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English Phonics: Reading and Writing



Unit 4: Consonants

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Unit 4: Consonants

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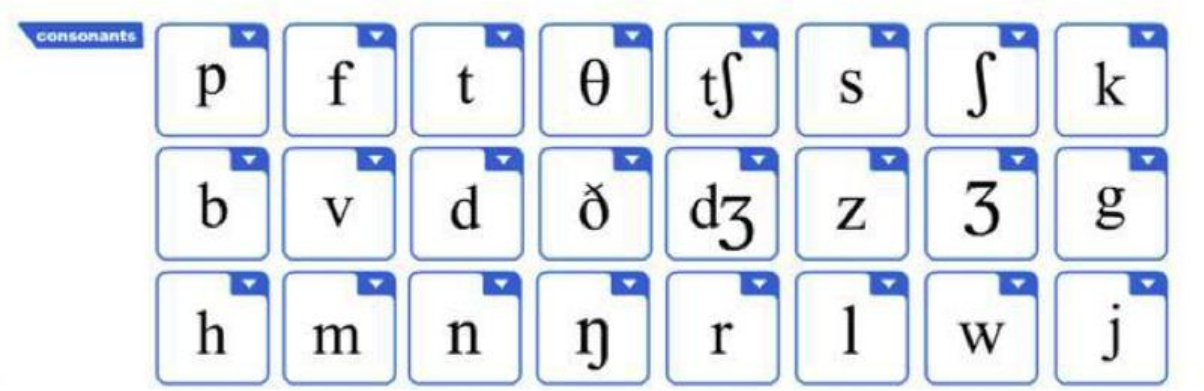
Unit 4: Consonants

4.1 Consonant sounds in English

There are 24 consonant sounds in English. Although many teachers spend a lot of time working on vowel sounds and diphthongs, learners who will be using English as a Lingua Franca (ELF), that is, English as a means of communicating with non-native speakers, often find that it is mispronunciation of consonant sounds rather than vowels and diphthongs that make others unintelligible. These days it is important to note that most communication in English for work or travel purposes is ELF rather than with native speakers. So it is likely that school children, once they become adults and begin to use English in real situations, will need to use and understand this particular variety of English more than British or American English regional accents.

The 24 consonant sounds in English



Let's begin by taking a look at each individual sound. You will notice that many of the consonant sounds are represented by a Latin letter and that the sound it represents corresponds to the sound that particular letter makes, or usually makes, in English. There are some sounds that are represented by other symbols, however, which are harder to guess.

4.1.1. / p /

The / p / is a labial plosive. It is made when both lips close together and air builds up behind the lips. The lips are then opened to release the air is a sudden, explosive blast. The / p / is unvoiced, as the sound is made by the release of air through the lips, as in the 'p' in page.

Watch the video and practice saying the sound:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o8WrKeiZKWI

4.1.2. / f /
The / f / is a labio-dental fricative. To make the sound, the bottom lip touches the top teeth, partially blocking the air as it is expelled. It is also unvoiced, and the sound is made by the air as it passes through the gap between the bottom lip and the upper teeth, as in the 'f' in fish.

Watch the video and practice saying the sound:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lP_xEHb8-xY

4.1.3. / t /
The / t / is an alveopalatal plosive. It is made by the two rows of teeth touching and the tip of the tongue behind the top row of teeth and raising the sides of the tongue so that the flow of air is blocked. The teeth are then separated to allow the air to escape. The / t / is voiced, which means that as well as the movement of the teeth, the larynx, or voice box, is used to make the sound, as in the 't' in today.

Watch the video and practice saying the sound:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VpzLzPpGDoE

4.1.4. / θ /
The / θ / is an interdental fricative. It is made by sticking the tip of the tongue between the teeth so that the tongue is touching both the top and the bottom row of teeth. The / θ / is unvoiced, so the sound is made as the air passes through the partially blocked space between the tongue and the teeth, as in the 'th' in think.

Watch the video and practice saying the sound:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sQ-O3o3TK1A

4.1.5. / tʃ /
The symbol for the / tʃ / is a combination of two other symbols; the / t / and the / ʃ /. This helps us remember what the sound is, although it is not exactly the same as the two sounds said one after the other. It is the sound made by the 'ch' in choose. We make the sound by placing the two rows of teeth together, and the tip of the tongue behind the top row of teeth and raising the sides of the tongue so that the flow of air is blocked, as if we were about to say / t /. The tip of the tongue then moves away from the top of the teeth to let the air pass through the closed teeth, and the lips are rounded. As the / tʃ / is unvoiced, the sound is made by the air as it is released when the tongue moves, and as it flows between the teeth.

