

# Understanding Russian Names in Literature

*Readers of Russian literature in translation can have trouble keeping track of Russian names. Understanding the proper structure and usage of Russian names will help.*

Russian names can overwhelm English readers interested in the great novels of Russian literature. Aside from the sheer size of books such as *War and Peace* or *The Brothers Karamazov*, many struggle with the confusing form and variations of the names of the novels' characters.

Translators often provide a list of *dramatis personae* at the beginning of English-language editions of Russian novels. But without an explanation of the way names and nicknames work in Russian, readers can still get lost and frustrated.

## ***The Structure of Russian Names***

Traditional Russian names come in three parts. These are the **given name**, **patronymic**, and **family name**. For instance, the full names of the great Russian novelists Dostoevsky and Tolstoy are Fyodor (given name) Mikhailovich (patronymic) Dostoevsky (family name) and Lev (given name) Nikolaevich (patronymic) Tolstoy (family name).

The patronymic is based on the first name of a person's father, adding either a masculine (-vich or -ich) or feminine (-na) ending. Thus siblings (with the same father) will have the same patronymic.

A good example from Russian literature is the Rostov family from Tolstoy's *War and Peace*. One of the main characters is Nikolai Ilyich Rostov, while his sister is Vera Ilyichna Rostova (their father's name, therefore, is Ilya).

The respectful way to refer to a Russian is by first name and patronymic, not by title and last name, as in other European languages. For example, Dostoevsky's antihero of *Crime and Punishment*, Rodion Romanovich Raskolnikov, would be politely addressed as Rodion Romanovich, not Mr. Raskolnikov.

## ***Common Russian Nicknames in Literature***

Another confusing element in Russian literature is the profusion of nicknames. However, this is not too far from English, which has a number of standard nicknames for common names – Will, Bill, or Billy for William; Jack or Johnny for John; Beth, Betty, or Liz for Elizabeth; and so on.

Common nicknames derived from Russian names include Vanya for Ivan (as in Anton Chekhov's play *Uncle Vanya*), Sasha for Alexander, or Tanya for Tatiana.

Many nicknames are also diminutives. Alexei Fyodorovich Karamazov (the youngest of Dostoevsky's *Brothers Karamazov*) is called Alyosha, Alyoshka, Alyoshenka, and many other affectionate variations in the novel, names which are usually suitable for children or one's juniors.

French names also appear in nineteenth-century Russian literature, as French was spoken by the Russian aristocracy. Thus Count Pyotr Kirillovich Bezukhov, another key figure in *War and Peace*, is usually referred to as "Pierre," the French version of Pyotr (or Peter).

## ***Coming to Understand Russian Names in Literature***

Once readers understand the three-part nature of names, and the way each part is used in formal or informal settings, they can keep better track of the many characters in Russian novels.

## **IVAN** [Иван](#) (Russian, Bulgarian, Serbian, Macedonian), [Іван](#) (Ukrainian)

Pronounced [ee-VAHN] (Russian), [IE-vən] (English) Newer form of the old [Slavic](#) name [Іѡаннѣ](#) (*Ioannu*), which was derived from Greek *Ioannes* (see [JOHN](#)). This was the name of six Russian rulers, including the 15th-century Ivan III the Great and 16th-century Ivan IV the Terrible, the first tsar of Russia. It was also borne by nine emperors of Bulgaria. Other notable bearers include the Russian author Ivan Turgenev and the Russian physiologist Ivan Pavlov (1849-1936).

FEMININE FORMS: [Ivanna](#) (Russian), [Ioana](#), [Ivana](#), [Yana](#), [Yoana](#) (Bulgarian), [Ivana](#), [Jovana](#) (Serbian), [Ivana](#) (Croatian), [Ivana](#) (Czech), [Ivana](#) (Slovene), [Ivana](#), [Jovana](#) (Macedonian)

