

## What If I Don't Know Any NT Greek Yet?

Not to worry! You can teach yourself Greek, *if* you are determined and *if* you are capable of self-discipline. Your main problem will be that there aren't a lot of good models of pronunciation available to listen to and even if you just want to read a language, you still need to know how it sounds. I've given some suggestions for dealing with the pronunciation issue at the end, but first, here are some suggestions for learning to read.

The Quick Take As a very first text, I'd recommend one of the following (ranked in order):

1. Dobson, *Learn New Testament Greek*
2. Decker, *Reading Koine Greek*
3. David Alan Black, *Learn to Read New Testament Greek*
4. Mounce, *Basics of Biblical Greek*

### Recommended Textbooks

I haven't seen every last introductory textbook of NT Greek, but I own several and I've paged through several others. The one I would recommend unreservedly for a self-teacher who knows no Greek is John Dobson's *Learn New Testament Greek*.

Dobson's text is definitely suitable for an absolute beginner, but it also covers everything you need to know in order to start reading the NT in Greek. Unlike many of the available textbooks, Dobson's is not just a grammar plus vocabulary lists plus exercises. From very early on, he gives the learner substantial chunks of text to read, not just disconnected sentences. Some of these are simplified versions of the NT—but there's nothing wrong with that, for a learner. We give children Bible story books that aren't written in the exact words of the Bible because we think it's important they start enjoying the stories, so that they acquire the appetite and ability to move on to reading the Bible itself. New learners of the language of the NT need the encouragement to be had from reading familiar excerpts of the NT in Greek they can understand. Most of all, they need to be exposed to a sufficient quantity of the language in order to absorb the grammar and reinforce the vocabulary. Dobson gives them all that.

While Dobson's book may look 'easier' than some, he includes a lot of exercises comprised of sentences with small differences so that the learner has to learn to pay close attention to what a native speaker of English is programmed to ignore: all the fiddly beginnings and endings of words that do much of the grammatical heavy lifting in a Greek text. If you follow Dobson's counsel and keep a piece of light card in the book to cover up the English next to the Greek, you will learn, at a deep, subconscious level, to take the morphology (the fiddly beginnings and endings) on board in way that prepares you to read Greek, not just puzzle it out, word by word.

The only problem with the Dobson is that it may not be as easy to find in North America. The third edition has an audio CD, with a very good model of Koine Greek and includes accents on Greek words, which earlier editions did not have. Nevertheless, if all you can find is a used copy of an earlier edition, I'd still recommend starting with that.

My second recommendation would be Rodney Decker's *Reading Koine Greek*. This is a very large textbook (and so more expensive than Dobson's), but it takes you into the realm of intermediate Greek. If you're really sure you will persist with Greek and don't mind the price, this could be a good option. Decker also includes a lot of text for practice, much more than most beginning Greek grammars, which typically give only a handful of sentences in each lesson. His explanations of grammar are clear and he doesn't fall back on insisting you rote learn absolutely everything: he tells you what he thinks needs to be memorised and what does not. However, when he says 'Koine', he means it: his is not simply an introduction to the Greek of the New Testament, but also a foretaste of the language of the scriptures that are most often cited in the NT, the Greek translation of the Septuagint, the LXX, as well as of early Christian writers. Most of Decker's examples and suggested practice exercises are drawn from the NT, though, so you can check your practice work against a translation.

My third and fourth recommendations are in a different category from the first two because neither has enough practice material to do much more than teach you the facts of morphology, plus a little syntax, and offer some vocabulary lists to learn. However, if you don't opt for Decker, you'll find it helpful to have a reference grammar as you go along. Dobson teaches the necessary grammar for a beginner, but as your Greek improves, you may want to just check something quickly and for that purpose, either Black or Mounce is a bit easier to use. As a reference grammar, Black is probably the best available until you get to the upper-intermediate stage. He covers less than Decker but more than Mounce and everything is well-laid out, so that you can almost always find what you need quickly. Black also has the advantage that it includes exercises and has an answer key at the back. The title, however, is a misnomer: the amount of Greek text in this book is way too small to enable you to read even the simpler passages of the GNT on your own, even though Black covers a bit more vocabulary than Mounce does (by my estimate). However, I'd strongly recommend Black as a supplement to Dobson. Like Mounce, Black signals what you really have to learn off by heart and where you can omit learning a paradigm if you understand a basic principle.

