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English Phonics: Reading and Writing



Unit 2: Vowel sounds in English

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Unit 2: Vowel sounds in English

There are five vowels in English; a, e, i, o and u, but there are twelve vowel sounds! This, for many learners, is what makes English so difficult to pronounce, understand and spell. In this unit we will be looking at the twelve vowel sounds in standard English.

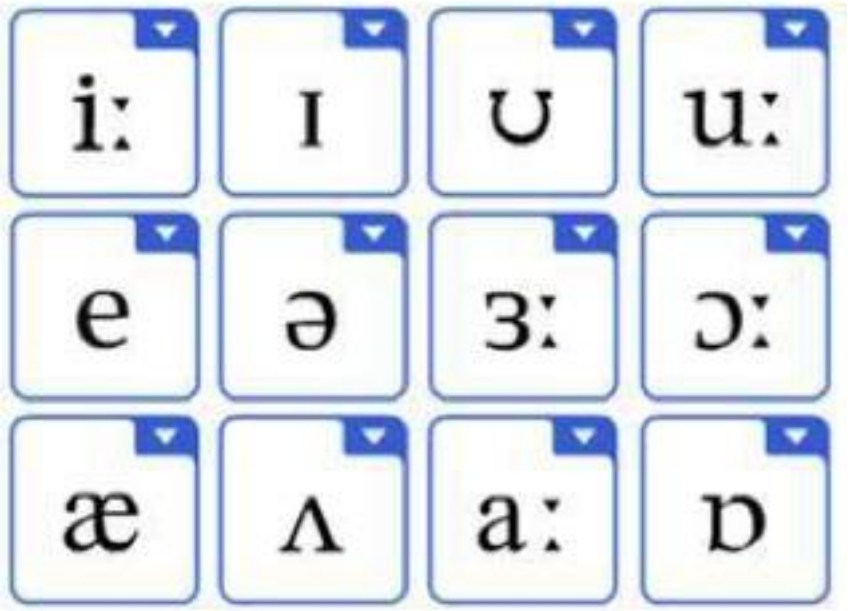
2.1. Conventions for writing transcriptions using the IPA

Many of the symbols used in the IPA, as we saw in Unit 1, are Latin letters. This means that they are easier to associate with sounds for speakers of languages that use the Latin alphabet. In fact, some of the symbols are already associated with specific sounds, especially the consonants. But this means that we need to mark clearly the beginning and end of a phonetic transcription so that it is not confused with general text. We show the beginning and end of a phonetic transcription by using the slash symbol: /. So a transcription will always begin and end with this symbol, for example:

/ wɪː ˊɔlweɪz jʊːz ə slæʃ ˊsɪmbəl tə bəˊgɪn ən end ə trænsˊkrɪpʃən /

We always use a slash symbol to begin and end a transcription.

Here are the twelve vowel symbols representing the sounds we will be looking at in this unit:



[source: https://freetalkwithforeigner.wordpress.com/2015/12/31/tip-hoc-tieng-anh-so-2-luyen-phat-am/]

2.2. The sounds and the symbols

2.2.1. / æ /

The / æ / sound is the sound made by the letter 'a' in many words, such as cat or apple. It is a short sound. To produce the sound, your mouth and lips should be open and your tongue at the bottom of your mouth.

Watch the video and practice saying the sound:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qF0DaO9FB8w

2.2.2. / e /

The / e / sound is made by the letter 'e' in words such as egg or bed. Like the / æ /, it is a short sound. To produce the sound, your mouth and lips should be open, but slightly less open than for the / æ /. Your tongue should be slightly nearer the roof of your moth too, although it is still at the bottom of your mouth.

Watch the video and practice saying the sound:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GPj2JrNuA14

2.2.3. / ɪː /

The / ɪː / is a long sound: notice the two dots after the symbol. As we saw in unit one, this tells us that the sound is long. It is the sound made by the letters 'e' in the word she, and by the letters 'ee' in sheep, and by 'ea' in sea. To make this sound your mouth should be more closed than for the / e / and your tongue should be closer to the roof of your mouth. Your lips should be apart, as if you are smiling.

Watch the video and practice saying the sound:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h-wdNRENfRw

2.2.4. / ʌ /

The / ʌ / is a short vowel. It is made by the letter 'u' in up and under, for example. To make this sound, your tongue should be at the bottom of your mouth, similar to the / æ / sound we saw in section 2.2.1. However, to make the / ʌ /, your lips should be a little closer together.

