



Chapter 4

Getting Started with Basic Expressions

IN THIS CHAPTER

- » Using informal and formal versions of “you”
- » Knowing how to say hello and goodbye
- » Making sense of Russian names
- » Introducing yourself and others
- » Trying out some popular expressions

Just as in English, greetings and introductions in Russian allow you to establish contact with other people and make a good first impression. In this chapter, we cover the formal and informal versions of “you,” saying hello and goodbye, understanding Russian names, and introducing yourself and other folks. We also provide you with some handy everyday phrases that will help you win the hearts of Russians.

To Whom Am I Speaking? Being Informal or Formal

When you want to say hello in Russian, you need to consider who you’re talking to first. Unlike in English (but similar to some languages, like French, German, and

Spanish), Russian uses two different words for the word *you* — the informal **ТЫ** (tŭ) and the formal **ВЫ** (vŭ). (In English, no matter whom you’re talking to — your close friend, your boss, the President of the United States, or your dog — you use the word *you*.)



REMEMBER

Here’s how to know when to use which form of *you*:

- » **Informal:** Use the informal **ТЫ** *only* when you’re speaking to your parents, grandparents, siblings, children, and close friends. Use it only when you’re speaking to an individual, not to a group of people.
- » **Formal:** Use the formal **ВЫ** when you talk to your boss, acquaintances, older people, or people you don’t know very well, and anytime you’re speaking to more than one person.



WARNING

If you’re a young person, you can safely use **ТЫ** when addressing people your age, such as your classmates. However, don’t dare to use **ТЫ** when talking to your teacher, no matter how young she is! Using **ТЫ** to address an elderly woman or your teacher may be taken as extreme rudeness, unless people make allowances for the fact that you’re not a native Russian speaker.



REMEMBER

As a rule, you should use the formal **ВЫ** when addressing somebody you’ve never met before, an official, a superior, or someone who is older than you. As you get to know a person better, you may switch to the informal **ТЫ**. You even have a way of asking that person whether he’s ready to switch to **ТЫ**:

Можно на ты? (mož-nô nâ tŭ; May I call you informal “you”?)

If you’re at all unsure about whether to use **ВЫ** or **ТЫ**, use **ВЫ** until the person you’re addressing asks you to use **ТЫ** or addresses you with **ТЫ**.

Comings and Goings: Saying Hello and Goodbye

Being able to use greetings and goodbyes in a culturally appropriate manner is essential no matter where you are. In the following sections, we show you how to say hello in a variety of ways, give you a few greetings to use throughout the day, tell you how to ask and answer the perennial “How are you?” and wrap up a conversation with goodbyes.

Saying hello to different people

To greet one person with whom you're on informal **ты** (tî) terms, use the word **здравствуй** (*zdra-stvuý*; hello). To greet a person with whom you're on formal **вы** (vî) terms, use the longer word **здравствуйте** (*zdra-stvuý-tê*; hello). (We cover **ты** and **вы** in the previous section.)



GRAMMATICALLY
SPEAKING

Note that the first letter **в** in **здравствуй** and **здравствуйте** is silent. Otherwise, those words would be hard for even Russians to pronounce!

Здравствуйте is also used to address more than one person. Use it when addressing two or more people, even if they're children, members of your family, or close friends (people with whom you're usually informal).



TIP

An even more informal way of saying *hello* in Russian is **привет** (*priv'et*). It's similar to the English hi. You should be on pretty familiar terms with a person before you use this greeting.

Greeting folks at any time of day

You have ways to greet people in Russian other than the bulky **здравствуй** or **здравствуйте**, but how you use these greetings depends on what time of day it is:

- » **Доброе утро** (*dob-rô-ýê ut-rô*; Good morning)
- » **Добрый день** (*dob-rîý d'en'*; Good afternoon)
- » **Добрый вечер** (*dob-rîý v'e-chêr*; Good evening)



REMEMBER

Note that Russians use these expressions only as greetings, not at leave-taking. (See the later section "Taking your leave" for details on good-byes.) You can also use these expressions without giving any thought to whether the person you greet should be addressed with **ты** or **вы**. No matter whom you greet, you can safely use any of these phrases.

