

Irregular Verbs, Past Tense

Gaelic has 10 'official' irregular verbs. This list of 10 leaves out 'Bi' and 'Is,' as well as the modal verbs (may, must) and defective verbs (verbs which do not have all tenses). Even when all these official omissions are added together, there are still many fewer troublesome verbs in Gaelic than there is in English (or Italian), which have HUNDREDS of irregular verbs. So we must rejoice at only having 10 official irregular verbs in Gaelic.

Really Irregular Verbs	Irregular Verbs maintaining use of 'do'
Abair! (use Can! for command), ag ràdh - say Thuirt. Cha tuirt. An tuirt? Nach tuirt?	Beir!, a' breith, a' beirsinn (+ air) - catch Rug. Cha d' rug. An d' rug? Nach d' rug?
Cluinn!, a' cluinntinn - hear Chuala. Cha chuala. An cuala? Nach cuala?	Dèan!, a' dèanamh - make or do Rinn. Cha d' rinn. An d' rinn? Nach d' rinn?
Faic!, a' faicinn - see Chunnaic. Chan fhaca. Am faca? Nach f(h)aca?	Faigh!, a' faighinn - get or find Fhuair. (Fh sounds like 'h' here) Cha d' fhuair. (Fh silent here) An d' fhuair? (Fh silent here) Nach d' fhuair? (Fh silent here)
Rach! (use Thalla! or Theirig!), a' dol - go Chaidh. Cha deach(aidh). An deach(aidh)? Nach deach(aidh)?	Ruig! a' ruigsinn - reach Ràinig. Cha d' ràinig. An d' ràinig? Nach d' ràinig?
Thig!, a' tighinn - come Thàinig. Cha tàinig. An tàinig? Nach tàinig?	
Thoir!, a' toirt - give, take, bring and more! Thug. Cha tug. An tug? Nach tug?	

Notes on Irregular Verbs

Lenition is a curious thing. Now that you have become familiar with it, we can introduce you to a nuance of lenition. There is strong lenition and weak lenition. This manifests itself with the consonants “t” and “d,” which has been given the mnemonic device, “the to die for rule,” since “to die” uses both “t” and “d.”

Examples of strong and weak lenition:

aon duine / one man - aon lenites, but is weak. Duine starts with a “d,” so no lenition.
dà dhuine / two men - dà lenites, and is strong. Duine lenites.

This is important because “cha” likes to lenite regardless of tense - so don’t be confused that we mark the past tense by leniting the imperative form of the verb. This is a separate issue.

However, “cha” is a weak leniter. You can see this in the past tense of the irregular verbs. Notice that all the irregular verbs that begin with “d” and “t” are unlenited after “cha,” while verbs that begin with other lenitable letters are? That’s the “to die for” rule at work.

Abair

While abair is the imperative of the verb “to say,” we don’t use the word abair in that way. Instead, we use the imperative of another (defective) verb: can!

Can sin a-rithist, ma ‘s do thoil e. / Say that again, please.

Abair, the imperative, is used as an exclamation:

Abair ad! / What a hat!

Beir (+air)

Rug mi air. / I caught it (masculine noun). I caught him.
Rug mi oirre. / I caught it (feminine noun). I caught her.

Beir without air means, “to give birth.” So don’t forget the “air” unless you mean to!

Thoir

Thoir + Do, give.
Thoir + Gu, bring.
Thoir + Bho, take from.
Thoir + Le, take with.

Further references & exercises:

- *Scottish Gaelic in Twelve Weeks*, Aonad 28, pp. 37-40; Aonad 29, p. 40.
- *Ceumannan 2*, Modal 3, Aonad 2, pp. 162-199
- *Scottish Gaelic*, by Muriel Fisher, “Thoir” Level 2, Section 13, pp. 32-33; “Abair & Rach” Level 3, Section 7, pp. 17-20; “Faic & Thoir” Level 3, Section 9, pp. 26-30; “Beir, Cluinn, & Ruig” Level 4, Section 1, pp. 3-9; “Dèan, Faigh, & Thig” Level 4, Section 17, pp. 47-51.