earth, Floor
- Firewood, Sky, Mountain Pass
- Throne, King, Knife, Basket, Bowl
- Door, Hut, Village, Path
- Hill, Field, Sandstorm, Ocean
- Peak, Mosquito, Fishhook, Flame
- Candle, Torch

Adjectives

- Silent, Smokey, Warm, Cold

- Spicy, Sticky, Narrow, Deep
- Bitter, Sweet, Bright
- Heavy, Light (weight), Shiny
- Gritty, Quiet, Loud
- Lonely, Lively, Sturdy, Weak
- Smooth, Rough, Old, New
- Safe, Dangerous

Verbs

- Build, Plant, Hurt, Fish
- Dig, Strike/Hit, Smell, Taste
- Sing, Paint, Mourn, Bless
- Stare, Open, Close, Jump
- Worship, Make, Trade, Gather
- Barter, Feed, Wrap, Protect

Other (Misc.)

- More, Less, Much, Few

Pronouns (Extended)

- None, No one, Someone, Everyone,
- Anything, Thing, Everything, Something, Nothing

Determiners (Extended)

- Any, Each, Some, Every

Additional Suffixes

- Iterative

Primary List

Nouns

Water

Dirt

Wood

Sand

Grass

Mushroom

Leaf

Fruit

Seed

Rock

Mountain

Tree

Lake

Salt

Thorn

Flower

River

Root

Stick

Fire

Ash

Smoke

Egg

Rain

Wind

Ice

Road

Sun

Moon

Star

God

Religion/Faith

Determiners

This

That

There

Here

Not

On

At

By

With (loc)

With (instrumental)

Pronouns

I me my

You you your

It it its

We us our

Yall yall yalls

They them their

What

Where

How

When

Other

One

Two

Three

Four

Five

All

Few

Yes

No

And

If

Animals

Animal

Fish

Insect

Bird

Human

Wolf

(Wild)cat

Mouse

Snake

People

Mother

Father

Female

Male

Child

Baby

Adjectives

Red

Green

Yellow

Grey

White

Black

Light

Dark

Big

Small

Long

Short

Wet

Dry

Sharp

Dull

Hard

Soft

Good

Bad

Round

Right

Left

Far

Near

Tall

High

Low

Organs

Blood

Tongue

Mouth

Skin

Eye

Ear

Nose

Head

Neck

Chest

Back

Leg

Foot

Hand

Arm

Finger

Glute

Fingernail

Penis

Vagina

Hair

Stomach

Feces

Urine

Tooth

Bone

Meat

Fat

Horn

Heart

Verbs

Walk

Run

Kill

Birth

Eat

Hold

See

Hear

Bite

Burn

Swim

Drink

Sleep

Think

Speak

Yell

Climb

Cut

Lay

Grow

Love

Intercourse

Scratch

Fear

Rain

Bleed

Cook
Die
Defecate, Urinate
Cough
Break
Fall
Go
Have
Want
Feel
Weep
Pray

Suffixes
Verbal
Instrumental
Diminutive
Perfective
Resultive
Collective
Attributive
Descriptive
Deficient
Emotional
Physical
Abstract
Adverbial

Roots
Interrogative
Demonstrative
Locative

Secondary List

These are to consider, and not necessarily make.

Nouns

House
Dog
Shark
Palm
Pine
Stone
Riverbank
Cave
Sunset
Temple
Altar
Earth
Floor
Firewood
Sky
Mountain Pass
Throne
King
Knife
Basket
Bowl
Door
Hut
Village
Path
Hill
Field
Sandstorm
Ocean
Peak
Mosquito
Fishhook
Flame
Candle
Torch

Adjectives

Silent
Smokey
Warm
Cold
Spicy
Sticky
Narrow
Deep
Bitter
Sweet
Bright
Heavy
Light (weight)
Shiny
Gritty
Quiet
Loud
Lonely
Lively
Sturdy
Weak
Smooth
Rough
Old
New
Safe
Dangerous

Verbs

Build
Plant
Hurt
Fish
Dig
Strike, hit
Smell

Taste
Sing
Paint
Mourn
Bless
Stare
Open
Close
Jump
Worship
Make
Trade
Gather
Barter
Feed
Wrap
Protect

Other

More
Less
Much
Few

Pronouns

None
No-one
Someone
Everyone
All
Anything
Thing
Everything
Something
Nothing

Determiner

Any

Each

Some

Every

Suffixes

Iterative