Watch the video and practice saying the sound:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JUVxRMQx4Xw

2.2.5. / ə /

The / ə / sound in English is the most common vowel sound. It is so common, in fact, that it has its own name: the schwa. It is found in the 'a' in above, in the 'er' in teacher, in the 'o' in the word of, the 'e' in the, and in many, many more. The fact that this sound is associated with so many letters is what makes it complicated for learners. Unlike many other vowels, the schwa is associated with an unstressed syllable rather than a specific letter or combination of letters. And it is a sound which is not found in many other languages, so for many learners, it is a sound they have to learn to make. To make this sound, the mouth is neither very open nor very closed, the tongue should be about half way between the bottom of the mouth and the roof of the mouth, and the lips in a neutral, relaxed position, neither very open nor very closed.

Watch the video and practice saying the sound:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R1EA3yFFsyE

2.2.6. / ɪ /

The / ɪ / is another short vowel sound. It is the sound made by the 'i' in bit and the 'E' in England. To make the sound, your tongue should be close to the roof of your mouth, similar to the / ɪː / sound in section 2.2.3. above. Your lips should be neutral, neither very wide nor very pursed.

Watch the video and practice saying the sound:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nPdof8AI3Tw

2.2.7. / ɑː /

The / ɑː / sound is a long vowel, as we can see from the two dots after the symbol. It is the sound made by the 'ar' in car or in party. To make the sound, your mouth should be open and your tonge down at the bottom of your mouth. Your lips should be open too.

Watch the video and practice saying the sound:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_k6kvYM_31c

2.2.8. / ʒː /

The / ʒː / is another difficult sound for learners. It is similar to the / ə /, but it is a long sound rather than a short sound. It is the sound made by the 'ear' in pearl, by the 'ir' in skirt, girl and first, and by the 'or' in work. As with the / ə /, to make this sound, the mouth is neither very open nor very closed, the tongue should be about half way between the bottom of the mouth and the roof of the mouth, and the lips in a neutral, relaxed position, neither very open nor very closed.

Watch the video and practice saying the sound:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hji8jdZDJi0

2.2.9. / ʊ /

The / ʊ / is a short sound. We find it in the 'u' of the word bull or the 'oo' of the words foot and look. To make the sound, the tongue should be close to the roof of the mouth, and the lips in a neutral position.

Watch the video and practice saying the sound:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_MCHk_eqwkY

2.2.10. / ɒ /

The / ɒ / is a short vowel sound. It is found in the 'o' of clock and orange. To make this sound, the tongue is down at the bottom of the mouth, but the lips are rounded rather than open.

Watch the video and practice saying the sound:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jGlLL7wzrNY

2.2.11. / ɔ: /

The /ɔ: / is similar to the / ɒ / above, but it is a long sound, and the tongue is slightly closer to the roof of the mouth, in a middle position. We find this sound in the 'or' of horse or born.

Watch the video and practice saying the sound:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D0ZLSg26KoU

2.2.12. / u: /

The last vowel sound in the / u: /. This sound is made with the tongue close to the roof of the mouth, and the lips rounded. We find this sound in the 'oe' of shoe, in the 'ue' of blue and in the 'ew' of new.

Watch the video and practice saying the sound:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vD0Ut4PxyDk

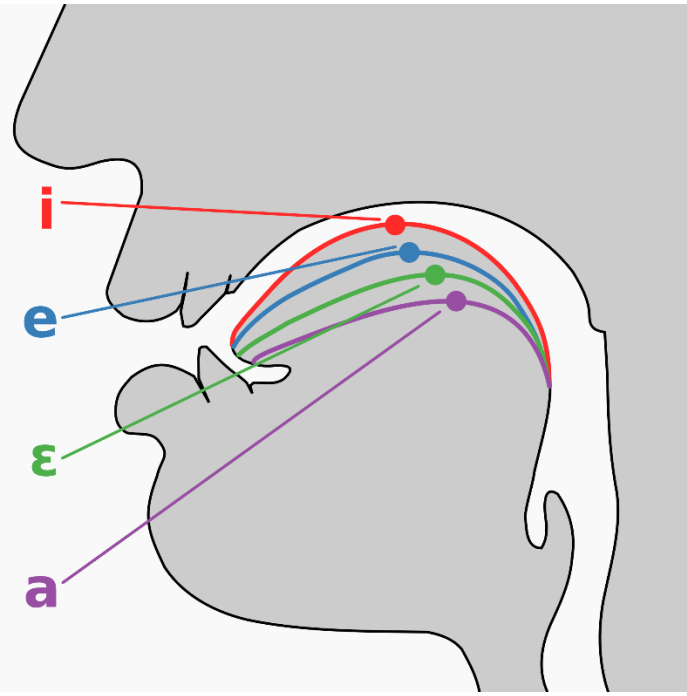
2.3 The arrangement of the vowel sounds on the Phonetic Chart

If you look carefully at the sounds described in section 2.2., you will see that there are two parts of the mouth which change position in order to make each sound; the tongue and the lips.

