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Diphthongs

A diphthong is one vowel sound that glides from one position to another within a single syllable, as in say, go and price. British English has eight: /eɪ/, /aɪ/, /ɔɪ/, /əʊ/, /aʊ/, /ɪə/, /eə/ and /ʊə/. The first part is stronger and longer, and the second part is short and light.

What to know

What is a diphthong?

Short and long vowels are pure vowels: the tongue stays still. A diphthong is different. The tongue and lips start in one place and move towards another while you say the sound. It is one syllable, not two.

The eight British English diphthongs

There are two groups. The first five end in a closing movement towards /ɪ/ or /ʊ/. The last three end in a movement towards the weak vowel /ə/ and are called centring diphthongs.

- /eɪ/ as in face: say, day, wait, eight
- /aɪ/ as in price: time, my, high, buy
- /ɔɪ/ as in choice: boy, enjoy, noise, toy
- /əʊ/ as in goat: go, home, know, phone
- /aʊ/ as in mouth: now, house, town, down

How the glide works

In each diphthong, the first part is the strong part. It is longer and louder. The second part is short and light, and it often does not reach the target position. So /aɪ/ is not a clear 'ah' then a clear 'ee'. It is a strong 'ah' that slides a short way up.

The centring diphthongs

The three centring diphthongs finish with /ə/. /ɪə/ is in here, near and idea. /eə/ is in there, care and share. /ʊə/ is in tour and pure, but it is becoming rare. Many British speakers now say /ɔ:/ in words like sure, and some say /tɔ:/ for tour. So you may use /ɔ:/ in sure and sound quite natural.

Common mistakes

The most common mistake is replacing a diphthong with a pure vowel. Learners say 'go' as /go/ and 'say' as /se/. In British English, these have a glide, and the pure vowel can sound foreign. The reverse also happens: some learners add a long, clear second part and make two syllables, so that 'my' sounds like 'my-ee'.

How to make the sound

1. Start the vowel in the first position, with a clear, strong sound.
2. Move your tongue and lips smoothly towards the second position while the sound continues.
3. Make the second part short and light, and keep it all in one syllable.
4. Say price, mouth and goat slowly, then at normal speed, and watch your mouth in a mirror.

Exercises

1. Which word has the diphthong /aɪ/?
 - a. boat
 - b. bit
 - c. bite
2. Which of these does NOT have a diphthong?
 - a. price
 - b. face
 - c. fleece
3. Find the mistake and write the right form: (1) A diphthong is (2) one vowel sound (3) made of two parts (4) that stay perfectly still.
4. In *boy* the vowel glides to /ɪ/, so the word rhymes with _____.
 - a. tow
 - b. toy
 - c. tea
5. Write the word with the diphthong /əʊ/ that means the opposite of *stop*.
6. Which word has the diphthong /aʊ/, as in mouth?
 - a. town
 - b. ton
 - c. toe
7. Which part of a diphthong is stronger and longer?
 - a. The second part
 - b. The first part
 - c. Both are equal

Listening items (3) 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/diphthongs/practice/

IELTS tip. In the Speaking test, diphthongs fill many of the most common words: my, now, go, make, home, time and know. A clear glide makes these words easier to recognise. Practise a short answer that includes ten diphthong words, and record it to check that each one slides and stays in one syllable.

FOR TEACHERS · PRONUNCIATION

Diphthongs

AIM	Learners will produce the eight British English diphthongs as smooth glides in one syllable and separate them from short vowels.
TIME	25 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 'go' very slowly and ask learners to notice how their lips move. Then say it again with a pure vowel and ask which sounds more English.

Lesson steps

1. Introduce the eight diphthongs with their key words and show the direction of the glide with arrows on the board.
2. Slow motion: learners say each diphthong in slow motion with a mirror, then at normal speed.
3. Contrast pairs: bet/bait, cot/coat, bit/bite, pen/pain. Learners listen, point and then say them.
4. Short phrases and a Part 1 answer using words such as my, now, go and home, recorded for review.

Extension

Discuss the centring diphthongs and why many speakers now use /ɔ:/ instead of /ʊə/.

Answer key

1. c) bite. Bite is /baɪ/. Bit has the short vowel /ɪ/ and boat has the diphthong /əʊ/.
2. c) fleece. Fleece has the long pure vowel /i:/ . Face has /eɪ/ and price has /aɪ/.
3. Part 4: *that stay perfectly still.* → **that glide from one to the other.** A diphthong glides from one position to another within one syllable.
4. b) toy. Boy and toy both have /ɔɪ/. Tea has /i:/ and tow has /əʊ/.
5. go. Go is /gəʊ/. Many learners say a pure /o/ here, but British English has a glide.
6. a) town. Town is /taʊn/. Ton has the short vowel /ʌ/ and toe has /əʊ/.
7. b) The first part. The first part carries the strength. The second part is short and light, and it often does not reach its target.

Questions learners often ask

What is a diphthong? It is a vowel sound that glides from one vowel position to another within one syllable, as in price, go and mouth.

How many diphthongs are there in English? In British English there are eight: /eɪ/, /aɪ/, /ɔɪ/, /əʊ/, /aʊ/, /ɪə/, /eə/ and /ʊə/. Some speakers use /ɔ:/ instead of /ʊə/ in some words.

Is a diphthong two vowels? It is written with two symbols, but it is one sound and one syllable. The two parts blend into a single glide.

Do all English accents have the same diphthongs? No. Accents differ. In this course we use standard British English, and in some other accents the sounds in words like face and goat are pure vowels.

Sources

- Roach, P. (2009). English Phonetics and Phonology: A Practical Course (4th ed.). Cambridge University Press.
- Cruttenden, A. (2014). Gimson's Pronunciation of English (8th ed.). Routledge.

Written by Will Salisbury · IELTS Laboratory · ielts-laboratory.co/free-resources/diphthongs · Free to copy for classroom use.