



FREE RESOURCE · PRONUNCIATION

The phonemic chart

The phonemic chart is a table of the 44 sounds of British English, each shown with its own symbol: 20 vowel sounds and 24 consonant sounds. It is based on the International Phonetic Alphabet. Learning it lets you read the pronunciation of any word in a dictionary.

What to know

What the chart shows

English spelling does not tell you how a word sounds. The words through, though, tough and cough all end in -ough, and all four sound different. The phonemic chart solves this by giving one symbol to each sound, so a word can be written exactly as it is said.

The 12 pure vowels

A pure vowel keeps one steady shape. Seven are short and five are long. The sign : shows length.

- /ɪ/ ship, /e/ bed, /æ/ cat, /ʌ/ cup, /ɒ/ hot, /ʊ/ book, /ə/ about.
- /i:/ sheep, /ɑ:/ car, /ɔ:/ door, /u:/ food, /ɜ:/ bird.

The 8 diphthongs

A diphthong glides from one vowel sound to another in one syllable. Together with the 12 pure vowels, they make the 20 vowel sounds.

- /eɪ/ day, /aɪ/ five, /ɔɪ/ boy, /əʊ/ go.
- /aʊ/ now, /ɪə/ here, /eə/ there, /ʊə/ tour.

The 24 consonants

Many consonants come in pairs. In each pair the mouth makes the same shape, but one sound is voiceless (no vibration in your throat) and the other is voiced (with vibration). Touch your throat to feel the difference.

- Pairs, voiceless then voiced: /p/ pen and /b/ bed; /t/ ten and /d/ day; /k/ cat and /g/ go; /f/ fan and /v/ van; /θ/ think and /ð/ this; /s/ see and /z/ zoo; /ʃ/ she and /ʒ/ measure; /tʃ/ chair and /dʒ/ jam.
- Single consonants: /m/ more, /n/ no, /ŋ/ sing, /l/ light, /r/ right, /w/ wet, /j/ yes, /h/ hat.

Symbols that look unfamiliar

Most consonant symbols look like the letters you know. A few do not, and these are the ones to learn first. The symbol /j/ is the sound at the start of yes, not the letter j. The sound at the start of jam is /dʒ/. The symbol /θ/ is the voiceless th in think. The symbol /ð/ is the voiced th in this. The symbol /ʃ/ is sh, /ʒ/ is the middle of measure, and /ŋ/ is the ng in sing.

How to make the sound

1. For /θ/ and /ð/: touch the back of your top front teeth with the tip of your tongue (when you practise slowly, the tip can show a little between your teeth). Blow for /θ/ and add voice for /ð/.
2. For /ʒ/: shape your mouth for /ʃ/, then add voice, as in the middle of measure.

3. For /ŋ/: raise the back of your tongue to the soft palate and let the sound come through your nose, as in sing.
4. Place your fingers on your throat to check which sounds have voice.

Exercises

1. How many sounds are in the British English phonemic chart?
 - a. 44
 - b. 26
 - c. 60
2. Which symbol is the first sound in *think*?
 - a. /θ/
 - b. /ð/
 - c. /s/
3. Which word contains the sound /ʃ/?
 - a. sip
 - b. ship
 - c. chip
4. Which symbol is the vowel in *bird*?
 - a. /ɔ:/
 - b. /ɑ:/
 - c. /ɜ:/
5. How many sounds are in the word *night* /naɪt/?
 - a. 2
 - b. 5
 - c. 3
6. Write the word that is written /ʃi:p/ in the phonemic chart.
7. The sound /ŋ/ is the last sound in _____.
 - a. sing
 - b. sin
8. Which consonant sound is voiced?
 - a. /s/
 - b. /f/
 - c. /z/
9. Which symbol shows a long vowel?
 - a. /i:/

b. /e/

c. /ɪ/

Listening items (1) 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/phonemic-chart/practice/

IELTS tip. You do not need the chart in the test, but it helps you prepare. Use it to check the sounds in the words you find hard, and to see which two words you are making sound the same. Knowing the symbols also helps you read the pronunciation of new vocabulary from your reading.

FOR TEACHERS · PRONUNCIATION

The phonemic chart

AIM	Learners can read the 44 symbols of the British English phonemic chart and use them to check pronunciation in a dictionary.
TIME	30 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 through, though, tough and cough on the board. Learners say each one and notice that -ough is said four different ways.

Lesson steps

1. Introduce the chart in three blocks: pure vowels, diphthongs and consonants. Learners read the example word for each symbol.
2. Practise the voiced and voiceless pairs with a throat check.
3. Learners match ten words to their IPA transcriptions.
4. In pairs, learners transcribe each other's names and a short phrase.

Extension

Learners write the IPA of a sentence from a Speaking answer and check it with a dictionary.

Answer key

1. a) 44. There are 20 vowel sounds (12 pure and 8 diphthongs) and 24 consonant sounds, which makes 44.
2. a) /θ/. The voiceless th in *think* is /θ/. The voiced th in *this* is /ð/.
3. b) ship. *Ship* starts with /ʃ/. *Chip* starts with /tʃ/ and *sip* starts with /s/.
4. c) /ɜː/. *Bird* is /bɜːd/. *Door* has /ɔː/ and *car* has /ɑː/.
5. c) 3. The sounds are /n/, /aɪ/ and /t/. The word has five letters, but only three sounds.
6. sheep. /ʃ/ is sh, /iː/ is the long vowel ee, and /p/ is p: sheep.
7. a) sing. *Sing* ends in /ŋ/. *Sin* ends in /n/. The letter g is not said separately.
8. c) /z/. /z/ is the voiced partner of /s/. Your vocal cords vibrate for /z/ but not for /s/ or /f/.
9. a) /iː/. The sign : after a vowel shows that it is long. /iː/ is the long vowel in *sheep*.

Questions learners often ask

How many sounds are in the phonemic chart? The chart for British English has 44: 12 pure vowels, 8 diphthongs and 24 consonants.

Is the phonemic chart the same as the IPA? It is based on the International Phonetic Alphabet but uses only the symbols that matter for English words.

Do I need to learn all the symbols? It is helpful but not required. Start with the sounds that are new for you and the symbols you meet in a dictionary.

Why do some sounds come in pairs? Because many consonants are made with the same mouth shape, with one voiceless and one voiced, such as /s/ and /z/.

Sources

- Roach, P. (2009). English Phonetics and Phonology: A Practical Course (4th ed.). Cambridge University Press.
- International Phonetic Association (1999). Handbook of the International Phonetic Association: A Guide to the Use of the International Phonetic Alphabet. Cambridge University Press.

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