My final recommendation would be William Mounce's *Basics of Biblical Greek*. This is a text widely used in American Evangelical seminaries and it has a noticeable theological bias, which you might or might not appreciate. Mounce's approach stresses learning the principles behind the formation of different forms, rather than rote learning paradigms of all the inflected forms. He also made a deliberate decision to emphasise mastery of forms rather than acquiring an extensive vocabulary. This means if you start with Mounce, you're going to have to do a lot of vocabulary learning before you can read the GNT with any ease, but Mounce probably has the priority right in this respect. The disadvantages of Mounce are that, first, he is rather wordy and some people find that frustrating. Second, there are no exercises or readings from the NT in the book itself: you're expected to buy the accompanying workbook for those. Worse, as far as I know, there is no key for the workbook, so this is not the best resource for self-teaching unless it's paired with another text or you know someone who can check your work for you.

If for whatever reason, none of these seems a good option for you, there are dozens of NT Greek books out there. Just try to choose one that gives plenty of practice, rather than dozens of pages of grammatical explanation followed by ten short sentences.

After working through most of a basic book, I'd suggest moving on to the advanced beginner texts, recommendations for which are to follow.

### Pronunciation

You can learn reasonably good pronunciation from a book, without any audio examples, but it's hard and not always reliable: hard, because when you're still at the stage of struggling with the alphabet, you have to sound out each word letter by letter, while trying to remember the sound of each letter. It's not always reliable because a book will give you English approximations of Greek sounds and your English may not be the same variety as that of the book's author.

A second issue is that there are differences of opinion over what kind of pronunciation should be used for Koine. The academic standard (so what you'd be likely to learn in a university or seminary course) is the same as used for Classical or Attic Greek. This is called Erasmian pronunciation, after the great Renaissance Humanist, Erasmus. It's a C15/16 guess at how Ancient Greek would have sounded. There are minorities in the academic world (both Classicists and NT scholars) who advocate for revised systems based on more modern theories of how Greek once sounded, but using Erasmian pronunciation is always safe.

The other approach for Koine is to use modern Greek pronunciation. Greeks tend to advocate this strongly, not surprisingly, and some NT enthusiasts agree with them. If you use this system around other people who know Greek but aren't actually Greeks, they'll probably look puzzled. Be aware also that if the criticism of the Erasmian system is that it was no more than a guess about how a language sounded 1500 years earlier, the criticism of using modern Greek pronunciation is that it presupposes the sounds of a language haven't changed over 2000 years.

Listen to a reading of *Beowulf* on YouTube and hear how English has changed over a much shorter period.

If you can find a copy of the third edition of Dobson with the audio CD, you have no problem: this CD has excellent pronunciation, i.e., a strong English-language accent doesn't come through. It's Erasmian, but that's the academic norm.

Otherwise, you have two choices: one is to purchase a CD or audio file of the whole GNT. This will be expensive and there are problems with the only available options I know of: you have to choose between either modern Greek pronunciation or the German Bible Society's version, which has a speaker with a strong American accent. There's nothing wrong with an American accent on English, but when you can immediately tell what variety of English someone speaks when they're speaking another language, it's a sign their pronunciation in the foreign language is not the best.

The other option would be to listen to YouTube videos and other resources on the Internet. The difficulty with this approach is that a beginner is never going to know how good the model is. However, if your aim is simply to have a rough idea of the sounds, as opposed to a model that is undoubtedly good, this won't be a problem. Just be aware that if the speaker has a Greek-looking name, in all likelihood the pronunciation will be that of Modern Greek and you need either to stick to that or to Erasmian pronunciation: don't try to do both or you're likely to end up with a mish-mash that's neither really one nor the other. . There's a case for each of them, but no case for mixing them into a stew of your own recipe. The best pronunciation I've found on YouTube is found in the videos produced by the Polis Institute in Jerusalem. Here's a link to the one on the Gospel of John: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uv0Y4pVCUDc&t=1225s>