2.3.1. Tongue positions

The tongue has four positions; one at the bottom of the mouth, two in the middle of the mouth, and one close to the roof of the mouth, almost touching it. These positions are shown on the diagram below:

Vowel tongue positions

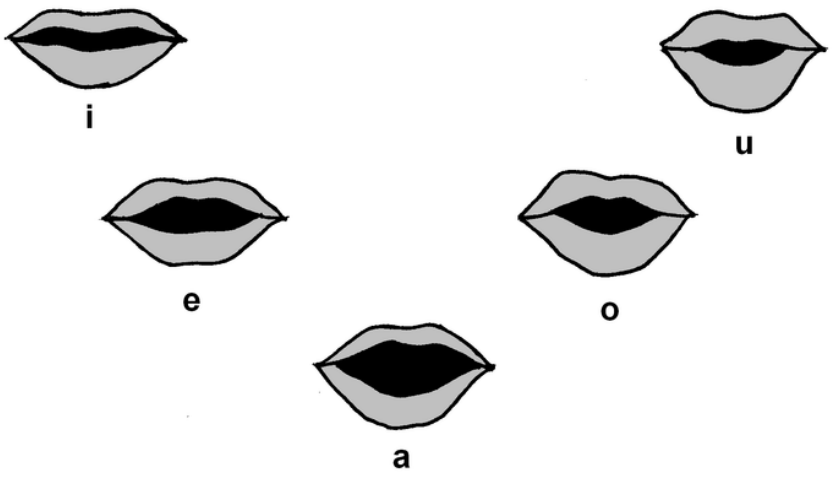


[Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Cardinal_vowel_tongue_position-front.png]

2.3.2. Lip positions

The other part of the mouth that changes position is the lips. The lips can be open, as if you were smiling, relaxed, in a neutral position, or rounded in a circular shape.

The positions of the lips for the main vowel sounds



[Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:CS_vowels_lips.PNG]

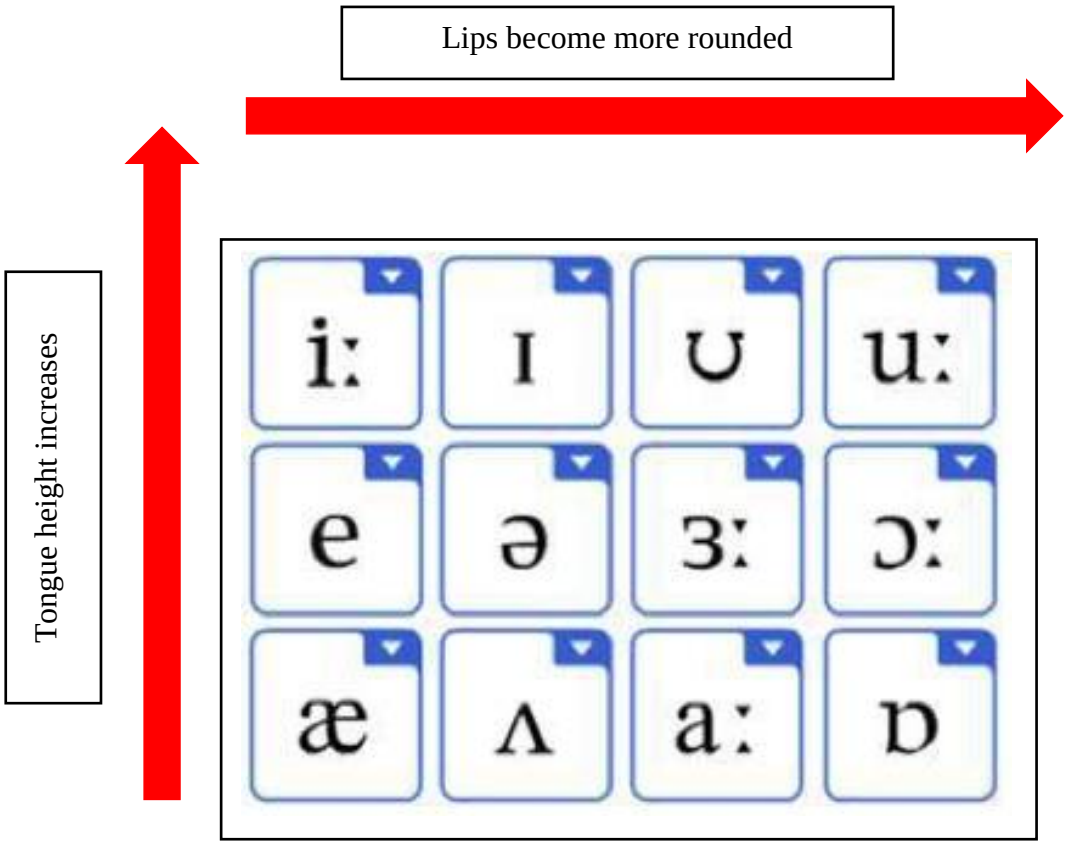
We can summarise the positions of the lips and mouth for each sound as follows:

