



FREE RESOURCE · PRONUNCIATION

Dark L and clear L

English has two kinds of l. A clear l, as in light, is made before a vowel with the tongue front raised. A dark l, as in feel or milk, comes after a vowel or before a consonant, and the back of the tongue is pulled up and back while the tongue tip touches the ridge.

What to know

Clear l and dark l

The letter l is not always the same sound in British English. Listeners hear both as "l", but the two versions feel different in the mouth and sound different to a trained ear.

- *light · feel*
- *leaf · milk*
- *yellow · ball*

How to make a dark l

Start with a normal /l/: put the tip of your tongue on the ridge behind your top teeth. Now do something extra with the back of your tongue. Pull it up and back, as if you are going to say a very short 'oo' at the same time. Keep the tip where it is. Let air pass over the sides of the tongue.

- Tongue tip: touches the ridge behind the top teeth.
- Back of the tongue: pulled up and back for dark l.
- Lips: relaxed, not rounded too much.
- Voice: on. Your throat should vibrate.

Where you will hear it

Dark l appears in three main places. At the end of a word: ball, school, full, hotel, people. Before a consonant inside a word: milk, help, shelf, old, film. And in a final syllable with no real vowel, such as table, little, bottle, middle. In these words the l makes a syllable of its own.

Common problems

The first problem is making every l clear and bright, so that feel and ball sound too light. The second is adding a small vowel after the l, so that feel sounds like 'fee-luh'. The third is dropping the l, so that milk becomes 'mick' and help becomes 'hep'. The fourth is replacing the l with r or with a vowel, so that people sounds like 'peepo'.

Short practice routine

Take a handful of words with a final dark l and practise them in pairs with a vowel after the l. Say 'feel' and then 'feel it'. In the second, the l is followed by a vowel and moves forward to become a clear l, as in 'fee-lit'. This is a normal pattern in English, and practising both helps you notice the shift.

How to make the sound

1. Put the tip of your tongue on the ridge behind your top teeth and keep it there.
2. For a dark l, pull the back of your tongue up and back, as if a short 'oo' is mixed in.

3. Let air and voice pass over the sides of the tongue, then stop without adding a vowel.

Exercises

1. In which word is the l a clear l, made before a vowel?
 - a. milk
 - b. light
 - c. feel
2. Which word contains a dark l before a consonant?
 - a. milk
 - b. lamp
 - c. yellow
3. The l in *yellow* comes before a vowel, so it is _____.
 - a. clear
 - b. silent
 - c. dark
4. What does the back of the tongue do for a dark l?
 - a. It moves forward to the teeth
 - b. It stays flat and relaxed
 - c. It pulls up and back
5. Find the mistake and write the right form: (1) For a dark l, (2) the tongue tip touches the ridge (3) and the back of the tongue (4) stays low and flat.
6. Write the word with a dark l at the end that is the opposite of *empty*.
7. Which word has a dark l in the final syllable with no real vowel?
 - a. listen
 - b. little
 - c. light
8. In some British accents, the word _____ can sound close to 'miwk'.
 - a. milk
 - b. mist
 - c. mink

Listening items (2) 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/dark-l/practice/

IELTS tip. In the Speaking test, a missing or very light final l can make words such as feel, film and people less clear, especially when you speak fast. Practise three or four words that you use often in IELTS topics, such as people, school and problem, and record them to check the final l. You do not need to copy a particular accent, only to keep the l present and steady.

FOR TEACHERS · PRONUNCIATION

Dark L and clear L

AIM	Learners will tell clear l and dark l apart and make a heavier l at the end of words and before consonants.
TIME	20 minutes
LEVEL	B1 to B2 (IELTS 5 to 6.5)
MATERIALS	This worksheet, one copy per learner; the free online practice for the audio

Warm-up

Say 'leaf' and 'feel' and ask learners to feel whether the back of their tongue moves in each word.

Lesson steps

1. Demonstrate the two kinds of l with a side-view drawing. Show the back of the tongue lifting for dark l.
2. Drill word pairs: lee/eel, light/fall. Learners say each pair and note where the tongue feels different.
3. Sort a list of words into clear l and dark l and check the answers together.
4. Short phrases: 'a cold hotel', 'a small bill'. Learners record and listen for a final l that is not dropped.

Extension

Practise syllabic l in table, bottle and little, and compare with the clear l in 'bottle it'.

Answer key

1. b) light. In light, the l comes before a vowel, so it is clear. In milk and feel, the l follows a vowel or comes before a consonant, so it is dark.
2. a) milk. In milk, the l is followed by the consonant k, so it is dark. Lamp and yellow have a clear l before a vowel.
3. a) clear. Before a vowel, the English l is clear. The tongue front is raised and the sound is bright.
4. c) It pulls up and back. The extra movement of the back of the tongue is what makes the l dark.
5. Part 4: *stays low and flat*. → **pulls up and back**. The raised back of the tongue is the feature that makes a dark l different from a clear l.
6. full. Full ends in a dark l: /fʊl/.
7. b) little. In little, the final syllable is a dark l on its own. Listen and light have only a clear l at the start of the word.
8. a) milk. Milk has a dark l before k, and in some accents this l can sound like a short /w/ or /ʊ/ sound.

Questions learners often ask

What is a dark l? It is the l sound you hear after a vowel or before a consonant, as in feel or milk. The tongue tip touches the ridge and the back of the tongue is pulled up and back.

What is the difference between clear l and dark l? A clear l is bright and comes before a vowel, as in light. A dark l is heavier and comes after a vowel or before a consonant, as in feel or milk.

Do I have to use a dark l in IELTS? You do not need to copy a perfect accent. You do need an l that is present and clear. A light or missing l at the end of words can make speech harder to understand.

Does the l change when a vowel follows? Yes. In 'feel it', the l is followed by a vowel and moves forward, so it sounds clearer. This is a normal pattern in English.

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.

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