



FREE RESOURCE · PRONUNCIATION

Minimal pairs

Minimal pairs are two words that differ by only one sound, such as ship and sheep, or light and right. Practising them trains your ear to hear small differences and your mouth to make them, so listeners stop mixing up your words.

What to know

What is a minimal pair?

A minimal pair is two words with the same sounds in the same order, except for one. Change that one sound and you get a different word with a different meaning.

- *ship* · *sheep*
- *light* · *right*
- *bed* · *bad*

Why minimal pairs matter

In your own language, you learned to ignore differences that do not change meaning. English uses some differences that your language may not. If your ear treats ship and sheep as the same word, your mouth will make them the same too.

How to practise minimal pairs

Follow the same order every time. Hearing comes before speaking, because you cannot make a difference that you cannot hear.

- Listen to the pair several times, slowly. Say which word is which before you speak.
- Ask someone, or use a recording, to say the words in a mixed order. Write down what you hear, then check.
- Say the pair slowly, and exaggerate the one different sound a little.
- Record yourself. Listen as if you were a stranger. Can you tell which word you meant?
- Put each word into a short sentence of your own. A sound you can use in a sentence is a sound you will use in a real answer.

Pairs to start with

Choose the contrast that you personally confuse. These groups cause trouble for many learners.

- Short and long vowel: ship and sheep, full and fool, sit and seat.
- Different vowel quality: bed and bad, cut and cat, pen and pan.
- L and R: light and right, lock and rock, glass and grass.
- B and V: berry and very, boat and vote.
- TH and S or T: think and sink, three and tree, thin and tin.

Minimal pairs, rhymes and homophones

Do not confuse these three ideas. A rhyme shares an ending, like cat and hat. A homophone sounds exactly the same but is a different word, like right and write. A minimal pair is different: the words are

almost the same, with exactly one sound changed.

How to make the sound

1. For sheep, spread your lips a little, raise the front of your tongue high and hold the vowel for two counts.
2. For ship, relax your lips and tongue a little lower, and make the vowel short and quick.
3. Say the pair three times: long, short, long. Feel the tongue and jaw move, not just the length.

Exercises

1. Which two words are a minimal pair?
 - a. cat and kitten
 - b. cat and cap
 - c. cat and dog
2. Which pair differs only by L and R?
 - a. lamp and ramp
 - b. lamp and lap
 - c. lamp and limp
3. Minimal pair practice helps most when you choose pairs that _____.
 - a. match your own problem sounds
 - b. come from the first page of the dictionary
 - c. have the longest words
4. Find the mistake and write the right form: (1) In a minimal pair, (2) the two words (3) differ by three sounds (4) and have different meanings.
5. Write the minimal partner of *bed* that has the vowel in *cat*.
6. In ship and sheep, what is the only difference?
 - a. the vowel: short /ɪ/ and long /i:/
 - b. the last consonant
 - c. the first consonant
7. Can you _____ me the way to the station, please?
 - a. show
 - b. sew

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/minimal-pairs/practice/

IELTS tip. In the Speaking test, the person assessing you needs to understand your words without effort. If a pair such as light and right or ship and sheep is a problem for you, a mistake can change

your meaning, so practise those pairs before the test. In the Listening test, hearing the difference between similar words helps you avoid wrong answers.

FOR TEACHERS · PRONUNCIATION

Minimal pairs

AIM	Learners will hear and produce one chosen contrast reliably in words and then in short sentences.
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

Write a pair on the board, such as ship and sheep. Say one word without showing your mouth and ask learners to hold up the card for the word they heard.

Lesson steps

1. Identification: say pairs in random order and let learners point or hold up a card. Repeat until most answers are correct.
2. Production: learners say the pair in turn while a partner identifies which word they said. Swap roles.
3. Sentences: each learner writes one sentence for each word in the pair and reads it aloud so the partner can pick the target.
4. Reflection: learners record themselves and note one sound they will practise at home.

Extension

Use pairs that match the first languages in the class, and use a short information-gap task where a wrong sound would lead to a wrong answer.

Answer key

1. b) cat and cap. Cat and cap are the same except for the last sound, /t/ and /p/. Cat and kitten have different lengths and sounds, and cat and dog share nothing.
2. a) lamp and ramp. Lamp and ramp differ only in the first sound. Lamp and lap lose a sound, and lamp and limp change the vowel.
3. a) match your own problem sounds. The aim is to train the contrasts that you personally confuse. Word length and dictionary order have nothing to do with it.
4. Part 3: *differ by three sounds* → **differ by one sound**. A minimal pair differs by just one sound. If the words differed in many sounds, they would not be a minimal pair.
5. bad. Bed and bad differ only in the vowel: /e/ in bed and /æ/ in bad.
6. a) the vowel: short /ɪ/ and long /i:/. Both words start with /ʃ/ and end with /p/. Only the vowel changes.
7. a) show. Show /ʃəʊ/ and sew /səʊ/ are a minimal pair, so a clear first sound matters. Only show fits the meaning here.

Questions learners often ask

What is a minimal pair in simple words? It is two words that sound the same except for one sound, such as ship and sheep. The one sound is enough to change the meaning.

How many minimal pairs should I practise? Choose a small group that matches your own problem sounds and return to them often. A few pairs practised well are more useful than a long list done once.

Do minimal pairs help with listening too? Yes. Training your ear on small differences helps you hear words correctly in conversation and in the Listening test, not only say them.

Are minimal pairs only about vowels? No. Pairs can differ in a vowel, a consonant at the start, or a consonant at the end. Light and right, bed and bad, and cap and cab are all minimal pairs.

Sources

- Munro, M. J., & Derwing, T. M. (2006). The functional load principle in ESL pronunciation instruction: An exploratory study. *System*, 34(4), 520-531.
- Roach, P. (2009). *English Phonetics and Phonology: A Practical Course* (4th ed.). Cambridge University Press.

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