

The Kwéyòl Writing System

St. Lucian Creole has 32 different sounds, or phonemes. These are represented in the writing system by 24 letters, and also two different accents used over the vowels. The letters Q and X are not used in St. Lucian Creole, and R is used only in some words borrowed from English.¹

In order for 24 letters to represent 32 sounds, some of the sounds are represented by a combination of letters. (The same is true for English, examples being CH, SH, and TH.) The 24 letters can represent 32 sounds by combining with accent marks and with each other. This Kwéyòl writing system is phonemic and easy to learn for anyone who can read and write English well and who can speak Kwéyòl.

Below is a summary of the sounds of Kwéyòl and the symbols used to represent them in writing:

CONSONANTS

<u>symbol</u>	<u>phonetic quality</u>
p	[p] voiceless bilabial stop
t	[t] voiceless alveolar stop
k	[k] voiceless velar stop
b	[b] voiced bilabial stop
d	[d] voiced alveolar stop
g	[g] voiced velar stop
f	[f] voiceless labiodental fricative
s	[s] voiceless alveolar grooved fricative
ch	[ʃ] voiceless alveopalatal grooved fricative

¹ This section on the Kwéyòl writing system is adapted from the SIL publication (1999), *Mannyè Ou Sa Li Èk Èkwi Kwéyòl*. Illustrations are by Mervin Evans, David Frank, Mark Frank, David Samman and Wilfred Auguste.

v	[v]	voiced labiodental fricative
z	[z]	voiced alveolar grooved fricative
j	[ʒ]	voiced alveopalatal grooved fricative
tʃ	[tʃ]	voiceless alveopalatal affricate
dʒ	[dʒ]	voiced alveopalatal affricate
l	[l]	voiced alveolar lateral
m	[m]	voiced bilabial nasal
n	[n]	voiced alveolar nasal
ŋ	[ŋ]	voiced velar nasal

SEMI-VOWELS

w	[w]	voiced bilabial semivowel
y	[j]	voiced alveopalatal semivowel
h	[h]	voiceless nonsyllabic vocoid
r	[ɹ]	retroflexed nonsyllabic vocoid

VOWELS

i	[i]	high front unrounded vocoid
é	[e]	mid close front unrounded vocoid
è	[ɛ]	mid open front unrounded vocoid
a	[a]	low central unrounded vocoid
ou	[u]	high back rounded vocoid
o	[o]	mid back rounded vocoid
ò	[ɔ]	low back rounded vocoid
en	[ɛ̃]	mid front unrounded nasal vocoid
on	[õ]	mid back rounded nasal vocoid
an	[ã]	low central unrounded nasal vocoid

THE KWÉYÒL ALPHABET

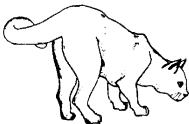
One of the most important things to note about the Creole writing system is that it is phonemically-based; that is, there is a one-to-one relationship between the sounds and the letters (or combination of letters) used to represent the sounds. The same cannot be said for English. The problem with English spelling is that the writing system is very old, and over the centuries the pronunciation of English has changed considerably while the spelling has changed little. As a result, there are English words that are spelled differently but pronounced the same, e.g. *right*, *write*, and *rite*. While the basics of English spelling can be taught according to phonic principles, there are many spellings of English words that simply have to be memorized.

The same is not true of Creole spelling. Because the system is fairly new and carefully thought out, the relationship between the spoken form of the language and the written form is very straightforward. One of the most basic rules of writing Creole is that it is written just the way it is pronounced, according to the given set of spelling rules. This is not meant to imply that Creole is superior to English, nor that the Creole writing system is superior to that of English, but rather that, for various reasons, the rules for reading and writing Creole can be learnt much more easily and quickly than those for writing English.

Note that some of the sounds in Kwéyòl are represented in writing by a sequence of two letters. These are called *digraphs*. The following digraphs are used in the Kwéyòl orthography, or writing system, each to represent a single consonant sound: **ch**, **dj**, **ng**, and **tj**. A nasal vowel in Kwéyòl, as in **bon** ‘good’, is represented by a vowel plus the letter **n**. The nasal vowels in Kwéyòl are **an**, **en**, and **on**. The [u] sound is represented by the combination **ou**, as in **boutik** ‘shop’. The letters C and U never occur by themselves in the Kwéyòl orthography, but only in the combinations **ch** and **ou**.