Sound	Tongue height	Lip position (roundedness)
/æ /	Low (bottom of the mouth)	Very open, smiling
/ e /	middle	Very open, smiling
/ ɪː /	high (roof of the mouth)	Very open, smiling
/ ʌ /	Low (bottom of the mouth)	Slightly closed, slightly smiling
/ ə /	middle	Slightly closed, slightly smiling
/ ɪ /	high (roof of the mouth)	Slightly closed, slightly smiling
/ ɑː /	Low (bottom of the mouth)	slightly rounded
/ ʒː /	middle	slightly rounded
/ ʊ /	high (roof of the mouth)	slightly rounded
/ ɒ /	Low (bottom of the mouth)	very rounded
/ɔː /	middle	very rounded
/ uː /	high (roof of the mouth)	very rounded

2.3.3. Tongue, lips and the phonetic chart

If we look back at the arrangement of the vowels, we will notice that as we move from the bottom of the chart towards the top of each column, the tongue position moves closer to the roof of the mouth. At the same time, as we move from left to right along each row, the lips change from a very open, smiling position to a very rounded position.

The position of the symbols and their articulation



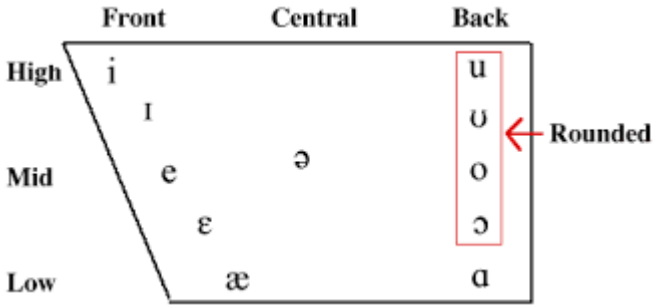
[source: https://freetalkwithforeigner.wordpress.com/2015/12/31/tip-hoc-tieng-anh-so-2-luyen-phat-am/]

2.4. Front vowels and back vowels

When we describe a vowel as a back vowel, we mean that the tongue is positioned towards the back of the mouth. A front vowel is, therefore, the opposite; the tongue is positioned to the front of the mouth. Vowels in which the tongue is neither far back nor far forward in the mouth are called central vowels. We can classify the vowel sounds in the following way:

Front vowels	Central vowels	Back vowels
/ɪ iː e ə ɜ æ /	/ə ʌ /	/ʊ uː ɑ ɔː /

Another graphic organiser that is often used to show the vowel sounds and their pronunciation is a quadrilateral, such as the one below:



[Source: https://msu.edu/~teamprog/vowels_intro.htm]

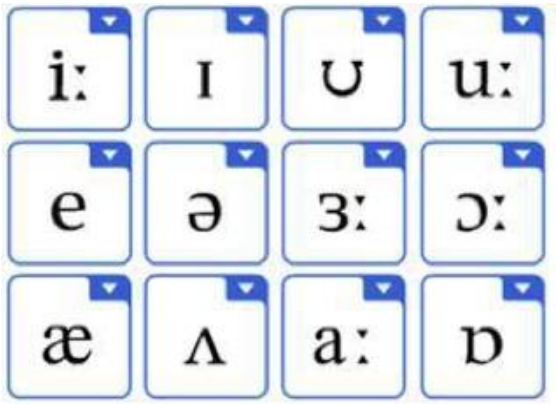
If you imagine this quadrilateral represents the inside of the mouth in profile, with the teeth on the left, the throat on the right and the roof of the mouth at the top, then you will see that the position of each symbol in the quadrilateral represents how far back it is produced; the symbols on the left represent back vowels, and the symbols on the right represent front vowels, while the symbol in the middle is a middle vowel. In addition, the height of the symbol in the quadrilateral represents the height of the tongue, so the vowels at the top are articulated with the tongue in a high position, while those at the bottom are produced with the tongue at the bottom of the mouth.

