



FREE RESOURCE · PRONUNCIATION

Long and short vowels

Short vowels are quick sounds, like /ɪ/ in ship, and long vowels are held longer, like /i:/ in sheep. In British English the pairs also differ in mouth shape, not just length. Spelling can mislead you, because the letters called long and short in spelling lessons are not the same as the sounds.

What to know

Two meanings of 'long' and 'short'

The words long and short are used in two ways, and they can confuse learners. In spelling lessons, a 'long a' is the sound in cake, and a 'short a' is the sound in cat. In that sense, a 'long' vowel is the letter said as its name.

The five pairs to know

In British English, the main long and short pairs are listed below. Say each pair slowly and listen for the mouth shape and for the length.

- /ɪ/ and /i:/: ship and sheep, bit and beat, live and leave.
- /ʊ/ and /u:/: full and fool, pull and pool, look and Luke.
- /ɒ/ and /ɔ:/: cot and caught, pot and port, shot and short.
- /ʌ/ and /ɑ:/: cut and cart, luck and lark, hut and heart.
- A quality contrast worth practising too: /e/ and /ɜ:/ (bed and bird, ten and turn, fed and fur).

Length is not the only difference

If you try to say sheep by stretching the vowel of ship, you will probably still hear the old vowel. The vowels have different shapes. For /i:/ your tongue is higher and tighter, and your lips are spread. For /ɪ/ your tongue is lower and more relaxed, and the lips are neutral. Similarly, /u:/ has tightly rounded lips, and /ʊ/ has looser lips.

Length changes in context

A vowel does not always have the same length. It is longer before a voiced consonant than before a voiceless one. The long vowel in seed is longer than in seat, and the short vowel in bid is longer than in bit.

Spelling clues and traps

Some spellings help you guess. The letters ee and ea often stand for /i:/, as in see, meet, team and read (in the present tense). The letters oo can be /u:/ in food and moon, or /ʊ/ in book and good. The letters or often stand for /ɔ:/, as in door, short and more, and ar for /ɑ:/, as in park and start.

How to make the sound

1. For short /ɪ/, /ʊ/ and /ɒ/, relax your mouth and say the sound quickly.
2. For long /i:/, spread your lips and raise your tongue. For /u:/, round your lips tightly.
3. For /ɔ:/, make a medium round shape and hold it.

4. Say each pair in a row: short, long, short, long. Feel both the length and the shape.

Exercises

1. Which pair is a short and long vowel pair?
 - a. ship and shop
 - b. ship and chip
 - c. ship and sheep
2. Which word has the long vowel /ɔ:/ in British English?
 - a. shot
 - b. short
 - c. shut
3. Long vowels are different from short vowels in length and also in _____.
 - a. mouth shape
 - b. stress only
 - c. spelling only
4. Find the mistake and write the right form: (1) The word steak (2) has the letters ea, (3) but it is said (4) with the vowel /i:/.

5. Write the word with the short vowel /ɪ/ that means 'a large boat'.

6. Which word has the longest vowel?
 - a. seed
 - b. seat
 - c. sit
7. Which word has a short vowel /ʌ/?
 - a. lark
 - b. luck
 - c. look

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/long-and-short-vowels/practice/

IELTS tip. In the Speaking test, the difference between long and short vowels changes words you use all the time, such as live and leave, or sit and seat. Choose the three pairs that are hardest for you and record a short answer using them. In Listening, careful listening for these pairs helps you write the right word when two answers are almost the same.

FOR TEACHERS · PRONUNCIATION

Long and short vowels

AIM	Learners will separate the five long and short vowel pairs by length and quality in listening and in speech.
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 ship and sheep without showing your mouth. Ask learners to say which one they heard and what was different.

Lesson steps

1. Show the five pairs and model each. Learners copy with attention to lip shape.
2. Run a listening round with cards: say one word of a pair, learners hold up the matching card.
3. Pair work: learners read a short list in random order while the partner marks which vowel they heard.
4. Move to sentences, then to a short spoken answer, recorded for self-review.

Extension

Compare the spelling meaning of long and short with the sound meaning, using cake/cat and cute/cut.

Answer key

1. c) ship and sheep. Ship has /ɪ/ and sheep has /i:/. Ship and chip differ in the first consonant, and ship and shop differ in vowel quality.
2. b) short. Short is /ɒ:t/. Shot has /ɒ/ and shut has /ʌ/.
3. a) mouth shape. In British English the long vowels have a different quality. For example, /i:/ is higher and tighter than /ɪ/.
4. Part 4: *with the vowel /i:/* → **with the sound /eɪ/**. Steak is said /steɪk/. Spelling is only a clue, so check new words in a dictionary.
5. ship. Ship is /ʃɪp/. Sheep, with the long vowel /i:/, is the animal.
6. a) seed. Seed has a long vowel before a voiced consonant. Seat has a long vowel before a voiceless consonant, which is shorter, and sit has a short vowel.
7. b) luck. Luck is /lʌk/. Lark has the long /ɑ:/ in British English, and look has the short /ʊ/.

Questions learners often ask

What is the difference between long and short vowels? Short vowels are quick and long vowels are held longer. In British English the long vowels also have a different mouth shape, so length is not the

only difference.

Is the long a in cake the same as a long vowel in pronunciation? No. The 'long a' in spelling lessons is /eɪ/, a glide. In pronunciation, a long vowel is a pure, steady sound such as /i:/ or /ɑ:/.

How many long and short vowel pairs are there? There are five main pairs in British English: /ɪ/ and /i:/, /ʊ/ and /u:/, /ɒ/ and /ɔ:/, /ʌ/ and /ɑ:/, and /e/ and /ɜ:/.

How can I hear the difference? Use minimal pairs such as ship and sheep. Listen with your eyes closed, say which word you hear, then check. Repeat with a few pairs each day.

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/long-and-short-vowels · Free to copy for classroom use.