OTHER LANGUAGES: [Gjon](#) (Albanian), [Yahya](#) (Arabic), [Hovhannes](#) (Armenian), [Ganix](#), [Ion](#), [Jon](#) (Basque), [John](#) (Biblical), [Ioannes](#) (Biblical Greek), [Yehochanan](#), [Yochanan](#) (Biblical Hebrew), [Iohannes](#) (Biblical Latin), [Yann](#), [Yanick](#), [Yannic](#), [Yannick](#) (Breton), [Joan](#) (Catalan), [Jowan](#) (Cornish), [Ghjuvan](#) (Corsican), [Jens](#), [Jannick](#), [Jannik](#) (Danish), [Jan](#), [Johan](#), [Johannes](#), [Hanne](#), [Hannes](#), [Hans](#), [Jo](#), [Joop](#) (Dutch), [Johano](#), [Joĉjo](#) (Esperanto), [Jaan](#), [Johannes](#), [Juhan](#) (Estonian), [Jani](#), [Janne](#), [Johannes](#), [Joni](#), [Jouni](#), [Juhana](#), [Juhani](#), [Hannes](#), [Hannu](#), [Juha](#), [Juho](#), [Jukka](#), [Jussi](#) (Finnish), [Jean](#), [Yann](#), [Jeannot](#), [Yanick](#), [Yannic](#), [Yannick](#) (French), [Xoán](#) (Galician), [Jan](#), [Johan](#), [Johann](#), [Johannes](#), [Hanke](#), [Hannes](#), [Hans](#), [Jo](#) (German), [Ioannes](#), [Ioannis](#), [Yanni](#), [Yannis](#), [Yianni](#), [Yiannis](#) (Greek), [Keoni](#) (Hawaiian), [Yochanan](#) (Hebrew), [János](#), [Jancsi](#), [Jani](#), [Janika](#) (Hungarian), [Jóhann](#), [Jóhannes](#), [Jón](#) (Icelandic), [Eoin](#), [Sean](#), [Seán](#), [Shane](#) (Irish), [Giovanni](#), [Gian](#), [Gianni](#), [Giannino](#), [Vanni](#) (Italian), [Johannes](#), [Joannes](#) (Late Roman), [Jānis](#) (Latvian), [Sjang](#), [Sjeng](#) (Limburgish), [Jonas](#) (Lithuanian), [Ean](#), [Juan](#) (Manx), [Hann](#), [Jan](#), [Jon](#), [Hankin](#), [Jankin](#) (Medieval English), [Jehan](#) (Medieval French), [Zuan](#) (Medieval Italian), [Jens](#) (Norwegian), [Iwan](#), [Jan](#), [Janusz](#), [Janek](#) (Polish), [João](#), [Joãozinho](#) (Portuguese), [Ioan](#), [Ion](#), [Iancu](#), [Ionel](#), [Ionuț](#), [Nelu](#) (Romanian), [Jan](#), [Johan](#), [Johannes](#), [Jon](#), [Hans](#) (Scandinavian), [Eoin](#), [Iain](#), [Ian](#) (Scottish), [Ján](#), [Janko](#) (Slovak), [Iván](#), [Juan](#), [Xuan](#), [Juanito](#) (Spanish), [Jens](#), [Hampus](#), [Hasse](#), [Janne](#) (Swedish), [Yahya](#) (Turkish), [Evan](#), [Iefan](#), [Ieuan](#), [Ifan](#), [Ioan](#), [Iwan](#), [Siôn](#), [Ianto](#) (Welsh)

## **NATALYA** [Наталья](#) (Russian) [nah-TAH-lyah] Russian form of **NATALIE**

VARIANT: [Nataliya](#) DIMINUTIVES: [Nata](#), [Natasha](#), [Tasha](#)

OTHER LANGUAGES: [Natalija](#), [Nataša](#) (Croatian), [Natálie](#) (Czech), [Natalie](#), [Nat](#), [Natalee](#), [Natasha](#), [Natille](#), [Tasha](#) (English), [Latasha](#), [Natisha](#) (English (African American)), [Natalie](#), [Nathalie](#), [Natacha](#) (French), [Natalie](#), [Nathalie](#) (German), [Natália](#) (Hungarian), [Natalia](#) (Italian), [Natalia](#) (Late Roman), [Natālija](#) (Latvian), [Natalija](#), [Nataša](#) (Macedonian), [Natalia](#), [Natalka](#), [Natasza](#) (Polish), [Natália](#) (Portuguese), [Nathália](#) (Portuguese (Brazilian)), [Natalia](#) (Romanian), [Natalija](#), [Nataša](#) (Serbian), [Natália](#) (Slovak), [Natalija](#), [Nataša](#) (Slovene), [Natalia](#) (Spanish), [Nataliya](#), [Natalka](#) (Ukrainian)

