

-아요/어요

polite present tense

The ending you will use more than any other. Which vowel you get is decided by the last vowel of the stem — and then the two often merge into a single syllable.

How it attaches

Stem type	Form	Example
Last vowel ㅏ or ㅑ	-아요	살다 → 살아요
Identical vowel merges	-아요 absorbed	가다 → 가요
Any other vowel	-어요	먹다 → 먹어요
하다 verbs	해요	공부하다 → 공부해요
ㅏ + 아 merges	와	보다 → 봐요
ㅣ + 어 merges	여	마시다 → 마셔요
ㅡ drops out	-어요	쓰다 → 써요
이다	이에요 / 예요	학생이에요 / 친구예요

Notes

This is the everyday polite level, used with strangers, colleagues, shopkeepers, and anyone you are not close to. It covers present tense and, in conversation, the near future as well: 내일 가요 means "I'm going tomorrow."

The choice is mechanical. Look at the last vowel of the stem. If it is ㅏ or ㅑ, add 아요. Anything else takes 어요. 하다 verbs are the one exception and become 해요 — and since a huge share of Korean verbs end in 하다, that single form does a lot of work.

Then the merging begins, and this is where learners stall. 가 + 아요 does not stay 가아요; the identical vowels collapse into 가요. 보 + 아요 becomes 봐요, 마시 + 어요 becomes 마셔요. The rules are regular, but you will absorb them faster by reading them aloud than by memorising a table.

Examples

- 저는 매일 한국어를 공부해요.
I study Korean every day.
- 이 커피 정말 맛있어요.
This coffee is really good.
- 어디에 가요?
Where are you going?
- 같이 점심 먹어요.
Let's have lunch together.
- 여기 앉아요.
Have a seat here.
- 날씨가 좋아서 기분이 좋아요.
The weather is nice, so I'm in a good mood.

Compared with

-ㅂ니다/습니다

Both are polite, but -ㅂ니다 is formal: announcements, presentations, the news, the military. -아요/어요 is warmer and is what you want in almost every conversation.

갑니다. (formal report) / 가요. (everyday polite)

-아/어 (반말)

Drop the 요 and you have casual speech, used with close friends and people clearly younger. Adding or removing that one syllable is the whole difference.

어디 가요? (polite) / 어디 가? (casual)

Future meaning

Korean does not need a future tense for planned events. -아요/어요 with a time word does the job; -(으)ㄹ 거예요 adds intention or prediction.

내일 가요. (I'm going tomorrow) / 내일 갈 거예요. (I intend to go tomorrow)

Watch out

✗ 저는 학교에 가아요.

○ 저는 학교에 가요.

When the stem already ends in ㅏ, the 아 of the ending disappears into it. The same happens with 사다 → 사요 and 만나다 → 만나요.

✗ 한국어를 공부하어요.

○ 한국어를 공부해요.

하다 never takes -아요 or -어요 in the regular way. It becomes 해요, and every 하다 compound follows: 일해요, 사랑해요, 운동해요.

✗ 저는 빵을 먹아요.

○ 저는 빵을 먹어요.

The stem 먹 has ㅣ as its last vowel, which is neither ㅏ nor ㅑ, so it takes -어요. Check the vowel, not the consonant.