The following table presents the Creole alphabet, this time in alphabetic order, with examples:

a chat

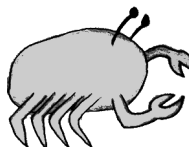


an dan

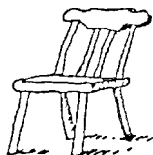


NOTE: This is a nasal vowel, represented by a digraph, namely vowel plus **n**.

b bak



ch ch̀ez



Note that **c** is never used by itself in the Creole writing system. It is always used in the combination **ch**.

d dé



dj djòl



é né

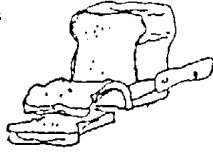


è bèf



en

pen



See note for **an**. Note that the **n** in these cases is not pronounced as a consonant, but rather is used to represent that the vowel has a certain nasal sound.

f

fèt



g

gason



h

hach



i

tifi



j

jako



k

kat



l

liv



m mouton 

n nich 

ng zong 

Sometimes **n** and **g** go together to make up a single sound, but sometimes the combination **ng** represents a sequence of two sounds rather than a digraph.

o ko 


ò pòpòt 

on bonbon 

See notes for **an**, **en**.

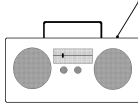
ou souwi 

Note that the **ou** together represents one sound. This spelling convention is patterned after the French. Note also that the **u** is never used by itself.

p pòt 

r

radyo



The **r** is used only in words borrowed from English.

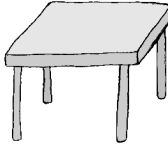
s

sèt



t

tab



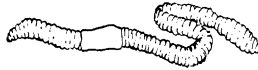
tj

tjè



v

vè



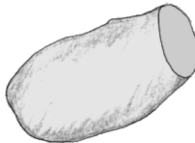
w

wat



y

yanm



z

zé



NOTE: While the vowels **a**, **e**, and **o** combine with an **n** to form a digraph in which the **n** is not to be pronounced as a consonant, the same is not true for the vowels **i**, **é**, **è**, **ou**, and **ò**, which are never combined with **n** as a digraph. So any time the reader sees one of these latter vowel symbols followed by an **n**, he should interpret it as the combination of a vowel plus a consonant rather than as a single nasal vowel sound. In cases where a true **n** sound is preceded by a nasal vowel, two **ns** have to be written. Note the spellings of the following words:

lapé	l + a + p + é	'peace'
lapen	l + a + p + en	'rabbit'
lapenn	l + a + p + en + n	'sorrow'
sa	s + a	'that'
san	s + an	'without'
sann	s + an + n	'ash'
sannng	s + an + ng	'belt'
lanp	l + an + p	'lamp'

PUNCTUATION

Most punctuation works the same way in St. Lucian Creole as in English. However, special attention must be given to the uses of the hyphen and the apostrophe.

hyphen The definite article (that is, the Creole equivalent of English 'the') is attached to the preceding word with a hyphen. The Creole definite article can take four forms, depending on the context: **-a**, **-la**, **-an**, and **-lan**. Here are some examples:

latè-a	'the earth'
tab-la	'the table'
tan-an	'the time/weather'
lanp-lan	'the lamp'

Mwen kouté listwa-a i wakonté-a.

'I listened to the story he told.'

apostrophe As in English, there are some words in Creole that are commonly contracted, and the contraction of two words is marked with an apostrophe. Here are some examples:

mwen + pa	= m'a
mwen + ka	= ng'a (or n'a)
mwen + kay	= ng'ay (or n'ay)

si + ou = s'ou
pa + ankò = p'òkò

When the pronouns **i** ('he' or 'she') and **ou** ('you') follow a word that ends with a vowel sound, they are sometimes converted to 'y and 'w respectively and attached to the preceding word, as in the following examples:

Mwen kay pwédyé ba ou. *becomes* **Mwen kay pwédyé ba'w.**
Tifi i bo i. *becomes* **Tifi'y bo'y.**