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English Phonics: Reading and Writing



Unit 3: Diphthongs

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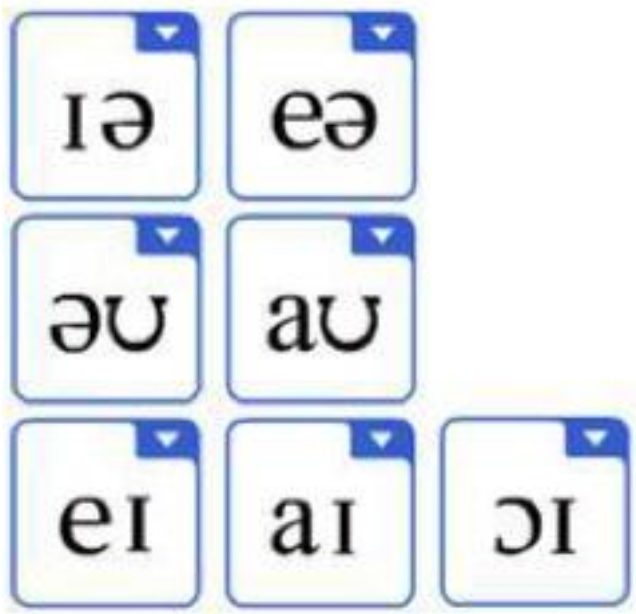
Unit 3: Diphthongs 3
3.1. What is a diphthong 3
3.2. The symbols and the sounds 3
3.2.1. / ɪə / 3
3.2.2. / eə / 4
3.2.3. / əʊ / 4
3.2.4. / aʊ / 4
3.2.5. / eɪ / 4
3.2.6. / aɪ / 5
3.2.7. / ɔɪ / 5
3.2.6. / aɪ / 5
3.2.8. Remembering the sounds 5
3.2.9. The disappearing / ʊə / sound 6
3.3 Digraph, hiatus or diphthong? 7
3.3.1. Digraphs 7
3.3.2. Hiatus 7
3.4. Unit summary 8

Unit 3: Diphthongs

3.1. What is a diphthong?

A diphthong is the name we give to two consecutive vowel sounds in a single syllable. There are seven diphthongs:



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

In this unit we will be looking at the seven diphthongs, and examining what type of diphthong each is. To write diphthongs, we combine two vowel syllables. The sound that results is a slide from one vowel sound to another. So as we say a diphthong, our mouth, lips and tongue will move in some way.

3.2 The symbols and the sounds

Let's look first at the sounds each symbol represents.

3.2.1. / ɪə /

The / ɪə / sound is the sound made by the 'e' in the word here or the 'ea' in fear. The sound begins with the lips unrounded and the tongue near to the roof of the mouth to make the / ɪ / sound. Then the tongue moves to a central position and the lips are neither rounded or unrounded, as in the / ə / sound.

Now watch the video and practise saying the sound:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GZ0gydCk-1g

3.2.2. / eə /

The / eə / sound is the sound made by the 'ai' in ai or the 'ea' in bear. To make this sound, the movement from the / e /, which is a low, unrounded vowel, to the / ə / which is a centre, unrounded vowel, is very slight. In fact, we can barely notice the movement at all. To make the / e /, our tongue is in a low position at the bottom of the mouth, and the lips are open, but not as open as for the / ɪ / sound. The / ə / is neutral in every sense; the tongue is placed in the middle of the mouth, and the lips are neither very open nor very rounded.

Now watch the video and practise saying the sound:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m3m8ksuuj98

3.2.3. / əʊ /

The diphthong / əʊ / is found in the 'o' of cold and the 'ow' of know. This sound begins with the neutral schwa sound / ə / and moves to a more rounded, high vowel sound / ʊ /. This sound is often difficult for learners to reproduce as the second vowel sound, the / ʊ / is a little longer than it would be if it were a single vowels sound on its own, but is not as long as the / uː /.

Now watch the video and practise saying the sound:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dYuEHHSi5JA

3.2.4. / aʊ /

The / aʊ / is the sound made by the 'ow' in now and brown. The sound starts with the lips wide open and the tongue at the bottom of the mouth. The tongue moves up towards the roof of the mouth, and the lips move from very unrounded to very rounded.

