

A VISUAL AID FOR REMEMBERING THAI TONE RULES

by

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To be "desperate" is to be without hope, and I have been there, more than once, in my struggle to master the tone rules of the Thai language¹. The language books that I happen to have used or consulted have not been particularly helpful, varying from those that say "don't worry about tones—they don't matter all that much" to more honest but much more diffuse treatments that leave one confused and "without hope". Indeed, it was the scattering of tone rules over several pages and chapters that was so discouraging—it took forever to relocate the rule that might apply to each individual case.

And then one night I set about pulling together the various rules I had encountered to see if they would fall into any pattern I could remember. It worked: I hit upon a system that gave me what I wanted. It is a "visual mnemonic", a pictorial way of bringing the rules into view whenever one needs them, so that one can quickly find the place on the "map" that will tell you what you need to know. I will not pretend that the system makes it *easy* to master the tone rules; it only makes it *easier*. I suspect the only easy way is to have had Thai parents. Although the approach to remembering Thai tone rules presented here occurred to me independently, I was not surprised to learn later that others have also used a visual approach. The other explanations (both visual and non-visual) I have found seem to me somewhat more complicated, and less concise, than the system presented here. But, doubtless, different systems will appeal to different readers.

The system I find helpful is visual. It is all contained in the tone table below, which consists of two 4x3 matrices: the upper matrix shows the "normal" tones without any tone-marks; the lower matrix shows the altered tones which the tone-marks instruct us to substitute for "normal" tones. In effect, the tone-marks tell us how to handle "irregular" tones, or exceptions. (How many languages have such a systematic way of telling people not only when they are dealing with an exception but what to do with it? Not many, and certainly not English!) The two matrices contain *all* the rules, so that if you master the table you are master of the tone rules.

The arrangement of the matrix is important to seeing some of the patterns or regularities that help in remembering it. The columns of High-, Middle-, and Low-class initial consonants are best arranged in that order, since it puts the slightly more complex Low-class consonants on the right-hand end. The rows begin with a row for words that end in a long vowel. Next

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¹ Strictly speaking, Central Thai. There are regional dialects that do not follow the same rules.

TONE TABLE

Vowel length & final consonant	Class of initial consonant (applies to each syllable)		
	High	Middle	Low
1. Long vowel	∨	—	—
2. Any vowel and "soft" finals ^a	∨	—	—
3. Short vowel	∖	∖	/
4. Any vowel + n, ๓, ๓, etc. ^b	∖	∖	{ / sh. v. + n, ๓ ^b ∧ long v. + n, ๓ ^b
Tone-marks ^c			
1 <i>mai aik</i>	∖	∖	∧
๒ <i>mai thoe</i>	∧	∧	/
๓ <i>mai dtrii</i>	n.u.	/	n.u.
* <i>mai catawaa</i>	n.u.	∨	n.u.
High-class consonants :	๑, ๑, ๒, ๓, ๔, ๕, ๖, ๗, ๘, ๙, ๑๐, ๑๑		
Middle-class consonants :	๑๒, ๑๓, ๑๔, ๑๕, ๑๖, ๑๗, ๑๘, ๑๙, ๒๐		
Low-class consonants :	๒๑, ๒๒, ๒๓, ๒๔, ๒๕, ๒๖, ๒๗, ๒๘, ๒๙, ๓๐, ๓๑, ๓๒, ๓๓, ๓๔, ๓๕, ๓๖, ๓๗, ๓๘, ๓๙, ๔๐, ๔๑, ๔๒, ๔๓, ๔๔, ๔๕, ๔๖, ๔๗, ๔๘, ๔๙, ๕๐		

Notes : Key to tone symbols

/	=	high tone
—	=	mid tone
∖	=	low tone
∨	=	rising tone
∧	=	falling tone
n.u.	=	not used

a. Often called "live" consonants, in contrast to the phonetically "stopped" or "dead" consonants.

b. I.e. all "stop" (dead) finals; these include all consonants given a "stopped" pronunciation when in a final position (e.g. ๑, ๒, ๓, ๔, ๕, ๖, ๗, ๘, ๙, etc.).

c. The Thai word "mai" means (among other things) "tone". The words "aik", "thoe", "dtrii", and "catawaa" are ordinal words of rank or class meaning "first", "second", "third", and "fourth". Thus the tone marks are in fact numbers — and look very similar to the Arabic numerals 1, 2, 3 and 4.

comes a row for words that end in a “soft” (or “live”) consonant, i.e. any consonant **except** those pronounced by completely stopping, and then releasing, the breath at some point, producing what I call “stopped” consonants and what Thai linguists call “dead” consonants. The third row is for syllables that end in a short vowel. Finally, we need a row for all syllables that end with the “stopped” or “dead” consonants, e.g. “*gaw, baw, daw*”. The only asymmetry in the matrix is the cell for Low-class initials that end in “*gaw, baw, daw, etc.*”: their tone depends on whether the preceding vowel is long or short (in row 2, or the first two cells in row 4, the vowel length preceding the final consonant makes no difference).

