Overview of the Thai Tone Rules

Every syllable of every Thai word has one of the five tones. Tone is determined by:

- The class of the initial consonant.
- Whether the vowel is long or short.
- The sound of the final consonant.
- The presence of a Thai tone mark.

You should know the consonants by class, the sound they make in both initial and final position, and the length and sound of all the vowels before you attempt to learn the tone rules.

We use the length of the vowel and the sound of the final consonant to determine whether a syllable is “dead” or “live”. A dead syllable has a sound that abrubtly stops, where the sound of a live syllable fades away slowly.

Dead syllables:

consonant + short vowel
consonant + short vowel + stop final
consonant + long vowel + stop final

Rule: Any syllable that ends in a short vowel or a stop final consonant is **dead.**

Live syllables:

consonant + long vowel
consonant + long vowel + sonorant final
consonant + short vowel + sonorant final

Rule: Any syllable that ends in a long vowel or a sonorant final consonant is **live.**

The Middle Class Consonants:

ก จ ฎ ฏ ด ต บ ป อ

The High Class Consonants:

ข ฃ ฉ ฐ ถ ผ ฝ ศ ษ
ส ห

The Low Class Consonants:

ค ฅ ฆ ง ช ซ ฌ ญ ฑ
ฒ ณ ท ธ น พ ฟ ภ ม
ย ร ล ว ฬ ฮ

The Short Vowels:

-ะ -ิ -ึ -ุ เ-ะ แ-ะ โ-ะ เ-าะ เ-อะ
เ-ียะ เ-ือะ -ัวะ ฤ

The Long Vowels:

-า -ี -ือ -ู เ- แ- โ- -อ เ-อ
เ-ีย เ-ือ -ัว -ำ ใ- ไ- เ-า ฤๅ

Sonorant Final Sounds:

น ม ง ย ว

aka n m ng y w

Stop Final Sounds:

ก ด บ aka k t p

There are 4 Tone Marks:

◌่	◌้	◌๊	◌๋
mái èk	mái toe	mái dtree	mái jàt-dtà-waa

When tone marks are used, they act as modifiers to the basic rules

Basic Rule when starting with Middle Class

Without a tone mark, there a two possible tones:

consonant + live syllable = mid tone
consonant + dead syllable = low tone

All five tones are possible when tone marks are used:

◌่	◌้	◌๊	◌๋
low	falling	high	rising

* rising tone ◌๋ is never used with dead syllables

Basic Rule when starting with High Class

Without a tone mark, there a two possible tones:

consonant + live syllable = rising tone
consonant + dead syllable = low tone

There are three tones possible and these marks can be used:

◌่	◌้
low	falling

Basic Rule when starting with Low Class

Without a tone mark, there a three possible tones:

consonant + live syllable = mid tone
consonant + (long) dead syllable = falling tone
consonant + (short) dead syllable = high tone

There are three tones possible and these marks can be used:

◌่	◌้
falling	high

With low consonants there are two types of dead syllables:
long vowel + stop final and **short vowel + stop final**

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