Handling "How are you?"

The easiest and most popular way to ask How are you? is **Как дела?** (*kak dê-la*). It literally means *How are things (going)?* Pretty simple, right?



CULTURAL
WISDOM

A word of caution: In the English-speaking world, "How are you?" is just a standard phrase often used in place of a greeting. The person asking this formulaic question doesn't expect to get a full account of how you're

actually doing. But in Russia it's different. Russians want to know everything! When they ask you how you're doing, they are, in fact, genuinely interested in how you're doing and expect you to give them a more or less accurate account of the most recent events in your life.

How should you reply to **Как дела?** Although optimistic Americans don't hesitate to say "terrific" or "wonderful," Russians usually respond with a more reserved **хорошо** (hō-rō-shō; good) or **нормально** (nōr-mal'-nō; normal or okay), or even a very neutral **ничего** (ni-chê-vo; so-so; Literally: nothing) or **неплохо** (nê-plo-hō; not bad).



TIP

If you're truly feeling great, go ahead and answer **прекрасно** (prê-kras-nō; wonderful) or **великолепно** (vê-li-kô-'ep-nō; terrific). But beware that by saying *terrific* or *wonderful*, you're putting your Russian friend on guard: Russians know all too well that life is not a picnic. To a Russian, wonderful and terrific events are the exception, not the rule. To be on the safe side, just say either **ничего** or **неплохо**.

And don't stop there! Be sure to ask the person how she's doing. You simply say **А у вас?** (a u vas; And you? [*formal*]). If you want to be less formal, say **А у тебя?** (a u tê-b'a; And you?)

Taking your leave

The usual way to say *goodbye* in almost any situation is **До свидания!** (do svi-da-ni-ya), which literally means Till [the next] meeting. If you're on informal terms with somebody, you may also say **Пока** (pô-ka; Bye or See you later).

The phrase you use when leaving in the evening or just before bed is **Спокойной ночи** (spô-koý-nôý no-chi; Good night). The phrase works for both formal and informal situations.

Talkin' the Talk



PLAY THIS

(Audio clip 4, go.dialektika.com/russian4)



Sasha (**Саша**) bumps into her classmate Oleg (**Олег**) on the subway. Sasha is just about to get off.

Олег: **Саша, привет!**
sa-shâ pri-v'et
Sasha, hi!

Саша: **Ой, Олег! Привет! Как дела?**

oý ô-l'ek; pri-v'et; kak dê-la

Oh, Oleg! Hi! How are you?

Олег: **Ничего. А у тебя?**

ni-chê-vo; a u tê-b'a

Okay. And you?

Саша: **Неплохо. Ой, это моя станция. До свидания, Олег.**

nê-plo-hô; oý e-tô mô-ya stan-tsî-ya; do svi-da-ni-ya ô-l'ek

Not bad. Oh, this is my station. Goodbye, Oleg.

Олег: **Пока!**

pô-ka

Bye!

Words to Know

привет	pri-v'et	hi
Как дела?	kak dê-la	How are you?
ничего	ni-chê-vo	okay
А у тебя?	a u tê-b'a	And you?
неплохо	nê-plo-hô	not bad
до свидания	do svi-da-ni-ya	goodbye
пока	pô-ka	bye

The Name Game: Deciphering Russian Names

The Russian word for name is **имя** (i-m'a), but you may not hear this word when people ask about your name. That's because what they actually ask is not “What is your name?” but literally, “How do people/they call you?” — **как вас зовут?** (kak vas zô-vut) in formal situations or **как тебя зовут?** (kak tê-b'a zô-vut) in informal situations. Consequently, when you answer the question, you say how people, in fact, call you — for example, if your name is John, you say

