

Learn Korean Ep. 112: Irregular Verbs

When Korean learners think of “irregular verb” conjugations, many (perhaps most) people first think of verb stems ending with ㅁ.

For example, here are ㅁ form present tense conjugations of verb stems ending with ㅁ.

춡다 (“to be cold”) → 추워요

곱다 (“to be beautiful,” “to be nice”) → 곱와요

입다 (“to wear”) → 입어요

Although all verb stems ending with ㅁ might appear irregular at first glance, the majority follow regular rules.

Verb Stems Ending with ㅁ

If an **action verb** stem ends with ㅁ, attach 아(요) if the last vowel is ㅏ or ㅑ. Or, attach 어(요) if the last vowel is anything else. This is exactly like conjugating most verbs in Korean.

잡다 (“to catch”) → 잡아요

접다 (“to fold”) → 접어요

If a **descriptive verb** stem ends with ㅁ, remove the ㅁ and attach 우. This will become 워(요) in the present tense, 왔어(요) in the past tense, and 올 거예요 in the future tense (among other forms).

덥다 (“to be hot”) → 더워요

But with any rule, there are exceptions. Here are the most common ones.

굽다 (“to bake”) → 구워요

눅다 (“to lie down”) → 누워요

돕다 (“to help”) → 도와요

줍다 (“to pick up”) → 주워요

곱다 ("to be beautiful," "to be nice") → 고와요

Of these, 돕다 and 곱다 are not commonly used by themselves, so you only need to focus on the remaining three exceptions.

Verb Stems Ending with ㅎ

For these verbs, remove the ㅎ and attach the sound ㅁ.

그렇다 ("to be so") → 그래요

까맣다 ("to be black") → 까매요

However, 하얗다 ("to be white") becomes 하얘요 – this is because 하야 combines with the ㅁ sound to become 하얘.

Verb Stems Ending with ㄹ

Whenever a verb stem ending with ㄹ is followed by ㄴ, ㅂ, or ㅅ, remove the ㄹ. Otherwise, keep the ㄹ.

For example, 길다 ("to be long") becomes 긴 (ㄴ) as an adjective, 갑니다 (ㅂ) in the 니다 form, and 기세요 (ㅅ) in the honorific form.

Verb Stems Ending with ㅈ

Some verb stems ending with ㅈ are irregular, while others are not.

For the irregular ones, the ㅈ will change to become ㅊ.

듣다 ("to listen") → 들어요

걷다 ("to walk") → 걸어요

While other verbs will conjugate normally.

믿다 ("to believe") → 믿어요

받다 ("to receive") → 받아요

Here are the most common irregular verbs ending in ㅁ.

듣다 ("to listen") → 들어요

걷다 ("to walk") → 걸어요

깨달다 ("to realize") → 깨달아요

실다 ("to load") → 실어요

묻다 ("to ask") → 물어요

Verb Stems Ending with ㅅ

For most verbs that end with ㅅ, remove the ㅅ.

낫다 ("to get better," "to be preferable") → 나아요

For other verbs, conjugate them normally.

웃다 ("to smile," "to laugh") → 웃어요

씻다 ("to wash") → 씻어요

Here are the most common exceptions to learn.

낫다 ("to get better," "to be preferable") → 나아요

짓다 ("to build") → 지어요

붓다 ("to swell") → 부어요

잇다 ("to connect") → 이어요

젓다 ("to stir") → 저어요

Verb Stems Ending with 르

For these verbs stems, remove the — vowel at the bottom. Then copy the ㄹ to the bottom of the previous syllable. Finally, attach 아(요) or 어(요) as usual.

For example, the verb stem of 모르다 (“to not know”) is 모르. Removing — we get 모르. Copying ㄹ to the bottom of the previous syllable gives us 몰르. Attaching 아(요) – since 몰 has ㅏ – gives us 몰라요.

For another example, the verb stem of 부르다 (“to sing”) is 부르. Removing — we get 부르. Copying ㄹ to the bottom of the previous syllable gives us 불르. Attaching 어(요) – since 부 doesn’t have ㅏ or ㅑ – gives us 불러요.

An exception is the verb 따르다 (“to follow”), which becomes 따라요 without copying the ㄹ.

Verb Stems Ending with —

For these verbs, most of the time we simply remove —. Then we replace it with 아(요) or 어(요) as usual.

For example, the verb stem of 기쁘다 (“to be happy”) is 기쁘. Removing — we get 기뻐. Attaching 어(요) – since 기 doesn’t have ㅏ or ㅑ – gives us 기뻐요.

For another example, the verb stem of 고프다 (“to be hungry”) is 고프. Removing — we get 고폸. Attaching 아(요) – since 고폸 has ㅏ – gives us 고폸아요.

Here are two common exceptions.

잠그다 (“to lock”) → 잠가요

담그다 (“to soak”) → 담가요

Keep in mind that these two verbs are often conjugated *incorrectly* as 잠귀요 and 담귀요.

Common Irregular Verbs

Here are a few more common irregular verbs.

이다 ("to be") conjugates to **이에요** when used after a consonant, and **예요** when used after a vowel.

하다 ("to do") conjugates to **해요**.

되다 ("to become") conjugates to **돼요**, although occasionally in writing it can also become **되어요**.

Conclusion

Most verbs are regular, and once you learn the rules (and the few exceptions) you can conjugate any verb in Korean.

If you have any questions, feel free to send me a message through my web site or on YouTube. Good luck in your studies!

