



FREE RESOURCE · PRONUNCIATION

Long vowel sounds

British English has five long vowel sounds: /i:/ as in see, /ɑ:/ as in car, /ɔ:/ as in saw, /u:/ as in too and /ɜ:/ as in her. Each one is held longer than a short vowel and has its own mouth shape, so length is not the only difference.

What to know

The five long vowels

A long vowel is a pure vowel sound that you hold for longer than a short vowel. The tongue stays in one position, without gliding to another sound. The symbol : after the vowel means long.

- /i:/ as in see: sheep, team, key, people
- /ɑ:/ as in car: father, start, last, heart
- /ɔ:/ as in saw: door, talk, four, water
- /u:/ as in too: food, blue, group, true
- /ɜ:/ as in her: bird, work, learn, first

How each one feels in the mouth

/i:/ is made high and at the front. Spread your lips a little, as in a small smile, and raise the front of your tongue near the roof of the mouth. Keep it steady and do not let it end in a glide.

Length and quality work together

Learners often think that a long vowel is the same as a short vowel, only stretched. That is not enough. In British English the long vowels also have a different quality, a different mouth shape. The vowel in sheep is higher and tighter than in ship. The vowel in fool is rounder than in full.

Length changes with the next sound

A vowel is longer before a voiced consonant than before a voiceless one. The vowel in seed is longer than in seat. The vowel in bag is longer than in back. Listeners use this difference to tell the words apart, especially at the end of a word.

Pairs to practise

Say each pair slowly, then say the long vowel word in a short sentence.

- /ɪ/ and /i:/: ship and sheep, sit and seat, live and leave.
- /ʊ/ and /u:/: full and fool, pull and pool, look and Luke.
- /ɒ/ and /ɔ:/: cot and caught, shot and short, pot and port.
- /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).

How to make the sound

1. For /i:/, spread your lips and raise the front of your tongue. Hold it steady for two counts.
2. For /ɑ:/, open your mouth wide and keep the tongue low.

3. For /ɔ:/ and /u:/, round your lips: a medium circle for /ɔ:/ and a small circle for /u:/.
4. For /ɜ:/, relax your lips and say a long, steady 'er' with no r sound.

Exercises

1. Which word has a long vowel?
 - a. pull
 - b. pool
 - c. put
2. Which word has the vowel /ɜ:/ as in her?
 - a. bird
 - b. bed
 - c. bud
3. The vowel /ɔ:/ is made with _____ lips.
 - a. rounded
 - b. closed tight
 - c. spread
4. Which word has a longer vowel in British English?
 - a. seat
 - b. seed
5. Find the mistake and write the right form: (1) To make a long vowel, (2) hold it for longer (3) and also change (4) nothing about the mouth shape.
6. Write the word that sounds like *short* but with the vowel /ɒ/. In football it can mean one attempt to score.
7. Which word has the long vowel /ɑ:/ in British English?
 - a. other
 - b. father
 - c. mother

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-vowel-sounds/practice/

IELTS tip. In the Speaking test, mixing up a long and a short vowel can make a different word, such as sheep for ship or pool for pull. Choose the two pairs that you personally confuse, and use them when you record a short answer. In the Listening test, hearing the long vowels clearly helps you separate words in names and numbers, such as fourteen and forty, where the vowel and stress both matter.

FOR TEACHERS · PRONUNCIATION

Long vowel sounds

AIM	Learners will produce the five long vowels with correct quality and length, and will not confuse them with 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

Write sheep, car, saw, too and her on the board. Ask learners which they find hardest to say, and keep a quick tally.

Lesson steps

1. Model each vowel with its key word and show the lip shape. Learners copy with a mirror or a phone camera.
2. Listening: say words from the pairs list at random and learners point to the long or short word.
3. Sort a mixed list of words into the five long-vowel groups and check together.
4. Practise in sentences, such as 'The school group learned a new tune at four.'

Extension

Teach the effect of the next sound on vowel length with seed/seat and bag/back.

Answer key

1. b) pool. Pool has the long vowel /u:/. Pull and put have the short vowel /ʊ/.
2. a) bird. Bird is /bɜ:d/, a long central vowel. Bed has /e/ and bud has /ʌ/.
3. a) rounded. /ɔ:/ is a rounded vowel. For /i:/ the lips are spread.
4. b) seed. A vowel is longer before a voiced consonant. The /d/ in seed is voiced, and the /t/ in seat is voiceless.
5. Part 4: *nothing about the mouth shape*. → **the mouth shape too**. British English long vowels differ in quality as well as length, so the mouth shape matters.
6. shot. Shot is /ʃɒt/. Short is /ʃɔ:t/ with the long vowel.
7. b) father. Father is /fɑ:ðə/. In other and mother the first vowel is the short /ʌ/.

Questions learners often ask

What are the long vowel sounds in English? In British English they are /i:/, /ɑ:/, /ɔ:/, /u:/ and /ɜ:/. Each is a single steady sound that is held longer than a short vowel.

Are long vowels the same as the letters a, e, i, o, u said as their names? No. Those letter names are mostly diphthongs, such as /eɪ/ and /aɪ/. The long vowels here are pure sounds, like the one in see.

Do I need to hold a long vowel for a fixed time? No. Length is relative. A long vowel is longer than a short one in the same position, and it also changes with the next sound.

Why do I hear the long vowels differently in American English? American English often pronounces the r after a vowel, as in car and bird, which changes the vowel quality. This course uses British English, where the r is silent unless a vowel follows.

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