Меня зовут Джон. (mê-n'a zô-vut džon; My name is John; *Literally: They call me John.*)



Saying names in Russian is a bit more complicated than in English. The reason is that in introducing themselves, especially in formal situations, Russians use the *patronymic* (father's first name) right after the first name. The patronymic usually has the ending **-вич** (*vich*), meaning son of, or **-овна/-евна** (*ov-nâ/ÿev-nâ*), meaning daughter of. For example, a man named **Борис** (*bo-ris*) whose father's name is **Иван** (*i-van*) would be known as **Борис Иванович** (**Иванович**, pronounced *i-vâ-nôv-ich*, is the patronymic). A woman named **Анна** (*an-na*) whose father's name is **Иван** (*i-van*) would be known as **Анна Ивановна** (**Ивановна**, pronounced *i-vâ-nôv-nâ*, is the patronymic). A Russian almost never formally addresses a person named **Михаил** (*mi-ha-il*) as just **Михаил** but rather as **Михаил** plus his patronymic with the suffix **-ович/-евич** (*o-vich/ÿe-vich*; for instance, **Михаил Николаевич** (*mi-ha-il ni-ko-la-ÿe-vich*) or **Михаил Борисович** (*mi-ha-il bo-ri-so-vich*).

You may say that Russians have three names. The first name is a baptismal name; the second name is his or her father's first name with the ending **-ович/-евич** for men or **-овна/-евна** for women; and the third is the last name, or the family name.

Men's last names and women's last names have different endings. That's because Russian last names have genders. Although many Russian male last names have the ending **-ов** (*ov*), female names take the ending **-ова** (*o-vâ*). Imagine that your new acquaintance, **Анна Ивановна Иванова**, is a married woman. Her husband's last name isn't **Иванова** (*i-vâ-no-vâ*), but **Иванов** (*i-vâ-nov*). (Yes, your friend Anna has a father and a husband with the same name: Ivan.)



TIP

No matter what your relation is to another person (either informal or formal), you can still address that person by his or her first name and patronymic. So if you're unsure whether you're on informal **ты** or formal **вы** terms with someone, go ahead and address the person by the first name and patronymic, just to be safe. When you're clearly on friendly terms with the person, you can switch to using the first name only.

Breaking the Ice: Making Introductions

Making a good first impression is important for the beginning of any relationship. Russians tend to be more formal than Americans in how they approach a person they've just met. In the following sections, we show you the best ways to introduce yourself to somebody you've just met. We also show you phrases to use when getting acquainted with someone, and the best way to introduce your friends, family, and colleagues to new people.

Getting acquainted



REMEMBER

In English, introducing yourself is the best way to start a conversation with somebody you don't know. Not so in Russian. When introducing themselves, Russians are a little more ceremonial. Russians like to suggest getting acquainted first, by saying "Let's get acquainted!" They have two ways to say this, depending on whether they're on formal **ВЫ** (vî) or informal **ТЫ** (tî) terms with the person (see "To Whom Am I Speaking? Being Informal or Formal" earlier in this chapter for info on these terms) as well as how many people they're addressing:

» **Addressing a person formally or addressing two or more people:**

Давайте познакомимся! (dâ-vaý-tê pò-znâ-ko-mim-s'a; Let's get acquainted)

» **Addressing a person informally:**

Давай познакомимся! (dâ-vaý pò-znâ-ko-mim-s'a; Let's get acquainted)

If somebody says one of these phrases to you, you should politely accept the suggestion. To respond, you can just use the first word of the question you were asked, which makes your task much easier:

» **If you were addressed formally or are in a group of people:**

Давайте (dâ-vaý-tê; Okay; Literally: Let's)

» **If you were addressed informally:**

Давай (dâ-vaý; Okay; Literally: Let's)

Introducing yourself

To introduce yourself in Russian, just say **Меня зовут** (mê-n'a zò-vut) plus your name. (See "The Name Game: Deciphering Russian Names," earlier in this chapter, for how to ask others for their names.)



