

Grammatical Gender in Gaelic

What is Grammatical Gender?

Gender can be a confusing topic in language. This is especially true for native English speakers because English doesn't use the concept of grammatical gender. Think of grammatical gender more as a category of how a noun behaves as it interacts with other parts of a sentence rather than trying to define a noun as "male" or "female" in the sense of how a person is male or female. There are two types of gender that must be kept in mind in using language - the gender of the noun, and the actual gender of the entity (person, animal or object - if an object can actually have a gender) the noun represents. Scottish Gaelic has two genders - masculine and feminine. Ancient forms of Scottish Gaelic had a neuter gender in addition to the masculine and feminine genders. The loss of this third gender is the source of some of the inconsistency in application of gender in Scottish Gaelic.

Masculine Nouns

What makes a masculine noun? Unfortunately, there aren't any hard and fast rules. Here are some guidelines to give you a hand:

1. Nouns ending with the following are masculine:
 - a. "-a," "-ach"
 - b. diminutives ending in "-an" or "-ean"
 - c. derivative nouns ending in "-as"
 - d. derivative nouns for agents/'doers' ending in: "-ear," "-air," "-iche," "-adh"
2. Nouns denoting male entities are masculine. If a masculine pronoun references a feminine noun, the noun is considered to be masculine. This applies to people as well as animals.

father	athair (masculine)
boy	gille (masculine)
man	fear (masculine)
king	king (masculine)
rooster	coileach (masculine)
stag	damh (masculine)
drake	dràchd (masculine)
ram	reatha (masculine)

Notable exception:

woman	boireannach (masculine)
-------	-------------------------

3. Masculine nouns referring to classes or species include male and female entities in those classes or species. For example, cat is a masculine noun that represents male cats and female cats. Therefore it is sometimes necessary to specify the gender of the entity being referenced by the masculine noun with an additional word.

3a. Male human entities can be denoted with the prefix "fear-."

grandchild	ogha (masculine)
grandson	fear-ogha (masculine)
friend	caraid (masculine)

male friend caraid (masculine - can use the same word as a class and specific person)
teacher teagaisg
male teacher fear-teagaisg (masculine)

3b. Male entities that are domesticated animals can be denoted with the adjective “fireann.”

cat cat (masculine)
a male cat cat fireann (masculine)
pig muc (feminine)
a male pig muc fireann (masculine)

3c Male entities that are wild animals can be denoted with the prefix “boc” before the genitive form of the feminine noun.

goat gobhar (feminine)
a male goat boc-goibhre (masculine)

4. It’s a good bet that the names of the seasons, days of the week, elements (fire, etc.), liquors, colors, the young of all animals (regardless of sex) and agricultural products such as vegetables, grains and timber, are masculine.

5. Frequently, nouns whose final vowel is broad, are masculine.

Feminine Nouns

1. Nouns ending with the following are (usually) feminine:

- a. derivative nouns for attributes ending in “-e”
- b. diminutives ending in “-ag”, “-achd”
- c. “-id”

2. Nouns denoting female entities are feminine. If a feminine pronoun references a masculine noun, the noun is considered to be feminine.

mother màthair (feminine)
girl nighean (feminine)
cearc hen, chicken (feminine)
cow bò (feminine) [cow as in female domesticated animal]

Notable exceptions:

heifer agh (masculine)
woman boireannach (masculine)
cow mart (masculine) [cow (bovine) to become food]

3. Female entities of a class may be specified with additional words or prefixes.

3a. Female human entities can be denoted with the prefix “ban-” or “bana-”

grandchild ogha (masculine)
granddaughter ban-ogha (feminine)
friend caraid (masculine)
female friend bana-charaid (feminine)
teacher teagaisg (masculine)
female teacher bean-teagaisg (feminine)

rìgh	king (masculine)
ban-rìgh	queen (feminine)

3b. Female entities that are domesticated animals can be denoted with the adjective “boireann.”

cat	cat (masculine)
a female cat	cat boireann (feminine)

4. It is likely that names of countries, musical instruments, heavenly bodies, and diseases are feminine.

5. Frequently, nouns whose final vowel is slender, are feminine.

Sources & Further readings

Byrne, Michel Gràmar na Gàidhlig, Stòrlann-Acair, 2002, pp. 24-26

Calder, George A Gaelic Grammar, Gairm Publications, 1990, pp. 74-77.

MacLaren, James Beginner's Gaelic, Hippocrene Books, Inc., 1999, pp 59-60.

Reid, Duncan Elementary Course of Gaelic, An Comunn Gaidhealach, 1968, pp 63-64.