



FREE RESOURCE · PRONUNCIATION

# The phonetic alphabet

The phonetic alphabet most learners need is the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA): a set of symbols where each one stands for one sound, not one letter. It lets you read the exact pronunciation of any English word in a dictionary, for example /θɪŋk/ for think. It is not the same as the spelling alphabet 'Alpha, Bravo, Charlie'.

## What to know

### What the phonetic alphabet is

English spelling is a poor guide to pronunciation. The letters ough are said four different ways in through, though, tough and cough. The International Phonetic Alphabet, or IPA, fixes this problem. It gives each sound its own symbol, and each symbol always means the same sound.

### Why learn it?

Every good learner's dictionary gives the IPA for each word, usually in slashes after the headword. If you can read the symbols, you can find the pronunciation of a new word at any time, without needing to hear it first. You can also see the stress, the vowel length and the weak syllables.

### How to read the IPA

Read the symbols one at a time and say the sound for each. Most consonants look like the letters you know. The symbols that are new for most learners are the vowels and a few consonants.

- / / (slashes) show that the word is written in phonemic symbols: /kæt/ is cat.
- ' before a syllable shows the main stress: /ə'baʊt/ about.
- ɪ before a syllable shows a weaker, secondary stress: /ɪnfə'meɪʃn/ information.
- : after a vowel shows that it is long: /i:/ in sheep.
- Two vowel symbols together show a diphthong, a glide: /aɪ/ in five.

### The symbols you need first

You do not need to learn all 44 symbols on the first day. Begin with the ones that are different from the letters you know, and with the sounds that your first language does not have.

- /θ/ and /ð/ (think, this) · /ʃ/ and /ʒ/ (she, measure)
- /ŋ/ (sing) · /j/ (yes, not the letter j)
- /dʒ/ (jam) · /tʃ/ (chair)

### Common mistakes when reading the IPA

The most common mistake is to read an IPA symbol as if it were an English letter. The symbol /j/ is the sound at the start of yes, not the sound at the start of jam. The symbol /e/ is the vowel in bed, not the long vowel in me. The symbol /r/ is the English r sound, and you do not roll it.

### How to make the sound

1. For /θ/: touch the back of your top front teeth with the tip of your tongue and blow air out.
2. For /j/: round your lips and pull the tongue back a little, as in she.

3. For /ŋ/: raise the back of your tongue to the soft palate and let the sound come through your nose.
4. For /ə/: relax your mouth completely and make a very short 'uh'.

## Exercises

1. Which word starts with the sound /ʃ/?
  - a. sip
  - b. ship
  - c. chip
2. What does the mark ' before a syllable show?
  - a. The main stress is on the next syllable
  - b. The vowel is long
3. What does : after a vowel show?
  - a. The vowel is stressed
  - b. The vowel is long
4. Write the word shown as /kæt/.
5. Write the word shown as /θɪŋk/.
6. Which symbol is the first sound of *this*?
  - a. /θ/
  - b. /ð/
  - c. /d/
7. The IPA gives one symbol to each \_\_\_\_\_, not each letter.
  - a. sound
  - b. word
8. Which syllable is stressed in **about**? a · bout
9. Which two words have the same vowel sound, /i:/?
  - a. sheep and ship
  - b. ship and team
  - c. sheep and team
10. Which word is written /wʌn/?
  - a. one
  - b. own
  - c. on

**Practise online, free:** hear every example and check your answers at [www.ielts-laboratory.co/free-resources/phonetic-alphabet/practice/](http://www.ielts-laboratory.co/free-resources/phonetic-alphabet/practice/)

**IELTS tip.** You will not use the IPA in the test itself, but it is a powerful tool for preparation. Use it to look up the pronunciation and stress of every new academic word you learn. Then say the word aloud before you use it in a Speaking answer.

FOR TEACHERS · PRONUNCIATION

# The phonetic alphabet

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| <b>AIM</b>       | Learners read common IPA symbols and use them to find the pronunciation and stress of new words in a dictionary. |
| <b>TIME</b>      | 25 minutes                                                                                                       |
| <b>LEVEL</b>     | B1 to B2 (IELTS 5 to 6.5)                                                                                        |
| <b>MATERIALS</b> | 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 discover that -ough is pronounced four ways.

## Lesson steps

1. Introduce the IPA as one symbol per sound. Teach the unfamiliar consonants first with the key words.
2. Learners match ten words to their IPA transcriptions.
3. Teach the stress mark, the length mark and the schwa with a short list of words.
4. In pairs, learners look up three words from their next writing topic and read the IPA aloud.

## Extension

Learners transcribe a short phrase into IPA and exchange it with a partner, who reads it aloud.

## Answer key

1. b) ship. /ʃ/ is the sh sound, as in *ship*. *Sip* starts with /s/ and *chip* starts with /tʃ/.
2. a) The main stress is on the next syllable. ' marks the strong syllable: /ə'baʊt/ is stressed on *bout*. Length is shown by :.
3. b) The vowel is long. The sign : means a long vowel, such as /i:/ in *sheep*. Stress is shown by ' in front of a syllable.
4. cat. /k/ is c, /æ/ is the short a, and /t/ is t: *cat*.
5. think. /θ/ is th, /ɪ/ is short i, /ŋk/ is nk: *think*.
6. b) /ð/. The voiced th in *this* is /ð/. The voiceless th in *think* is /θ/.
7. a) sound. The IPA records sounds. The same letter can have many sounds and the same sound can be spelled in many ways.
8. a**BOUT**. /ə'baʊt/: the mark ' is before *baʊt*, so the strong syllable is the second. The first syllable is a weak schwa.
9. c) sheep and team. *Sheep* is /ʃi:p/ and *team* is /ti:m/: both have the long vowel /i:/. *Ship* is /ʃɪp/, with the short vowel /ɪ/.

10. a) one. /w/ + /ʌ/ + /n/ is *one*. Spelling hides this: the word begins with a w sound that is not written.

## Questions learners often ask

**What is the phonetic alphabet?** A set of symbols where each symbol stands for one sound. The standard version is the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA).

**Is the phonetic alphabet the same as 'Alpha, Bravo, Charlie'?** No. That is a spelling alphabet used to spell out letters clearly on the radio. The IPA records sounds.

**Do I need to learn the IPA for IELTS?** You do not need it in the test, but it helps you check the pronunciation and stress of new words when you prepare.

**Where can I see the IPA?** In most learner's dictionaries, usually between slashes after the word, for example /'ɪntrəstɪŋ/.

## Sources

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

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