TIP

When you're introducing yourself, formality doesn't matter. **Меня зовут** and the other Russian phrases in this section are appropriate in both formal and informal situations.

After you're introduced to someone, you may want to say *Nice to meet you*. In Russian, you say **очень приятно** (o-chên' pri-ýat-nô; Literally: very pleasant). The person you've been introduced to may then reply **мне тоже** (mn'e to-že; same here).

Introducing your friends, family, and colleagues

Everyday, common introductions are easy in Russian. When you want to introduce your friends, all you need to say is **Это...** (e-tô...; This is...). Then you simply add the name of the person (see “The Name Game: Deciphering Russian Names” earlier in this chapter for more info about names).

As in English, the same construction (**Это** + *the person you’re introducing*) applies to a broad circle of people, including your family members. For example, to introduce your mother, you say

Это моя мама. (e-tô mô-ya ma-mâ; This is my mother.)

To introduce your brother, you just say

Это мой брат. (e-tô moy brat; This is my brother.)

To introduce other members of your family, see Chapter 7, where we provide words indicating other family members.

You can use the same simple method to introduce anybody. For example, when introducing your co-worker, you may want to say

Это мой коллега, Антон Александрович. (e-tô moy kô-l'e-gâ ân-ton â-lêk-sand-rô-vich; This is my colleague, Anton Aleksandrovich.)

Talkin’ the Talk



PLAY THIS

(Audio clip 5, go.dialektika.com/russian5)



Anna (Анна) is approached by her friend, **Viktor** (Виктор), and his acquaintance, **Boris Alekseevich** (Борис Алексеевич).

Виктор: **Ой, привет, Анна!**

oý pri-v'et a-nâ

Oh, hi Anna!

Анна: **Привет Виктор! Как дела?**

pri-v'et vik-tôr; kak dê-la

Hi, Viktor! How are you?

Виктор: **Ничего. А у тебя?**

ni-chê-vo; a u tê-b'a

Okay. And you?

Анна: **Неплохо.**

nê-plo-hô

Not bad.

- Виктор:** **А это Борис Алексеевич.**
 a e-tô bô-ris â-lêk-s'e-ye-vich
And this is Boris Alekseevich.
- Анна:** **Здравствуйте! Давайте познакомимся!**
 zdra-stvuý-tê; dâ-vaý-tê pô-znâ-ko-mim-s'a
Hello! Let's get acquainted!
- Борис Алексеевич:** **Давайте! Меня зовут Борис.**
 dâ-vaý-tê; mê-n'a zô-vut bô-ris
Let's! My name is Boris.
- Анна:** **Очень приятно!**
 o-chên' pri-ýat-nô
Nice to meet you!
- Борис Алексеевич:** **Мне тоже.**
 mn'e to-že
Nice to meet you, too. (Literally: Same here.)

Words to Know

это	e-tô	this is
Давайте познакомимся!	dâ-vaý-tê pô-znâ-ko-mim-s'a	Let's get acquainted!
меня зовут	mê-n'a zô-vut	my name is
Очень приятно!	o-chên' pri-ýat-nô	Nice to meet you!
мне тоже	mn'e to-že	likewise

You Can Say That Again: Using Popular Expressions

Using popular expressions is one way to make a great first impression when speaking Russian. We recommend that you memorize the phrases in the following sections, because they can come in handy in almost any situation.

Speaking courteously

Don't forget the manners your mother taught you when you're with a Russian speaker. Try out these simple phrases:

- » **пожалуйста** (pô-žal-stâ; please or you're welcome in response to thank you)
- » **Да, пожалуйста.** (da pô-žal-stâ; Yes, please.)
- » **Спасибо.** (spâ-si-bô; Thank you.)
- » **Нет, спасибо.** (n'et spâ-si-bô; No, thank you.)
- » **Спасибо большое.** (spâ-si-bô bôl'-sho-ýe; Thank you very much.)



