



FREE RESOURCE · PRONUNCIATION

# The British accent

There is no single British accent: Britain has many. The one used in dictionaries and most teaching is Received Pronunciation (RP), also called Standard Southern British English. It differs from General American mainly in the r sound, in vowels such as bath and hot, and in a few stresses. IELTS accepts any clear accent.

## What to know

### There is more than one British accent

People from London, Manchester, Glasgow, Cardiff, Liverpool and Newcastle all speak British English, and they sound very different. Britain has dozens of regional accents, and each has its own vowels, rhythm and intonation.

### What RP sounds like

RP is the model used in the Cambridge and Oxford dictionaries and in this series. It is the accent behind the IPA symbols you see on this site. Its main features are easy to hear once you know them.

### British and General American compared

General American (GA) is the accent most often heard in American films and news. The differences are small in number, but they affect many common words. The list below shows the ones that matter most for a learner.

- *car (British) /kɑ:/: no r at the end · car (American) /kɑ:r/: r at the end*
- *bath (British) /bɑ:θ/: long vowel · bath (American) /bæθ/: short vowel*
- *hot (British) /hɒt/: short and round · hot (American) /hɑ:t/: open and unrounded*

### The r sound is the biggest difference

Most American accents are rhotic: the r is always said, even at the end of a word. RP is non-rhotic: the r is only said before a vowel. So you say 'car' without an r, but you say the r when a vowel follows, as in 'far away', where it links the two words.

### Stress and word differences

A few words are stressed differently, or have a different number of syllables. Advertisement is /əd'vɜ:tɪsmənt/ in British English, with the stress on the second syllable, and often /ˌædvər'taɪzmənt/ in American English. Secretary is /'sekɹətri/ in British English and /'sekrəteri/ in American English. Missile ends in /aɪl/ in British English and in /l/ in American English.

### How to make the sound

1. For /ɑ:/ in bath: open the mouth wide, pull the tongue back and make it long.
2. For /ɒ/ in hot: open the mouth, round your lips a little and keep the sound short.
3. For /æ/ in an American bath: open wide with the tongue forward, which gives a brighter vowel.
4. For the non-rhotic r in car: stop at the vowel and do not curl the tongue.

## Exercises

1. How is *car* said in RP?
  - a. /kɑ:/, with no r sound at the end
  - b. /kɑ:r/, with an r sound at the end
2. Which vowel does RP use in *bath*?
  - a. /ɑ:/
  - b. /æ/
3. Which is the typical British pronunciation of *hot*?
  - a. /hɒt/
  - b. /hɑ:t/
4. In RP, when is the r in *far* said?
  - a. Never
  - b. When a vowel follows, as in far away
5. Which syllable is stressed in **advertisement**? ad · ver · tise · ment
6. For IELTS, your pronunciation needs to be \_\_\_\_\_.
  - a. easy to understand
  - b. exactly like RP
7. RP stands for Received \_\_\_\_\_. Write the missing word.
8. Which word has the same vowel in RP as *bath*?
  - a. car
  - b. hot
  - c. cat
9. What often happens to the /t/ in *water* in General American?
  - a. It becomes a glottal stop
  - b. It becomes a quick tap, like a soft d

*Listening items (1) are online only and are not included in this list.*

**Practise online, free:** hear every example and check your answers at [www.ielts-laboratory.co/free-resources/british-accent/practice/](http://www.ielts-laboratory.co/free-resources/british-accent/practice/)

**IELTS tip.** In the Speaking test, you do not need to sound British, only clear. Use the vowels, stress and rhythm of one model and be consistent. In the Listening test, expect a range of accents, so listen to short clips from speakers in Britain, Australia, New Zealand and North America.

FOR TEACHERS · PRONUNCIATION

# The British accent

|                  |                                                                                                                      |
|------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>AIM</b>       | Learners understand what RP is, can hear the main British and American differences, and choose one consistent model. |
| <b>TIME</b>      | 20 minutes                                                                                                           |
| <b>LEVEL</b>     | B1 to B2 (IELTS 5 to 6.5)                                                                                            |
| <b>MATERIALS</b> | This worksheet, one copy per learner; the free online practice for the audio                                         |

## Warm-up

Play two short clips (one British, one American) and ask learners what differences they notice, without naming the accents.

## Lesson steps

1. Present the four key RP features: non-rhotic r, long /ɑ:/ in bath words, /ɒ/ in hot and /əʊ/ in go.
2. Learners listen to word pairs and say whether each is British or American.
3. Drill the British forms in short phrases (a hot bath, a car park, go home).
4. Discuss the model choice: each learner decides which model they will use in the Speaking test and why.

## Extension

Learners listen to a regional British speaker and list three features that differ from RP.

## Answer key

1. a) /kɑ:/, with no r sound at the end. RP is non-rhotic, so the r is not said after a vowel at the end of a word.
2. a) /ɑ:/. RP has the long /ɑ:/ in *bath*. General American uses /æ/.
3. a) /hɒt/. RP uses the short, round /ɒ/. The American form is /hɑ:t/.
4. b) When a vowel follows, as in far away. RP is non-rhotic, but a linking r appears before a vowel: *far away* sounds like far-r-away.
5. ad**VER**tisement. British English stresses the second syllable: ad-**VER**-tise-ment.
6. a) easy to understand. IELTS asks you to be clear and understandable. It does not ask you to copy any native accent.
7. pronunciation. RP is Received Pronunciation, the accent of dictionaries and most teaching.
8. a) car. *Bath* and *car* both have the long /ɑ:/ in RP. *Cat* has /æ/ and *hot* has /ɒ/.
9. b) It becomes a quick tap, like a soft d. American speakers often say *water* with a tapped /r/ in the middle. British speakers use a clear /t/ or sometimes a glottal stop.

## Questions learners often ask

**What is RP?** Received Pronunciation is the accent used in dictionaries and most English teaching in Britain. It is also called Standard Southern British English.

**Do I need a British accent for IELTS?** No. IELTS asks you to be clear and easy to understand. You can use any accent, as long as it is consistent and clear.

**What is the main difference between British and American English?** The r sound. British RP does not say the r after a vowel in words like car, while General American does.

**Is it a problem to mix British and American features?** It is better to choose one model and stay with it, because mixing can produce vowels that fit neither accent. The meaning will usually still be clear.

## Sources

- Cruttenden, A. (2014). Gimson's Pronunciation of English (8th ed.). Routledge.
- Roach, P. (2009). English Phonetics and Phonology: A Practical Course (4th ed.). Cambridge University Press.
- Wells, J. C. (1982). Accents of English (vol. 1: An Introduction; vol. 2: The British Isles). Cambridge University Press.

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