

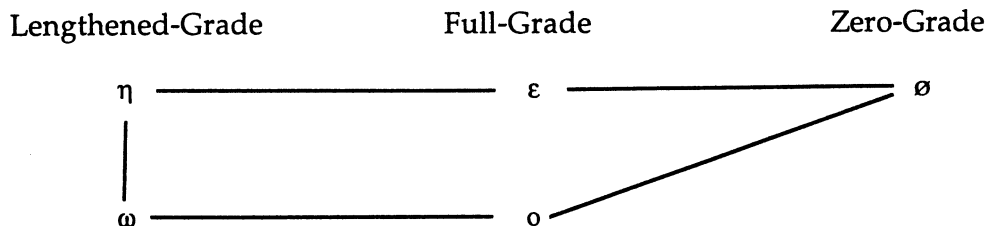
Introduction to Ablaut in Classical Greek

by
Rex Wallace
University of Massachusetts at Amherst

(1) In Classical Greek certain roots/stems and certain suffixes show regular alternations in both the quality and quantity of vowels. The suffix *-τερ-*, which is used in the formation of the noun *πατήρ* "father" and of the adjective *ἀπάτωρ* "fatherless," is a good example. Consider the forms of this suffix in the (partial) paradigms given below:

NOM SG	πατήρ	ἀπάτωρ
ACC SG	πατέρα	ἀπάτορα
GEN SG	πατρός	

These alternations in the quality (*-τηρ-*, *-τερ-* vs. *-τωρ-*, *-τορ-*) and in the quantity (*-τηρ-* vs. *-τερ-* vs. *-τρ-* [= absence of a vowel]) of vowels is known as ABLAUT (also called APOPHONY or VOWEL GRADATION). Schematically, the ablaut alternations in Classical Greek can be set up as follows:



For descriptive purposes, the e-vowel is considered to be the basic vowel in this set of alternations. Roots/stems and suffixes with this vowel (ε) are said to be in the full (or basic) e-grade (*-τερ-*). The other vowels that participate in ablaut are labelled as follows: ο = o-grade (*-τορ-*), η = lengthened e-grade (*-τηρ-*), ω = lengthened o-grade (*-τωρ-*), and ∅ = zero grade (*-τρ-*).

(2) As noted above, ablaut is found in both roots/stems and suffixes. An example of different ablaut grades in a root is provided by the Greek verbal root *φέρω* "bear, carry."

- φέρω* "bear, carry" → full e-grade
- φόρος* "tribute" → full o-grade
- δίφορος* "two-man chariot board" → zero-grade (root *-φρ-*)
- φώρα* "thief" → lengthened o-grade

(3) In Classical Greek ablaut functions as a grammatical device that helps to signal morphological information (categories) of nouns/adjectives and verbs. For example, the lengthened grade form of the suffix *-τηρ* in *πατήρ* is a signal for NOM case and SG number, as opposed to *-τερ-*, which is found in the VOC/ACC SG and NOM/ACC PL, and as opposed to *-τρ-*, which is found in the GEN/DAT SG and PL. In verb forms ablaut carries information about tense/aspect, person and number, and so forth. Ablaut differences in verb forms can be illustrated by the principal parts of the verb *λείπω* "leave." In the present tense/aspect (present system), this verb has the full e-grade *λείπ-*. In the aorist tense/aspect, we find the

zero-grade λιπ- (absence of -ε) and in the perfect active the o-grade λοιπ-. In Classical Greek verbs that show ablaut alternations, this is the regular pattern of vowel alternations, full e-grade in the present tense, zero grade in the aorist, and full o-grade in the perfect active.

Exercise 1

Identify the ablaut grades of the roots in the following words:

"fly"	πέτεσθαι	ποτή	πτέσθαι
"hold"	ἔχειν	ῥοχοί	σχεῖν
"persuade"	πείθειν	πέποιθα	πιθεῖν
"leave"	λείπειν	λέλοιπα	λιπεῖν
"flee"	φεύγειν		φυγεῖν
"be"	πέλομαι	πόλος	πλέσθαι
"family"	γένος	γόνος	γίγνομαι

Exercise 2

Make a list of five verbs in Greek that show ablaut alternations with the same pattern as found in λείπω.

(4) Verbal roots that end in liquids (e.g., φθερ- "destroy," στελ- "equip") or in nasals (τεμ- "cut," μεν- "wait for"), and verbal roots that contain the same (e.g., δερκ- "see," πενθ- "suffer"), show peculiar developments that may obscure ablaut grades. We noted that the thematic aorist formations generally have zero grade of the root, and we cited λείπω "leave" PRES vs. ἔλιπον AOR as an example. The verb δέρκομαι "see" forms a thematic aorist not unlike the two forms just cited. The theme vowel is added to the zero grade of the root. Following the rule of formation (zero grade of root + thematic vowel -ο- (for 1SG)) we would expect the 1SG AOR to be ἔ-δρκ-ο-ν since -δρκ- is zero grade of the root δερκ-. This is, in fact, precisely the formation that is found in Greek. The trick is that -ρ- between two consonants develops to either -ρα- or -αρ-, so that Greek ends up with a distinctive-looking zero grade form ἔδρακον, but it is zero grade nonetheless.

To take another example, the verb root τεν- "stretch" forms an adjective by adding a suffix -τό-, -τή- to the zero grade of the root. Following the rule of formation (zero grade of root + suffix -τό-/ -τή-), we would expect to find an adjective of the form *τντό-, *τντή-. Once again, this is precisely the form that Greek has, but -ν- between consonants develops to the vowel -α-, so that the zero grade form τατό-/τατή- is disguised, but it is zero grade just the same.

(5) The table below sets out the ablaut grades of roots with liquids and nasals:

	e-grade	o-grade	zero grade
δερκ-	δέρκομαι	δέδορκα	ἔδρακον
στελ-	στέλλω	στόλος	ἔσταλμαι
γεν-	γένος	γόνος	γίγνομαι γεγάμεν

Exercise 3

Determine the ablaut grade of the root in the following nouns and verbs. Provide meanings for the words that are not glossed:

βέλος τείνω "stretch"	βάλλω "throw" τόνος	βολή τέταμαι
--------------------------	------------------------	-----------------

πραθειν
πένθος "grief"
τόμος
μένω "wait for"

πέπορθα
πάθος
τέμω "cut"
μονή

πέρθω "destroy"
πέπονθα
μίμνω

Exercise 4

Determine the ablaut grade for the following roots and suffixes. Provide the meanings for the words that are not glossed:

φόνος "murder"
φθείρω "destroy"
τέτροφα
άνήρ "man"
τρόπος
δορά
νόστος "return"
φρένα "diaphragm"
έλεύσομαι "come, go"

έπεφνον
φθορά
τροφός
άνερ
έτραπον
δέρω "skin"
Νέστωρ
άφρονα
φρήν
ήλυθον

έφθαρμαι
τρέφω "nourish"
άνδρός
τρέπω "turn"
δαρτός
άσμενος
φρασί
άφρων
ειλήλουθα (Homeric)