

ENGLISH PRONUNCIATION – VOWEL SOUNDS

As it happens in Spanish, the English language has five vowel letters (vocalic representations of sounds in writing), which are **a, e, i, o, u**. However, unlike Spanish, English has **12 different vowel sounds**. Which sounds are these? Let's check the following list, with a little explanation for each sound and some exercises to start practising them.

WARNING!! As I told you in class many times, there are not **RULES** to follow in order to state 100% sure the **correspondence between letters and their sounds, but there are certain patterns we can trust**. Spanish is a **phonetic language**, that is, when we see a new word written in Spanish, we know how to pronounce it, as it happens with German or Finnish, for example. However, English is a **non-phonetic language**, which means that when we see a new word written we do not really know how to pronounce because there is not a clear relationship between the spelling of a word and its pronunciation. But, as I said before, we'll try to find certain patterns that might help us.

In any case, it's good to know these patterns, but **in English the best way to know how a word is pronounced is to know that word**, because we can't always trust English rules of pronunciation.

So, these are the **VOWEL SOUNDS IN ENGLISH**:

/a:/ (long 'a'). This sound appears in words like arm, father, car, glass, bar, star.

- Quite common in monosyllabic words with a written 'a', and followed by an 'r': card, tart, Mars.
- Also common in stressed (*acentuadas*) syllables which have a written 'a' followed by an 'r': marble, guitar, pardon.
- However, there are words that do not follow any pattern and have this sound. In any case, they all use the written letter 'a': father, palm, heart.

/ʌ/ (short 'a'). It appears in words like young, run, cut, love, welcome, sun.

- It is habitual in monosyllabic words, represented by a written 'u': nuts, bus, hut.
- It is also common in stressed syllables, represented by a written 'u': butter, summer, Sunday.
- It can also be represented by a written 'o', but it's not so common: son, brother, London, come.
- It is common to be represented by the letters 'ou': double, country, touch, enough.
- Other words with this sound: blood, does, flood.

/æ/ (short). It's a mix between the 'a' and 'e' sounds in Spanish. It appears in words such as man, cat, ham, apple, map, than.

- It is quite common in monosyllabic words, represented by an 'a' letter, as long as this isn't followed by an 'r': bad, band, back, tax.
- Also habitual in stressed syllables with an 'a' letter, as long as this isn't followed by an 'r': family, happy, understand.
- There aren't exceptions in this case, this sound always follows these two patterns.

>>> PRACTICE 1: These words contain the above sounds (/a:/, /ʌ/, /æ/) . Which one each?

ankle · are · under · nothing · flat · heartache · happen · target · gun · thunder · money · wonderful · farmer ·

uphill · value · safari · matter · bat · argue · cousin · love · apart · calm · trouble · truck · tongue · won · bloody

/e/ (short 'e'). It appears in words like **ten, bed, pen, friend, head, bread.**

- Common in monosyllabic words, represented by an 'e' vowel, as long as it's not followed by an 'r': **egg, end, tell.**
- Also common in stressed syllables, represented by an 'e' vowel, as long as it's not followed by an 'r': **suggest, protect, expect.**
- It is also commonly represented by the letters 'ea': **head, ready, heavy, breakfast.**
- Others: **again, many, said, friend.**

/3:/ (larga; a mix between Spanish 'e' and 'u', very different from any Spanish vocalic sound). It appears in words like **girl, first, world, work, earth, church, perfect.**

As you can see, this vocalic sound happens when we have a vowel followed by an -r sound (except the 'a' vowel), in monosyllabic words, or stressed syllables:

- With "er": **nerve, person, were.**
- With "ear": **early, search, heard.**
- With "ur": **burn, murder, turn.**
- With "ir": **dirty, firm, thirty.**
- With 'or': **word, worse, worm.**
- Others: **journalist, entrepreneur, colonel.**

>>> PRACTICE 2: These words contain the above sounds (/e/, /3:/). Which one each?

