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English vowel sounds

British English has 20 vowel sounds, although it has only five vowel letters. Twelve are single, steady sounds (seven short and five long) and eight are diphthongs, which glide from one sound to another, like /aɪ/ in five. Each one has a symbol and a key word.

What to know

Twenty sounds from five letters

The letters a, e, i, o and u are not the vowel sounds. They are only spellings, and they stand for many different sounds. The letter a is a different sound in cat, car, cake, about and water.

The 12 pure vowels

A pure vowel keeps the same shape for the whole sound. Seven are short and five are long. The long ones have a colon (:) after the symbol.

- /ɪ/ short: ship, sit, big.
- /e/ short: bed, ten, men.
- /æ/ short: cat, bad, hat.
- /ʌ/ short: cup, bus, love.
- /ɒ/ short: hot, dog, stop.

The 8 diphthongs

A diphthong starts at one vowel and glides to another inside the same syllable. You hear two parts, but they are one sound. The first part is longer and stronger, and the second is quick and light.

- /eɪ/: day, make, rain.
- /aɪ/: five, my, time.
- /ɔɪ/: boy, noise, enjoy.
- /əʊ/: go, home, phone.
- /aʊ/: now, house, town.

How vowels are different from each other

Vowels differ in four ways. The first is how high the tongue is: high for /i:/ in sheep, low for /æ/ in cat. The second is how far forward it is: forward for /i:/, back for /u:/ in food. The third is whether the lips are rounded, as for /u:/, or spread, as for /i:/. The fourth is length: /i:/ is longer than /ɪ/.

Length changes with the next sound

Vowel length is not fixed. The same vowel is longer before a voiced consonant than before a voiceless one. So the vowel in seed is longer than the vowel in seat, and the vowel in bed is longer than the vowel in bet.

How to make the sound

1. For /i:/ (sheep): lips spread, tongue high and forward, jaw almost closed. Hold it a little longer.
2. For /ɪ/ (ship): relax the lips and jaw slightly. Make it short.

3. For /æ/ (cat): open the jaw wide and keep the tongue low at the front.
4. For /ɑ:/ (car): open wide, but pull the tongue back and make it long.

Exercises

1. How many vowel sounds are there in standard British English, including diphthongs?
 - a. 20
 - b. 12
 - c. 5
2. Which word has a diphthong?
 - a. boy
 - b. bed
 - c. book
3. Which word has a long vowel?
 - a. sheep
 - b. shop
 - c. ship
4. *Cup* has the vowel /ʌ/. *Cap* has the vowel _____.
 - a. /ɑ:/
 - b. /æ/
5. How many vowel sounds (not letters) are in *boat*? Write a number.
6. Which word has the same vowel sound as *food*?
 - a. blue
 - b. book
 - c. good
7. Which pair has the same vowel sound?
 - a. learn and bear
 - b. learn and bird
 - c. bird and bad
8. What does the colon in /i:/ show?
 - a. The vowel is stressed
 - b. The vowel is long

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/english-vowel-sounds/practice/

IELTS tip. Vowel sounds make the difference between many pairs of words you will use, such as live and leave, sit and seat, and full and fool. In Speaking, a listener who cannot tell two words apart has to guess from context. Practise the pairs that your first language does not have.

FOR TEACHERS · PRONUNCIATION

English vowel sounds

AIM	Learners name and produce the 20 British English vowels using key words and identify the contrasts that matter for their first language.
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

Write cat, car, cake, about and water on the board. Ask how many different sounds the letter a represents.

Lesson steps

1. Introduce the three groups: short pure, long pure and diphthongs, with one key word each.
2. Learners match twelve words to their vowel symbols in a short exercise.
3. Drill the three main contrasts for the class (length, front and back, open and close) with minimal pairs.
4. In pairs, learners say one word of a pair from a hidden card while the partner says which word was said.

Extension

Learners find the vowel sounds in a sentence from a Reading passage by looking up the IPA.

Answer key

1. a) 20. There are 12 pure vowels and 8 diphthongs, which makes 20. The five letters a, e, i, o and u are only spellings.
2. a) boy. *Boy* has /ɔɪ/, which glides from one vowel to another. *Bed* has /e/ and *book* has /ʊ/, both pure vowels.
3. a) sheep. *Sheep* has /i:/, a long vowel. *Ship* has /ɪ/ and *shop* has /ɒ/, both short.
4. b) /æ/. *Cap* has /æ/, as in *cat*. The long vowel /ɑ:/ is in *car* and *cart*.
5. 1. *Boat* is /bəʊt/: one vowel sound, the diphthong /əʊ/. It has two vowel letters but only one vowel sound.
6. a) blue. *Food* and *blue* both have the long /u:/. *Book* and *good* have the short /ʊ/.
7. b) learn and bird. *Learn* and *bird* both have /ɜ:/. *Bear* has the diphthong /eə/ and *bad* has /æ/.
8. b) The vowel is long. The colon : shows length. Stress is shown by a different mark, ' , in front of a syllable.

Questions learners often ask

How many vowel sounds are in English? British English has 20: 12 pure vowels and 8 diphthongs. Other accents of English use a different number.

What is the difference between a vowel letter and a vowel sound? Letters are the written symbols a, e, i, o and u. Sounds are what you say, and there are more of them than letters.

What is a diphthong? A vowel that glides from one sound to another in a single syllable, such as /aɪ/ in five.

Which vowel is the most important to learn first? Start with the pairs your language does not have, because they change the meaning of words, such as ship and sheep.

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/english-vowel-sounds · Free to copy for classroom use.