TIP

You often use the word **пожалуйста** just after the verb when making a polite request, as in the following sentences:

Повторите, пожалуйста. (pôf-tô-ri-tê pô-žal-stâ; Please repeat what you said.)

Говорите, пожалуйста, медленнее. (gô-vô-ri-tê pô-žal-stâ m'ed-lê-nê-ýe; Please speak a little more slowly.)

Excusing yourself

In English you say *sorry* to apologize for something you've done wrong and *excuse me* when you want to attract somebody's attention or make an interjection. Russian uses two words to express either meaning: **извините** (iz-vi-ni-tê) or **извини** (iz-vi-ni; sorry or excuse me; *formal/informal*).



TIP

To be even more polite when you excuse yourself in Russian, you can add the word **пожалуйста** (pô-žal-stâ; please), as in the following sentences:

Извините, пожалуйста, мне пора. (iz-vi-ni-tê pô-žal-stâ mn'e pô-ra; Excuse me, it's time for me to go.)

Извините, пожалуйста, я не понимаю. (iz-vi-ni-tê pô-žal-stâ ya n'e pô-ni-ma-yu; Excuse me, I don't understand.)

Arming yourself with other handy phrases

Someone new to speaking Russian (in Russia or anywhere else in the world) may want to know these common phrases:

- » Добро пожаловать! (dôb-ro pô-ža-lô-vât'; Welcome!)
- » Поздравляю! (pô-zdrâv-l'a-yû; Congratulations!)
- » Желаю удачи! (že-la-yû u-da-chi; Good luck!)
- » Всего хорошего! (vsê-vo hô-ro-shê-vô; All the best!)
- » Приятного аппетита! (pri-yat-nô-vô â-pê-ti-tâ; Bon appetit!)
- » Жалко! (žal-kô; Too bad!)
- » Можно задать вам вопрос? (mož-nô zâ-dat' vam vô-pros; Can I ask you a question?)

In addition to the preceding phrases, Russians often use the following words to express a wide range of emotions, such as fear, surprise, delight, anger, and more (the expressions are interchangeable):

- » Ой! (oý; Oh!)
- » Ай! (aý; Ah!)

Talking about Talking: The Verb “To Speak”

If you’ve checked out all the expressions we provide earlier in this chapter, you may be wondering how to say *to speak* in Russian. That’s easy; it’s **говорить** (gô-vô-rit'; to speak). It’s one of those second-conjugation verbs we mention in Chapter 3. This is how it conjugates in the present tense:

<i>Conjugation</i>	<i>Pronunciation</i>
Я говорю	ýa gô-vô-r'ú
Ты говоришь	tî gô-vô-riš'
Он/она говорит	on/ô-na gô-vô-rit
Мы говорим	mî gô-vô-rim
Вы говорите	vî gô-vô-ri-tê
Они говорят	ô-ni gô-vô-r'at

To find out whether your Russian conversation partner speaks English, you may simply ask

Вы говорите по-английски? (vî gô-vô-ri-tê po ân-gliý-ski; Do you speak English?)

Keep in mind that you should use the formal version of *you* in this question!



Fun & Games

Practice saying hello in Russian to the following people. Should you use **Здравствуй** (*zdra-stvuý-tê*) or **Здравствуй** (*zdra-stvuý*)? Circle the correct choice in each of the following instances. Find the answers in Appendix D.

1. Your close friend **Здравствуй** **Здравствуй**
2. Your boss **Здравствуй** **Здравствуй**
3. Your teacher **Здравствуй** **Здравствуй**
4. Your doctor **Здравствуй** **Здравствуй**
5. Your pet **Здравствуй** **Здравствуй**
6. A group of friends **Здравствуй** **Здравствуй**
7. Several children **Здравствуй** **Здравствуй**