Birmingham · worth · pearl · flirt · friendly · birthday · header · curly · respectful · pen · urgent · fern · journey ·

· instead · service · wet · determine · says · Thursday · leopard · learn · weather · thermal · leg · dead · yes ·

/i:/ (long). It appears in words like **these, need, please, cheese, sea, free.**

- It is common to see it represented by the vowel 'e' in stressed syllables: **even, appreciate, female, recent.**
- It is also common with the vowel 'e' when it's the final letter of monosyllabic words: **she, he, be.**
- With 'ea', in monosyllabic words and stressed syllables, not followed by '-r': **beach, reason, creature, leave, easy.**
- With 'ee' in monosyllabic words and stressed syllables, not followed by '-r': **agree, fifteen, see, street.**
- With 'ei' in monosyllabic words and stressed syllables, not followed by '-r': **receive, ceiling.**
- With 'ie' in monosyllabic words and stressed syllables, not followed by '-r': **achieve, believe, field.**
- Sometimes with 'i' in stressed syllables: **gasoline, machine, police.**
- Others: **key, people, ski.**

/ɪ/ (short). It appears in words such as **English, this, is, women, big, live.** It can appear in unstressed ("no acentuadas") syllables

- Commonly represented by 'i', as long as it isn't followed by an '-r': **hit, did, begin, little, different.**
- Also by 'y' when it goes between consonants: **crystal, typical, system.**
- Others: **England, pretty, busy, women, built.**

>>> PRACTICE 3: These words contain the above sounds (/i:/, /ɪ/). Which one each?

sequence · three · pit · stream · routine · reader · Englishman · piece · we · these · this · sympathy · sing · receipt · trip ·

keyring · magazine · bicycle · business · builder · will · belief · syllable · interest

/ɒ/ (short, open 'o'). A trick to pronounce this is to try to pronounce an 'o', but opening our mouth as if we pronounced an 'a'. It appears in words like **shop, dog, watch, hot, want, wrong**.

- It is most commonly represented by the letter 'o', normally in monosyllabic words, and in stressed syllables: **follow, shop, model, stop, obvious**.
- In a few cases, it can be represented by the letter 'a': **wash, wander, restaurant**.
- Exceptions: **knowledge**. (Unlike "know", which doesn't have this vowel sound but the diphthong /əʊ/.)

/ɔ:/ (long, closed 'o'). It appears in words like **abroad, water, tall, sport, horse, talk**.

- It is commonly represented with "aught/ought": **ought, thought, caught**
- with "al" / "all": **almost, chalk, ball, call**
- with "aw" / "au": **flaw, hawk, author, August**
- with "or": **door, horse, storm, story**
- with "oar" / "our" / "awer": **four, board, roar, drawer**.
- With "ar": **war, warm, quarter**.
- Exceptions: **water, broad, abroad**.

>>> **PRACTICE 4:** These words contain the above sounds (/ɒ/, /ɔ:/). Which one each?

forty · source · box · follow · tall · lot · taught · law · common · store · court · problem · sword · paw · contact · waterproof

· autumn · got · job · always · body · talk · not · hall · involve · bought · warn · follow · thaw · lot · bought

/u:/ (long). It appears in words such as **blue, shoe, moon, tooth, truth, school**.

- It can be represented with the letters 'oo': **cool, fool, Liverpool, boomerang**.
- Also with 'ou': **you, group, through**.
- With 'u': **June, rule, flu**.
- With 'ue/ui': **bruise, blue, fruit, true**.
- Sometimes in final 'o': **do, two**.
- With 'ew': **chew, crew**.
- With 'o': **improve, move, whose**.

/ʊ/ (short). In words like **put, look, book, foot, rook, full**. This sound is very uncommon in English. There are few words that have it:

- With 'oo': **took, cook, wood, good**.
- With 'o': **wolf, woman**.
- With 'ou': **could, would**.
- A few times with 'u', in monosyllabic and in stressed syllables: **bull, sugar, full, put**.

>>> **PRACTICE 5:** These words contain the above sounds (/u:/, /ʊ/). Which one each?