Watch the video and practice saying the sound:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nqc4vNkouag

4.1.6. / s /
The / s / is an alveolar fricative made when the two rows of teeth touch, blocking the flow of air as it passes out of the mouth. The lips are open, and it is unvoiced, as in the 's' in see.

Watch the video and practice saying the sound:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dfl47sSFLI4

4.1.7. / ʃ /
As we have seen, the / ʃ / is an alveopalatal fricative. It is made by touching the two rows of teeth and expelling air through the gap between them, but unlike the / s /, the lip position is rounded and the tongue is raised behind the teeth to further block the air. It is unvoiced, as in the 'sh' in ship.

Watch the video and practice saying the sound:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O3s5iSXzvWY

4.1.8. / k /
The / k / is another unvoiced sound. To make this sound, the back of the tongue is raised so it touches the roof of the mouth, towards the back, and blocks the flow of air. The tongue is then moved down to allow the air to escape, causing a plosive sound, as in the 'k' in king, or the 'c' in cat.

Watch the video and practice saying the sound:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XB2_8GUO4t4

4.1.9. / b /
The / b / is very similar to the / p / because it is a labial plosive. It is made when both lips close together and air builds up behind the lips. The lips are then opened to release the air is a sudden, explosive blast. However, the / b / is voiced, as in the 'b' in boy.

Watch the video and practice saying the sound. As you practice, place your fingers on your neck, over your larynx, and see if you can feel the vibration:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eAok4xryJ-E

4.1.10. / v /
The / v / is similar to the / f /. It is a labio-dental fricative. To make the sound, the bottom lip touches the top teeth, partially blocking the air as is is expelled. However, the / v / is voiced as in the 'v' in very.

Watch the video and practice saying the sound. As you practice, place your fingers on your neck, over your larynx, and see if you can feel the vibration:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RYd1Qa0YirM

4.1.11. / d /
The / d / is similar to the / t /, which is an alveopalatal plosive. It is made by the two rows of teeth touching and the tip of the tongue behind the top row of teeth and raising the sides of

the tongue so that the flow of air is blocked. The teeth are then separated to allow the air to escape. The / d /, like the / v / and the / b / above, is voiced. We can hear this sound in the 'b' of bed.

Watch the video and practice saying the sound. As you practice, place your fingers on your neck, over your larynx, and see if you can feel the vibration:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eAok4xryJ-E

4.1.12. / ð /

The / ð /, like the / θ /, is an interdental fricative. It is made by sticking the tip of the tongue between the teeth so that the tongue is touching both the top and the bottom row of teeth. It is the voiced sound we hear in the 'th' of this. To hear the difference between / ð / and / θ /, place your fingers on your neck, above your larynx, and say *think* and then *this*. Can you feel the difference? Can you hear it too?

Watch the video and practice saying the sound. As you practice, place your fingers on your neck, over your larynx, and see if you can feel the vibration:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O_Wc00LH7xQ

4.1.13. / dʒ /

The / dʒ / is a difficult sound to make for learners of English. It is similar to the / tʃ /, but it is voiced. Again, the symbol is a combination of two other sounds, and this will help us remember which sound it represents. We make the sound by placing the two rows of teeth together, and the tip of the tongue behind the top row of teeth and raising the sides of the tongue so that the flow of air is blocked, as if we were about to say / d /. The tip of the tongue then moves away from the top of the teeth to let the air pass through the closed teeth, and the lips are rounded, and the larynx vibrates. It is the sound we make when we say the 'g' in Germany or the 'j' in juice.

Watch the video and practice saying the sound. As you practice, place your fingers on your neck, over your larynx, and see if you can feel the vibration:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=519mf5YT9tE

4.1.14. / z /

The / z / is the voiced / s /. It is an alveolar fricative made when the two rows of teeth touch, blocking the flow of air as it passes out of the mouth. The lips are open and the larynx vibrates. It is the sound we make when we say the 'z' in zoo or the 's' in toys. This is another sound that learners often struggle to hear and produce. You're your fingers over your larynx, practice saying *sip* and *zip* to hear the difference between the / s / and the / z /.

Watch the video and practice saying the sound. As you practice, place your fingers on your neck, over your larynx, and see if you can feel the vibration:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WQnvdk2AsDs

4.1.15. / ʒ /
The / ʒ / is another tricky sound to hear and make for learners of English. It is similar to the / ʃ /, which is an alveopalatal fricative. It is made by touching the two rows of teeth and expelling air through the gap between them with rounded lips. The tongue is raised behind the teeth to further block the air, and it is voiced so the larynx vibrates. It is the 'sio' in vision or the 'su' in measure.