Now watch the video and practise saying the sound:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yZbk1oippQU

3.2.5. / eɪ /

This sound begins with the / e / sound, which is an unrounded sound in which the tongue is in the middle of the mouth. To produce the diphthong the tongue moves towards the roof of the mouth, but the lips remain open and unrounded to make the / ɪ / sound. We find this sound in the word place and in eight, for example.

Now watch the video and practise saying the sound:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=14Y3Ym5dHQo

3.2.6. / aɪ /

The / aɪ / also begins in an unrounded sound where the lips are open and unrounded; the / a /. However, unlike the / e / sound, the / a / is made with the tongue in a low position, at the bottom of the mouth. From this open, low position, the tongue moves towards the roof of the mouth, but the lips remain unrounded. The / aɪ / can be found in nice and in high.

Now watch the video and practise saying the sound:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Bl1tOp-6Yo

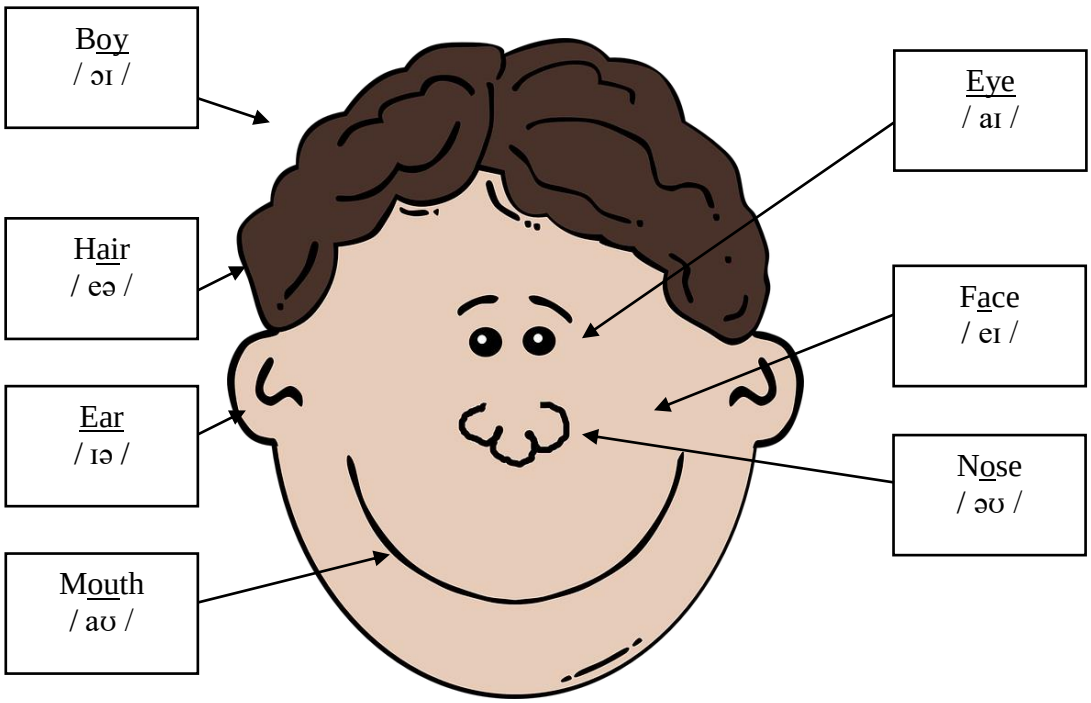
3.2.7. / ɔɪ /

The / ɔɪ / is the sound made by the 'oy' in words such as boy and toy, or by the 'oi' in noise. It starts with a rounded sound in which the tongue is low, the / ɔ /, and moves towards the / ɪ /, which is unrounded and high.

Now watch the video and practise saying the sound:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jj0xC-zymms

3.2.8. Remembering the sounds

One easy way to remember the seven diphthongs is to think of a picture of a face. Each diphthong is represented by a part of the face;



[Source: https://pixabay.com/en/boy-expression-happy-child-face-311484/]

3.2.9. The disappearing / ʊə / sound

In standard British English in the past, there was another diphthong; the / ʊə / sound. It was found in words such as pure and tourist. But recently the sound is more often pronounced as a / ɔː / and the / ʊə / is becoming less and less common. In some regional dialects, especially in the north of Britain, tourist is still pronounced as the diphthong / ʊə /.