## **STEPAN** (Russian, Armenian) [Степан](#) (Russian) [stye-PAHN] (Russian) [stee-PAHN] (Russian)

Russian and Armenian form of [STEPHEN](#)

OTHER LANGUAGES: [Stephanos](#) (Ancient Greek), [Estebe](#), [Eztebe](#) (Basque), [Stephen](#) (Biblical), [Stephanos](#) (Biblical Greek), [Stephanus](#) (Biblical Latin), [Stefan](#) (Bulgarian), [Esteve](#) (Catalan), [Stjepan](#), [Štefan](#), [Stevan](#), [Stevo](#), [Stipan](#), [Stipe](#), [Stipo](#) (Croatian), [Štěpán](#) (Czech), [Steffen](#) (Danish), [Stefan](#), [Stefanus](#), [Steffen](#), [Stef](#) (Dutch), [Stephen](#), [Ste](#), [Steph](#), [Steve](#), [Steven](#), [Stevie](#) (English), [Tapani](#), [Tahvo](#), [Teppo](#) (Finnish), [Étienne](#), [Stéphane](#) (French), [Estevo](#) (Galician), [Stefan](#), [Steffen](#), [Stephan](#) (German), [Stefanos](#), [Stephanos](#) (Greek), [István](#), [Pista](#), [Pisti](#) (Hungarian), [Stiofán](#) (Irish), [Stefano](#) (Italian), [Stefans](#) (Latvian), [Steponas](#) (Lithuanian), [Stefan](#) (Macedonian), [Tipene](#) (Maori), [Estienne](#) (Medieval French), [Steffen](#) (Norwegian), [Stefan](#), [Szczepan](#) (Polish), [Estevão](#) (Portuguese), [Estève](#) (Provençal), [Stefan](#), [Fane](#) (Romanian), [Stefan](#) (Scandinavian), [Steafan](#), [Steaphan](#), [Steenie](#) (Scottish), [Stefan](#), [Stevan](#), [Stevo](#), [Stjepan](#) (Serbian), [Štefan](#) (Slovak), [Štefan](#) (Slovene), [Esteban](#), [Estavan](#) (Spanish), [Staffan](#) (Swedish), [Steffan](#) (Welsh)

## The Simple Actor's Guide to Pronouncing Chekhov's Names

Does it matter how actors pronounce Russian names when they are acting Chekhov's plays in English? I think it does, and that's not just because I'm a Russian speaker or a pedant (or possibly both). Nobody minds how the names of characters in Shakespeare or Brecht are pronounced, but Chekhov's plays are different. Not only are they firmly anchored in the theatrical tradition of late 19th century naturalism, but the characters Chekhov created are universal because they are so tied to time and place -- Russia on the eve of the 1905 revolution, with its rapid social change and class upheavals. In this context, I think it's right for actors who don't speak Russian to try to get the names to sound authentic by getting the stress on the correct syllables. Russian is a beautiful language, and jars on the ear when it's mispronounced. When even actors as cerebral as Simon Russell Beale struggle to get it right during celebrations of Chekhov's anniversary, then I think there's a need for a handy guide.

Broadly speaking, Russian names can be pronounced as they are transliterated, though there are one or two pitfalls for the unwary. In *The Seagull* Konstantin's surname is sometimes written Treplev, but it's pronounced Treplyov. Another character is Semen Semenovich, but the first name and patronymic are pronounced Semyon Semyonovich. What's a patronymic? For men and women, it's a middle name based on the name of the father. Every Russian has one. So Anna Pavlovna is Anna, the daughter of Pavel. Chekhov was Anton Pavlovich. First name and patronymic are the normal mode of address between people who know each other but aren't intimate friends or close relatives. Translators of Chekhov often drop the patronymic altogether, but I like to hear it used. I think the different ways his characters address each other help signify the degree of social and emotional distance between them. Without the patronymic, it's sometimes hard to get the tone right. A surname on its own can be too formal and a Christian name on its own too intimate.