Watch the video and practice saying the sound. As you practice, place your fingers on your neck, over your larynx, and see if you can feel the vibration:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oSxztVFiOV4

4.1.16. / g /
The / g / is similar to the / k / but it is a voiced sound. To make this sound, the back of the tongue is raised so it touches the roof of the mouth, towards the back, and blocks the flow of air. The tongue is then moved down to allow the air to escape, causing a plosive sound, such as in the 'g' of go or game.

Watch the video and practice saying the sound. As you practice, place your fingers on your neck, over your larynx, and see if you can feel the vibration:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q1FeUBu2gkE

4.1.17. / h /
The / h / is an aspirated semi-vowel sound. It is made with the mouth open, the tongue down and the lips unrounded. There is no blockage of air as it passes from the throat, through the mouth and out through the lips. Many learners of English tend not to sound this letter, but in Standard English it can be heard, although not strongly. It is the 'h' sound we hear when we say hand or help.

Watch the video and practice saying the sound:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=syU5dm80l5Q

4.1.18. / m /
The / m /, / n / and / ŋ / are all nasal sounds, which means they are produces using the nose instead of or as well as the mouth and throat. To make the / m /, we close the lips completely so that the air, to leave the throat, must pass through the nose. It is the sound the letter 'm' makes in more.

Watch the video and practice saying the sound:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lRaz1EZq9Q8

4.1.19. / n /

the second nasal sound is the / n /. In this sound, the air is blocked by the tongue as it touches the roof of the mouth, behind the teeth. Again, the air passes through the nose rather than the mouth as it flows from the throat. The / n / is the sound made by the ‘n’ in nose.

Watch the video and practice saying the sound:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6tqR3bJgAw0

4.1.20. / ŋ /
The third, and possibly the most complicated of the nasal consonants is the / ŋ /. To make this sound, the tongue blocks the flow of air, forcing it to pass through the nose, just as in the previous two sounds, but rather than raising the tip of the tong and the sides to the roof of the mouth, it is the back of the tongue which is raised. The air is blocked right at the back of the mouth. It is the sound made by the ‘ng’ in sing or the ‘n’ in think.

Watch the video and practice saying the sound:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4ifnqLO6oiQ
4.1.21. / r /
The / r / in English is a much softer sound than in other languages. It is important to note that the / r / sound varies greatly between different regional accents. To complicate things further, the pronunciation of the / r / varies according to its position in the word and the sounds that come immediately before or after it. In general, we can say that the / r / is a voiced approximant. The tongue is raised at the sides and the back but lowered in the middle and at the tip. However, there is no blockage of the flow of air; the tongue is positioned close to the roof of the mouth at the back, but it doesn’t touch it. In many words, the / r / is assimilated. This means it is not pronounced as a separate sound, but rather it affects the pronunciation of the sounds around it. Let’s look at some examples:

‘r’ as a voiced approximant: rate /reɪt/, rabbit /ræbɪt/, crib /krɪb/
Assimilated ‘r’: car /kaː/, teacher /tiːtʃə/

In the assimilated ‘r’, you will notice that there is no / r / in the phonetic transcription. This is because the letter ‘r’ doesn’t sound as an individual sound in these words.

Watch the video and practice saying the sound. As you practice, place your fingers on your neck, over your larynx, and see if you can feel the vibration:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-Zw_B4TROvM

4.1.22. / l /
To make the / l / sound, we raise the tip of the tongue until it rests lightly on the alveolar ridge, just behind the top row of teeth. It is a voiced sound, so you should feel your larynx vibrate if you place your fingers over it. The / l / is the sound made by the letter ‘l’ in lap or the ‘ll’ in call. Some learners struggle to hear and pronounce the difference between the / l / and the / r /. If you are having problems, you could try watching the following video which will help clarify how these two sounds differ:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rEZi3xaVGIg

Watch the video and practice saying the sound. As you practice, place your fingers on your neck, over your larynx, and see if you can feel the vibration:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1UXmQKXUzcQ

4.1.23. / w /
The / w /, like the / h /, is a semi-vowel. It is an approximant, which means two parts of your mouth with move closer to each other, but without touching. In this case, the lips are rounded at the start of the sound, as if you were going to make the / uː /. To make the / w /, the lips move apart towards a central / ə / sound. The / w / is a voiced sound, and it is the sound the letter 'w' makes in wind. Of course, this sound is not the diphthong / ʊə /, although it is similar. It is, however, much shorter than the diphthong.