Moon · bamboo · bully · drew · shoe · pull · school · womanhood · shook · glue · who · sugary · youth · juice · too · should

· movie · boot · soup

/ə/ (called “schwa”). This is the **most common sound** in all varieties of English. It is so common, that it even has a name (“schwa”). It corresponds to most unstressed (“no acentuadas”) syllables, and it can substitute any of the five vowels, and also the ‘y’.

Important!! Together with the /ɪ/ sound, the ‘schwa’ is the only vowel sound that can appear in unstressed syllables.

How do we pronounce it? It’s like a little “golpe de voz”, something like “uh”, or a neuter vowel. But see the video to listen to examples of **/ə/**.

Check these examples, and see how the “schwa” **always appears in unstressed syllables**: *freedom, winter, woman, father, occasion, together, circus, martyr.*

>>> PRACTICE 6: The unstressed syllables of these words contain /ə/, or /ɪ/. Which one each?

(No os indico cuáles son las sílabas no acentuadas, tenéis que saberlo o buscarlo vosotros).

Japan · today · about · practice · women · suggest · practice · police · report · balloon · become · minute · salad · August

· woman · result · quarter · emotion · wonder · demand · reason · movie · recent · agree · nature

MORE PRACTICE:

- a) Put the following words into the correct box according to the underlined sound. Use a dictionary to help you:

St <u>e</u> am	H <u>e</u> art	Teach <u>e</u> r	Sle <u>e</u> p	P <u>o</u> or	W <u>o</u> od
C <u>o</u> ugh	Syst <u>e</u> m	Asl <u>e</u> ep	B <u>u</u> sy	Sa <u>i</u> d	Sa <u>w</u>
St <u>a</u> mp	T <u>u</u> rn	Fl <u>a</u> t	Sh <u>o</u> e	Sh <u>o</u> uld	Pat <u>h</u>
Fl <u>o</u> od	B <u>r</u> ead	Do <u>e</u> s	Fle <u>w</u>	Sh <u>i</u> rt	H <u>o</u> t

Sheep /i:/	Ship /ɪ/	Bed /e/	Bad /æ/	Father /a:/	Bird /ɜ:/
Pot /ɒ/	Caught /ɔ:/	Put /ʊ/	Boot /u:/	Cut /ʌ/	Camera /ə/

- b) Some ABAU questions regarding VOWEL PRONUNCIATION:

- Which one of the following words has the same vowel sound as the letter underlined in the word “church”:
terriers, warm, tourism, prefer.
- Write the word whose underlined letters are pronounced differently from the others: *country, could, foot, good.*

- c. In which one of the following words is the letter “u” silent (not pronounced)? *popular; building; survey; population.*
- d. Write the word whose underlined letters are pronounced differently from the others: *steel, previously, healthcare, believe.*
- e. In which one of the following words are/is the underlined letter(s) pronounced /b/ like the “o” in “hot”? *some, daughter, both, problems.*
- f. Which one of the following words has the same vowel sound as the letters underlined in the word “free”: *foreign, universities, least, finance.*
- g. Write the word whose underlined letters are pronounced differently from the others: *taught, support, foreign, abroad.*
- h. Write the word whose underlined letters are pronounced differently from the others: *learn, hurts, work, sort.*
- i. In which one of the following words is the letter “o” pronounced /ʌ/ as in “fun”: *brother, problem, romantically, told.*
- j. Which one of these words contains the sound /æ/ as in “fat”: *spanned, always, bar, one?*
- k. Which one of these words contains the sound / i: / as in “see”: *physical, injuries, detail, greatest?*
- l. Write the word whose underlined letters are pronounced differently from the rest: *won, following, not, potter.*
- m. In which word is the underlined letter (“a”) pronounced differently: *mayor, age, nature, danger?*
- n. Write the word whose underlined letters are pronounced differently: *food, fool, cook, boot.*
- o. In which word are the underlined letters pronounced /ɑ:/ as in “park”? *bare, are, care, fare.*