

The Weird and Wacky 'Okina

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The 'okina is a unique consonant of the Hawaiian language and it represents what is known as a glottal stop. The 'okina doesn't look like the other letters, it has no Roman alphabet equivalent and the glottal stop really isn't a consonant in the English language, so that may be part of the reason why the 'okina seems so weird.

The 'okina letter is properly depicted as an upside down apostrophe. A curled apostrophe looks like a little number nine (9), so the 'okina looks like a little number six (6).

-Apostrophe samples (curled and straight)-

Turn this page upside down to see what an 'okina looks like.



The 'okina is properly depicted as an upside down apostrophe.

The 'okina is often incorrectly described as reversed or backward apostrophe. A backward apostrophe is not a proper 'okina. It is a bad description of its orientation and I just hate when a character's orientation is misrepresented.

- ' = an apostrophe
- ◌' = a backward apostrophe
- ◌' = an upside down apostrophe ('okina)

Sometimes, artistic liberty is used when depicting the 'okina. The example below isn't curled or tilted and it would be more accurate if it was pointed up, instead of down. Although the 'okina below is not a proper 'okina, I don't have a problem with it. Properly depicted, a straight line 'okina should have the same orientation as a forward slash (/) and if there is a thicker or heavier end, it should be at the bottom.

HAWAII

The 'okina might be considered strange and wacky, because every other consonant contributes a sound to a Hawaiian syllable, but what does the 'okina contribute? We can easily hear the sound of the consonants in *ha, ka, la, ma, na, pa,* and *wa,* but what does the 'okina contribute in the word *'a* and how does it sound any different from *a*? How is *'ahi* (tuna) any different in pronunciation from *ahi* (fire) or how is *'ono* (delicious) different from *ono* (a type of fish)?

Many instructors will explain that the sound of the 'okina is like the sound that occurs between the two *ohs* in the expression *oh-oh*, but the only sound I ever hear between *oh-oh* is the sound of squeaking bed springs.

Seriously, I do not hear a sound, only the absence of sound. I am told, whatever is happening is naturally occurring, so we need not worry about it too much and besides it is a "voiceless glottal plosive", whatever that means. Since the 'okina seems to have "the right to remain silent", I have dubbed the 'okina, "the Miranda consonant."

The 'okina is sometimes described as a diacritic mark, but that description diminishes its true character. The *kahakō* (◌̄), known in English as a macron, is the only diacritic mark in the Hawaiian language. The 'okina is a real and full fledged Hawaiian consonant, however unique its character. It is important, because it affects correct pronunciation, so it should not be ignored or neglected.

'okina literally means "cutting off, separation" *kahakō* lit. means "long vowel sound mark"

The 'okina can come between what otherwise would be a diphthong, if not for the appearance of the 'okina. Hawaiian diphthongs are two vowels pronounced together as one syllable, like the *ai* in *Waikīkī* (spouting water) or the *au* in the word *pau* (finished) and the Hawaiian feast known as a *lū'au*.

ka'i (to lead, direct)

has no diphthong and two syllables

kai (sea) has an *ai* diphthong

ka'u (my)

has no diphthong and two syllables

kau (to place) has an *au* diphthong

The 'okina can also prevent the otherwise possible occurrence of a glide. Glides are natural occurrences of the spoken Hawaiian language. There are two types of Hawaiian glides, *w*-glides and *y*-glides.

moa (chicken) pronounced like MOH-wuh

mo'a (cooked) pronounced like MOH-uh

kea (white, clear) pronounced like KAY-yuh

ke'a (cross, crucifix) pronounced like KAY-uh

For many reasons, the 'okina has been omitted from the spelling of Hawaiian words. Back in the early 1820's, when the written Hawaiian language was first being devised, the glottal stop was neglected in spelling, partially because its presence was understood by Hawaiian speakers who had learned the language by ear rather than by textbooks or print.

Even when it was felt that the 'okina should be represented in print, early nineteenth century Hawai'i publishers simply didn't have the proper typeface to correctly depict the 'okina. However, the 'okina was used in print on occasion and even then, sporadically. When it was used, the 'okina was represented by an apostrophe, not a proper 'okina, but the *kahakō* went missing entirely. Today, the 'okina and the *kahakō* can be hard to depict with a computer, for the lack of a Hawaiian font and Hawaiian keyboard layout. Even more challenging is the use of the 'okina and *kahakō* on the internet. Most webmasters resort to using a grave accent (◌̀) or an apostrophe (◌'), but I don't like their use. I think the best solution for the internet is to use the escape character entities in html files. For instance, to render an 'okina in an html file, use (‘) without the parentheses.

The 'okina and *kahakō* are often stripped in the spelling of words for street signs, maps, et cetera to simplify spelling and give a less cluttered look, but this can lead to confusion about correct pronunciation and/or spelling.

Because the 'okina and *kahakō* were excluded for many years or decades and even

today they are often omitted; many people believe that both symbols are inauthentic and illegitimate characters, when nothing could be further from the truth. There might also be a fallacious belief that they are optional characters. The 'okina and *kahakō* give a more accurate written representation of the Hawaiian language. They are not ancillary characters and should be regarded as being as essential as any other letter.

Although the omission of the 'okina and *kahakō* may make understandable a mistake in pronunciation, it is not a justification for a change in pronunciation. When spelling Hawaiian words the 'okina and *kahakō* should be properly recognized in writing and speech.

In English spelling it is acceptable and in fact correct to exclude the 'okina and *kahakō*; however they are no longer correctly spelled Hawaiian words, but Anglicized versions of Hawaiian words and despite the change in spelling, pronunciation should not change.

Nowadays the 'okina and *kahakō* are included and used by thoughtful writers who use Hawaiian words, however this sometimes leads to the incorrect inclusion of the 'okina in words derived from the Hawaiian language, but are not Hawaiian, like the words *Hawaiian* and *Hawaii's*. It is a sort of a hypercorrection in an attempt to make up for a past history of exclusion of the 'okina. *Hawaiian* is not a Hawaiian word, because it violates the rule that all Hawaiian words end in a vowel. *Hawaii's* is not a Hawaiian word, because possessiveness in Hawaiian is not signified by the adding of an apostrophe and a *s*, that is English spelling.

Hawai'ian Hawai'i's

I don't like the spellings above, because they are neither completely Hawaiian or English, but a sort of hybrid of the two spelling systems. It seems to me a corruption of one or both languages. However, it can be permissible to mix Hawaiian words into an English sentence and vice versa, but I stop short of the "mixing" of the 'okina into non-Hawaiian words. The spelling of the possessive *Hawai'i's*, seems particularly strange. It looks funny to me, because the 'okina and the apostrophe are so close to each other, it reminds me of the yin-yang symbol.

The 'okina is also unique and weird, because despite being a letter in the Hawaiian language, it is never capitalized. But why should not the 'okina have a capitalized version? Why should not the 'okina be entitled to the same right and privilege of capitalization? just like every other Hawaiian letter?

With tongue firmly planted in cheek, I would like to make a contribution to the written Hawaiian language. I have devised a way to capitalize the 'okina. Capital letters are larger and usually taller than their lowercase counterparts, so I suggest using the number six symbol until a similar, but unique character can be designed for the uppercase 'okina. 'Okina capitalize my way, would thus be spelled *6okina*.

Ka Pau 'Ana