Watch the video and practice saying the sound. As you practice, place your fingers on your neck, over your larynx, and see if you can feel the vibration:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H_RiNSxqi0w

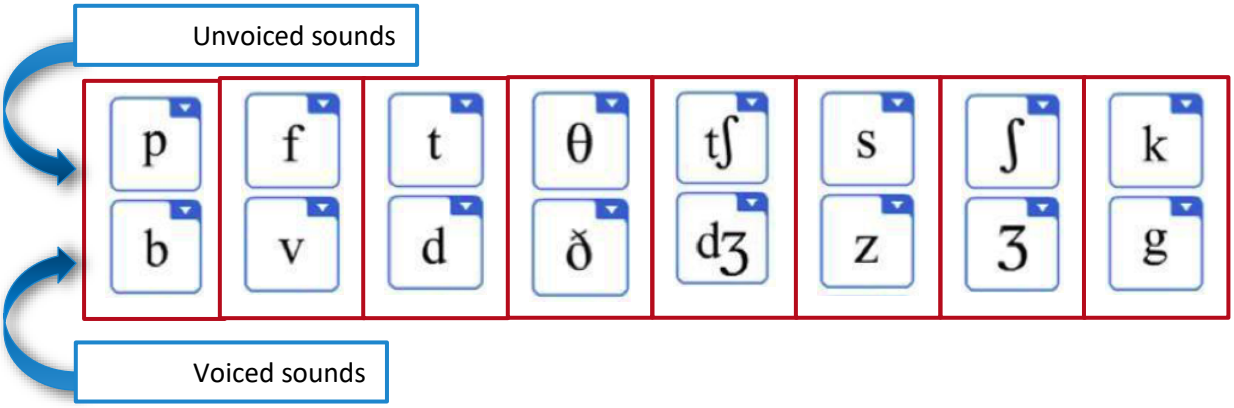
If you are not sure about the difference between the / w / and the / ʊə /, compare the pronunciation of the diphthong to the sound in the video above by re-watching the following video:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5PqoKIgxD8c

4.1.24. / j /
The / j / is a tricky sound to remember, simply because the symbol seems to represent the sound the letter 'j' makes. However, this is not the correct sound for this symbol. Instead, the / j / represents the 'y' in yes. We make the / j / by raising the tongue towards the roof of the mouth, but without touching it. As we make the sound, the tongue moves down and away from the roof of the mouth. Again, it is a voiced sound.

Watch the video and practice saying the sound. As you practice, place your fingers on your neck, over your larynx, and see if you can feel the vibration:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fWcW3QoOVfM

4.2. Voiced and unvoiced pairs

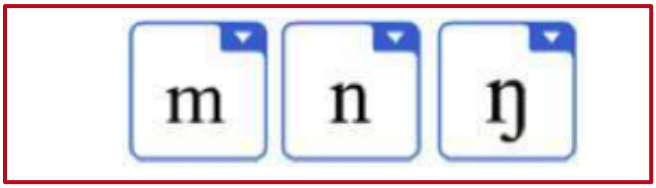
If we take another look at the layout of consonant section of the IPA chart, you will notice that the sounds are grouped together in a specific way:



So the only difference between the / p / and the / b /, for example, is that the / p / is unvoiced and the / b / is voiced. In all other aspects, they are the same sound.

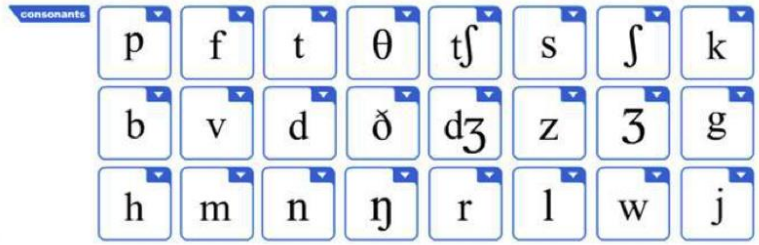
4.3. Nasal sounds

In the IPA chart, the nasal sounds are also grouped together. The only real difference between each of these sounds is the part of the mouth where the flow of air is blocked in each case.

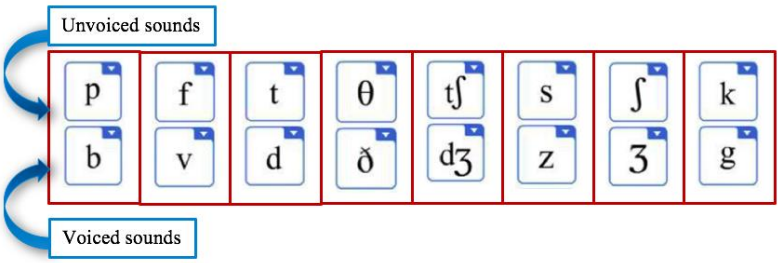


4.4. Unit Summary

There are 24 consonant sound in English:



The consonants can be grouped in the following way:



Consonant clusters are groups of two or more consonants that are not separated by a vowel. They can be difficult for learners to produce and should be practiced.