The key to pronouncing Russian names is getting the stress on the right syllable -- which is much more pronounced in Russian than in English or French. Russian dictionaries and language textbooks give stress marks, though they aren't normally printed anywhere else. There are few firm rules about stress, though getting it wrong can change the meaning of a word. When you learn Russian, you pick it up as you go along. One reason it's important is that unstressed vowels sometimes change their sound. The Russian word for Moscow is Moskva, with the stress on the second syllable, but the actual pronunciation is Maskva. One name that's hard to get right for English speakers is Boris, pronounced Barij with the stress on the second syllable -- NOT as in Boris Johnson.

So here is a stress-free stress guide to the characters' names in Chekhov's major plays. I have now updated it to include *Platonov* and *Ivanov* as well as the big four plays -- *The Seagull*, *Uncle Vanya*, *Three Sisters* and *The Cherry Orchard*. The next time I watch a Chekhov play I shall be listening hard to see who gets it right.

**PLATONOV** -- Mikhail Vasilyevich Platonov, Aleksandra Ivanovna (Sasha) Platonova, Anna Petrovna Voynitseva, Sergei Pavlovich Voynitsev, Sofia Yegorovna Voynitseva, Porfiry Semyonovich Glagolev, Kirill Porfiryevich Glagolev, Gerasim Kuzmich Petrin, Pavel Petrovich Shcherbuk, Marya Yefimovna Greko, Ivan Ivanovich Trilyetsky, Nikolai Ivanovich Trilyetsky, Abram Abramovich Vengerovich, Isak Abramovich Vengerovich, Timofey Gordeyevich Bugrov, Osip, Marko, Vasily, Yakov, Katya

**IVANOV** -- Nikolai Alekseyevich Ivanov, Anna Petrovna Ivanova (born Sarra Abramson), Matvey Semyonovich Shabelsky, Pavel Kirillich Lebedev, Zinaida Savishna Lebedeva, Sasha (Aleksandra Pavlovna) Lebedeva, Yevgeny Konstantinovich Lvov, Marfa Yegorovna Babakina, Dmitry Nikitich Kosykh, Mikhail Mikhailovich Borkin, Avdotya Nazarovna, Yegorushka, Pyotr, Gavrila

**THE SEAGULL** -- Irina Nikolayevna Arkadina (formerly Treplyova), Konstantin Gavrilovich Treplyov (Kostya), Pyotr Nikolayevich Sorin, Nina Mikhailovna Zarechnaya, Ilya Afanasyevich Shamrayev, Polina Andreyevna, Masha, Boris Alekseyevich Trigorin, Yevgeny Sergeyevich Dorn, Semyon Semyonovich Medvedenko, Yakov

**UNCLE VANYA** -- Aleksandr Vladimirovich Serebryakov, Yelena Andreyevna, Sofiya Alexandrovna (Sonya), Mariya Vasilevna Voinitskaya, Ivan Petrovich Voinitsky (Vanya), Mikhail Lvovich Astrov, Ilya Ilyich Telegin, Mariya

**THREE SISTERS** -- Andrei Sergeyevich Prozorov, Natalya Ivanovna (Natasha), Olga Sergeyevna, Mariya Sergeyevna (Masha), Irina Sergeyevna, Fyodor Ilyich Kulygin, Aleksandr Ignatyevich Vershinin, Nikolai Lvovich Tuzenbach, Vasily Vasilyevich Solyony, Ivan Romanovich Chebutykin, Aleksei Petrovich Fedotik, Vladimir Karlovich Rode, Ferapont Spiridonovich, Anfisa

**THE CHERRY ORCHARD** -- Lyubov Andreyevna Ranyevskaya, Anya, Varya, Leonid Andreyevich Gayev, Yermolai Alekseyevich Lopakhin, Pyotr Sergeyevich Trofimov, Boris Borisovich Semyonov-Pishchik, Charlotta Ivanovna, Semyon Panteleyevich Yepikhodov, Dunyasha, Feers, Yasha

ONLINE pronunciation guide for Chekhov's THE MARRIAGE PROPOSAL...

<http://www.dialectsarchive.com/the-marriage-proposal>