Now watch the video and practice saying the sound:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5PqoKIgxD8c

3.3 Digraph, hiatus or diphthong?

3.3.1. Digraphs

In English, spelling can sometimes be confusing. Some diphthongs, as we have seen in the previous section, are represented by two written letters in a word, for example hair and mouth, but others can be represented by one vowel, such as nose and face. And sometimes single vowel sounds can be represented by two vowels in a word, such as cheap, pearl or look.

A digraph is a combination of two letters, either vowels or consonants, that represent one sound, such as in the examples of cheap, pearl and look above. Examples of consonant digraphs include the 'ch' in chocolate, the 'sh' in shop and the 'ph' in elephant and, of course, the 'th' of this or think.

So we can say that two letters in English doesn't necessarily correspond to two sounds. This can be tricky for learners, especially with vowel sounds because, as we have seen, vowel sounds don't correspond to one particular spelling pattern, but rather each vowel can be pronounced in a variety of different ways, depending on the word it is in. Learners often assume when they see two vowels together in a word that there will be a diphthong rather than a single vowel sound, or vice versa. In some cases, of course, they may be right. In others they won't. This can be confusing and frustrating as it seems completely illogical. We will look at some techniques for helping learners with vowel and diphthong pronunciation differences later on in the unit.

3.3.2. Hiatus

So we said a digraph is when two vowels (or consonants) represent a single sound. Hiatus, then, is when two vowel sounds are found together in a word, but belong to separate syllables. Think of the word 'cooperate' for example. If we break it down into syllables, we would get:

co – op – er – ate

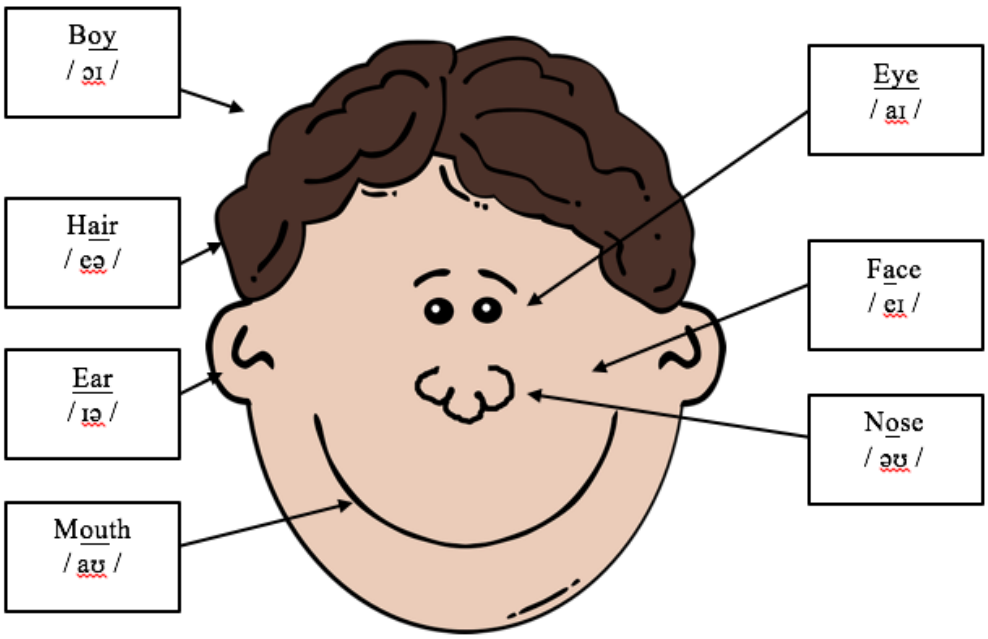
The first syllable ends in an 'o' and the second syllable begins with the same letter. But they don't merge to form a single sound, as they would if they were a digraph, nor to they make a diphthong, as diphthongs are two vowel sounds that form a single syllable. We call this phenomenon hiatus. We would transcribe this word in the following way:

/ riː. əlekt /

Notice the full stop between the / iː / and the / ə /. This helps us see that each sound should stand alone rather than becoming a diphthong. Other examples of hiatus can be found in words like re-elect and dialysis.

3.4. Unit summary

A diphthong is the name we give to two consecutive vowel sounds in a single syllable. There are seven (or eight) diphthongs:



- A digraph is a combination of two letters, either vowels or consonants, that represent one sound, such as in the examples of cheap, pearl and chocolate.

- Hiatus is when two vowel sounds are found together in a word but belong to separate syllables. For example; cooperate or reinvent.