



Writing Systems

What are writing systems?

The main way that people communicate is through spoken language (or through signing for signed languages). Some languages also have writing systems, but many do not. In fact, according to Ethnologue only 3,866 out of 7,099 languages have a developed writing system.¹ As long as a language is actively spoken by members of a community, it can remain strong, whether or not it has a writing system.

In B.C., no First Nations language had a fully developed writing system until after colonization. Most writing systems for First Nations languages in B.C. were developed by priests, anthropologists or linguists who visited the communities.



Our Living Languages exhibit at the Royal BC Museum

The SENĆOTEN alphabet is an example of a writing system developed by a First Nations community member. Dave Elliott, a fluent speaker and language champion from the WJOLEEP First Nation, created a writing system for SENĆOTEN that represents the unique sounds found in the language. This writing system is used for the language today and has played an integral role in SENĆOTEN language revitalization efforts.

In B.C., there are three main types of writing systems. *Alphabetical systems* use letters to represent sounds. Writing systems that use the English alphabet must use combinations of letters to represent sounds that are not found in English, such as [lh] for the breathy 'l' sound. *Phonetic systems* incorporate phonetic symbols from the International or North American Phonetic Alphabets to represent sounds that are not covered by the English alphabet, such as the symbol ɬ to represent the breathy 'l' sound. *Syllabic systems* use a symbol to represent a whole syllable of a word rather than just a sound.

KEY TERMS

- **International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA):** a system in which a symbol represents every sound in a language. It is based on the principle of one symbol = one sound.
- **North American Phonetic Alphabet (NAPA):** a system developed for the transcription of Indigenous languages of the Americas and for languages of Europe. It is based on the principle of one symbol = one sound. It shares many symbols with the IPA.
- **Writing system standardization:** the process of choosing one writing system to represent a language.

Each system has advantages and disadvantages. Alphabetical systems that are similar to English are generally easier to learn, and are simple to type on computers and phones. Systems using phonetic symbols, like the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) and the North American Phonetic Alphabet (NAPA) have the advantage of using one symbol to represent one sound.

¹ Simons, G.F. & Fennig, C.D. (Eds.). 2017. Ethnologue: Languages of the world, Twentieth edition. Dallas, TX: SIL International. <http://www.ethnologue.com>

Why do they matter?

A lack of agreement about writing systems is one of the biggest challenges faced by communities trying to revitalize their languages. Many First Nations languages in B.C. have multiple writing systems and there is not always consensus on which one to use. Multiple writing systems for the same language can make it difficult to get work done. Dictionaries, curricula and other resources that use different systems cannot be easily shared, and communities that share a language may be duplicating resources needlessly.

What can I do?

If there are multiple writing systems in use for your language, standardizing your writing system is one of the best things you can do to improve language revitalization efforts for your language. Having one writing system will ensure that all resources that are created can be shared among all communities that use the language, without the time, cost and effort needed to translate them into another system. Bring together Elders, teachers, learners and all interested community members to come to an agreement about which writing system you will use (see our fact sheet on New Words & Language Adaptation for examples of community standardization projects).

KEY POINTS

- Having multiple writing systems for the same language can stand in the way of efficient language revitalization. It can prevent the sharing of resources and can be confusing for learners.
- Some revitalization efforts focus mainly on reading and writing, but people must also learn to speak. Speaking and understanding your language will keep it strong.
- People may be strongly attached to one system or another and may resist change. Remember that writing systems are fairly new additions to the long history of First Nations languages. However, choosing one system will help your language in the long run.

You may want to survey all resources for your language and choose the system that is already widely used.

Although reading and writing are valuable skills, having people actively **speaking** and **understanding** your language will keep it strong. Developing proficient speakers should be the focus of language revitalization efforts. Think about children: they learn to speak and understand their first language several years before they are taught to read and write. Even adults learn to read and write after the basics of speaking and understanding are mastered. These skills can be taught simultaneously as long as oral proficiency is prioritized.

If you are a teacher, ensure that your students learn to speak and understand the language, not just

read and write. If you are a learner, value speaking over writing.

Communication is about being able to have a simple everyday conversation in your language!

FPCC is often asked which kind of writing system is better. There is no straightforward answer to this question. There are advantages and disadvantages to every system. While we do not want to tell you which system to use, we do strongly recommend that you choose one standard writing system. We understand that choosing one system will be disappointing to those who use another system, and it will require a period of adjustment for those who have to learn a new system. But you can take pride in the fact that by choosing one system, you have made it easier for all future language learners!

WHERE CAN I LEARN MORE?

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International Phonetic Association
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FIRST PEOPLES'
CULTURAL COUNCIL

For more information:

First Peoples' Cultural Council
1A Boat Ramp Road
Brentwood Bay, BC V8M 1N9

T (250) 652-5952
E info@fpcc.ca
www.fpcc.ca

