

Verb principle parts, contract verbs, and 3rd declension nouns pose special challenges for students of beginning Greek. One way to ease the difficulties students pose in parsing these forms is to teach the algebra of Greek consonants and vowels so that students learn what to expect when consonants, especially ς and κ , combine with other consonants, and when vowels combine.

Greek textbooks usually delay addressing the combination of different consonants with sigma until they introduce the third declension (for example, Shelmerdine, Chap. 8; Groton, Chap. 16). Rather than introducing this concept when a student is faced with a new declension, this process of parsing the alphabet must begin very early with the introduction of the alphabet. Teaching the compound consonants ψ and ξ , for example, as the sum of $\beta/\pi/\phi + \varsigma$ and $\kappa/\gamma/\chi + \varsigma$ will allow students to anticipate the forms they will find in the future and sigmatic aorist stems of labial and guttural stem verbs and the nominatives and dative plurals of labial and guttural stem nouns. Similarly, teaching students that adding a κ to $\beta/\pi/\phi$ or $\kappa/\gamma/\chi$ results in a ϕ or χ respectively allows students to anticipate the forms for the perfect tense and to work backward from perfect forms to find the present forms they need to look up in the dictionary. Key to this process is having students try to say the different combinations aloud, so that they themselves hear that $\kappa/\gamma/\chi$ followed by a ς sounds like a ξ .

Vowels tend to receive more attention in terms of the combinations because of the need to understand augments and contract verbs, but again there is a value in introducing the rules of vowel combinations when students are first learning about diphthongs (for example, Shelmerdine, Chap. 18; Groton, Chap. 17). By teaching students that a vowel plus ι or υ as the second element results in a diphthong ($\alpha\iota$, $\epsilon\iota$, $\omicron\iota$, $\upsilon\iota$; $\alpha\upsilon$, $\epsilon\upsilon$, $\omicron\upsilon$, $\eta\upsilon$), quickly eliminates some concern. By then teaching students the trends with the other vowel combinations at the beginning of their language study, students are then better able to handle contract verbs and sigma-stem nouns.

Teaching students what to expect when certain vowels or consonants combine at the beginning of their experience with Greek will help students become comfortable with many standard aspects of the Greek language and give the student a sense of control over the language at an early stage in his/her experience with the language.

A handout will provide examples of alphabet algebraic exercises.