2.5 Why is it important to get it right?

It's important to get the vowel sounds right in English, because many English words have the same consonants but different vowel sounds, so if you mispronounce them, people will probably misunderstand you.

2.6. Unit summary

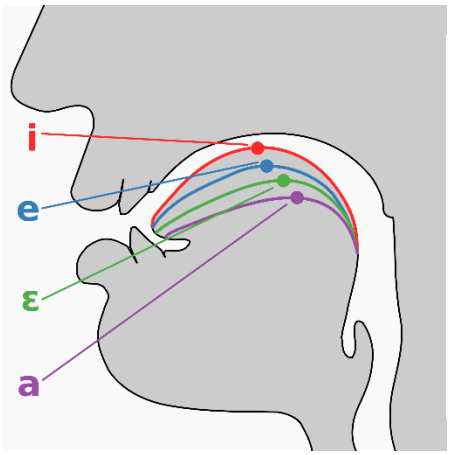
- We use a slash (/) to begin and end a phonetic transcription.
- There are five vowels in English, but there are twelve vowel sounds:

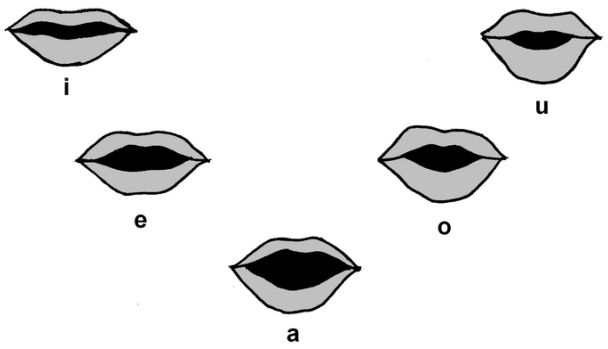


For example:

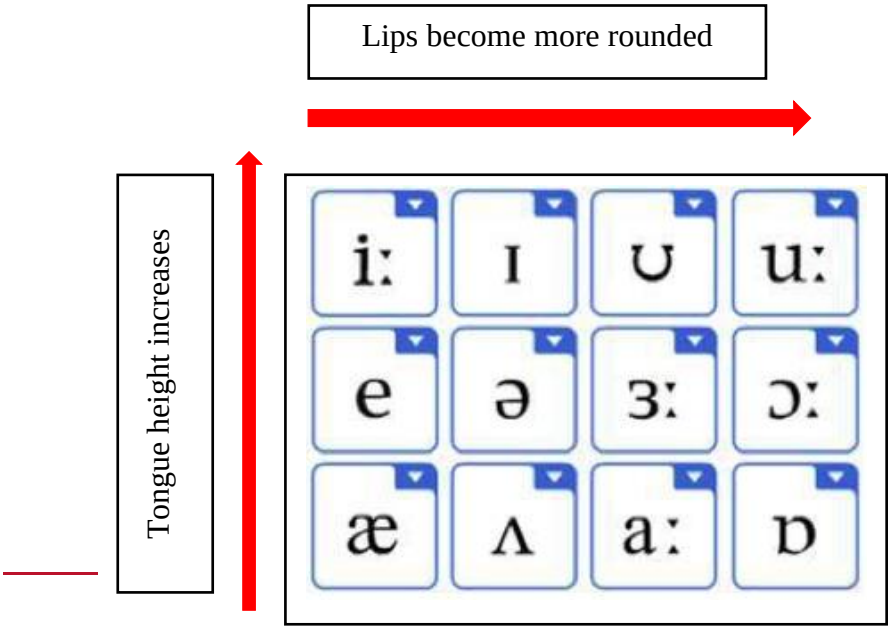
/ æ / cat
/ e / egg
/ iː / sheep
/ ʌ / up
/ ə / about
/ ɪ / fish
/ aː / car
/ ɜː / bird
/ ʊ / bull
/ ɒ / got
/ ɔː / horse
/ uː / you

Articulation: tongue and lip positions:





The position of the symbols and their articulation



Back vowels and front vowels