By happy coincidence, the above arrangement of the basic matrix produces a simple symmetry in the tone-mark matrix below it. The symmetry in the tone-mark matrix is the simple “cross” pattern produced by having the Middle-class consonants in the middle, the only consonants that use all four tone marks, and by having “empty” cells in the bottom two cells of the first and last columns.

There you have the basic “m.p.”—two 4 x 3 matrices, one for the normal rules, the other for the exceptions indicated by the tone marks. If one is willing to meditate over these matrices a while, some helpful observations or patterns come into view. At least, I find them helpful. But before listing the patterns I have noticed, it may be well to acknowledge that this visual approach to Thai tones will not be of any use until one masters the three classes of consonants. I know of no way for normal students to do this except by writing down the nine Middle-class consonants and the ten High-class consonants a few hundred times—or however many times it takes to fix these two classes well in mind. Once you have mastered the Middle- and High-class consonants, then you know that everything else must be a Low-class consonant—there are more of these than of Middle- and High-class combined²! It is also essential to know the difference between a long vowel and a short vowel: apparently everyone is supposed to be born with this knowledge, for few of the language books bother to tell you that these vowels are all the same vowels except for how they are pronounced and written. There are basically nine vowels in Thai; each can be either long or short. A short vowel is simply a long one that is chopped off abruptly before it has a chance to become “long”! The written forms differ, to make the distinction. Thus there is a mechanical or phonetic principle that explains the difference between long and short vowels. There is no such phonetic logic underlying the differences between High-class, Middle-class, and Low-class consonants: these classes tell us nothing about how they are pronounced, and are purely arbitrary. They could as well be called class I, class II, and class III consonants—at least this wouldn’t raise false questions about how they ought to be pronounced!

Here are some of the patterns that I have noticed in the table and which I find helpful in trying to remember and to apply it:

1. There are no low tones in the Low-class column, and no high tones in the High-class column! So immediately one can rule out those possibilities when one is struggling to remember what tones belong to what cells.

² For convenience, I have listed the consonants in each class below the tone table.

2. High tones exist **only** with Low-class initials—plus a “*mai dtii*” tone mark (which appears **only** with Middle-class initials).
3. The “*mai catawaa*” tone mark (like the “*mai dtii*” mark) appears in only one cell, over Middle-class consonants, and thus always means only one thing—a rising tone. When you realize this point about *mai dtii* and *mai catawaa* (that each appears in the matrix only once, and hence has a unique instruction), all you have to do is to memorize what each of them tells you to do. Not so with the other two tone marks!
4. The mid-tone cells are easy to identify and remember: they occupy the four “northeastern” cells—that’s all there are. No tone mark ever signals a “mid-tone”.
5. The low tones occupy the opposite or “southwestern” cells—plus the two *mai aik* cells right below them.
6. With one exception, falling tones are produced by tone marks, not by combinations in the main matrix. The exception appears in the main “exception” cell of the whole system—syllables that start with Low-class consonants and end with “*gaw, baw, daw, etc.*” Here the tones depend on whether the preceding vowel is short or long: I remember the tones to use from the earlier observation that (a) there are no low tones in the Low-class column and (b) the falling tone used for this long-vowel syllable is the **only** falling tone in the upper matrix.
7. Remembering where the rising and falling tones appear in the matrix is all that remains. Does it help to realize that there is only one falling cell in the upper matrix (the Low-class consonant “half cell”) and only one rising tone cell in the tone-mark matrix? It has not been difficult for me to fix in place the rising tones of the first two cells in the High-class column: the only other rising-tone cell is with “*mai catawaa*”, which we have learned independently. As for the falling tones, they belong with *mai thoe* marks on High- and Middle-class initials—but then you have to step up one row to the Low-class consonants, for which *mai aik* produces a falling tone (i.e., for Low-class consonants, the last row of the upper matrix and the first row of the tone-mark matrix call for the same, falling, tone).

I have no idea whether the visual format explained above can help others; all I know is that it helps me. The tone-table can easily be copied inside the cover of any book one is struggling to read, so that there is no need to refer back to one’s basic grammar—where it is often so difficult to find the particular tone rule you are looking for. Other students may find better ways of setting up the matrices—my format is entirely arbitrary, after playing briefly with some other possible ordering of the columns and rows. There is only one sure test: use whatever format works best for you. “*Chók*” (column 3, row 4), “*dī*”, (column 2, row 1), “*kháp*” (column 3, row 4)!