



FREE RESOURCE · PRONUNCIATION

The r sound

In British English, the r sound is made with the tongue pulled back and the tip touching nothing, and it is said only before a vowel. So you say r in red and very, but not in car, teacher or park. You do say it when a vowel follows, as in 'far away'.

What to know

How the English r is made

The English r is not rolled or tapped. It is a smooth, gliding sound. Pull your tongue back a little in your mouth and lift the tip towards the roof, but do not let it touch anything. The sides of the tongue touch your upper back teeth, and your lips are slightly rounded.

- Tongue tip: pulled back, touching nothing.
- Tongue sides: touching the upper back teeth.
- Lips: slightly rounded.
- Voice: on, and the sound is smooth.

When to say r in British English

In standard British English, you say the r only when a vowel sound comes after it. So r is said at the start of a word (red, road, right), between vowels (very, around, sorry) and after another consonant before a vowel (three, bring, country).

- *red · car*
- *very · park*
- *three · teacher*

Linking r

There is one important exception. When a word ends in a written r and the next word starts with a vowel, you do say the r. It links the two words. 'Far away' sounds like 'fa-raway'. 'The teacher is here' has a linking r in 'teacher is'. 'Four of them' has an r in 'four of'.

R and L

For many learners, r and l sound alike, and the pair changes meanings: light and right, lock and rock, long and wrong. For /l/ the tongue tip touches the ridge behind the top teeth. For /r/, nothing touches. Learn the difference in your mouth first, then in your ears.

- light and right
- lock and rock
- long and wrong
- glass and grass
- fly and fry

Common mistakes

The most common mistake is using a trill or a tap. This is natural in many languages, but in English the sound is smooth. Another mistake is saying the r in every place the letter is written, so that car, teacher and bird have a strong r. Listeners will understand you, but your accent will not follow one clear pattern.

How to make the sound

1. Pull your tongue back and lift the tip towards the roof of your mouth. Do not let it touch.
2. Let the sides of your tongue rest against your upper back teeth and round your lips slightly.
3. Say 'rrr' with your voice on, then glide into a vowel: 'red', 'road', 'right'.
4. For /l/, touch the tip to the ridge. The difference is the touch: /l/ touches, /r/ does not.

Exercises

1. In British English, in which word do you pronounce the r?
 - a. teacher
 - b. red
 - c. car
2. In 'far away', the r in far is _____.
 - a. silent
 - b. pronounced, as a link to the vowel
 - c. rolled strongly
3. Where is the tongue tip when you make the English /r/?
 - a. It touches nothing
 - b. It is between the teeth
 - c. It touches the ridge behind the top teeth
4. Find the mistake and write the right form: (1) In British English, (2) the final r in teacher, (3) when nothing follows, (4) is rolled strongly.
5. Write the word that is the opposite of *left* and starts with /r/.
6. Which word has no r sound in British English?
 - a. bird
 - b. bring
 - c. very
7. How is the English r different from a Spanish rr?
 - a. It is rolled more
 - b. It is smooth, not rolled
 - c. It is made with the lips

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/r-sound/practice/

IELTS tip. In the Speaking test, a strong rolled r or a mix-up between r and l can make words like right, road, correct and problem harder to recognise. Practise ten words from your topics, such as around, country, correct and problem, and record them. Check the r is smooth and that you do not say it at the end of words like teacher and computer when a consonant follows.

FOR TEACHERS · PRONUNCIATION

The r sound

AIM	Learners will produce a smooth English /r/, use it only where British English requires it, and separate r from l.
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

Ask learners to say red and led, and describe what their tongue tip does in each word.

Lesson steps

1. Show the tongue positions for /r/ and /l/ with a diagram. Learners practise the sound alone with a mirror.
2. Contrast pairs: light/right, lock/rock, glass/grass. Learners listen, point and then say them.
3. Teach where r is said and where it is silent. Learners sort words such as car, red, teacher, very, bird into columns.
4. Link practice: 'far away', 'her own', 'four of'. Then a short answer for IELTS Part 1 recorded for review.

Extension

Discuss rhotic and non-rhotic accents and how to stay consistent in one accent during the test.

Answer key

1. b) red. In red, the r comes before a vowel, so it is pronounced. In car and teacher, nothing follows the r, so it is silent.
2. b) pronounced, as a link to the vowel. When the next word starts with a vowel, the final r links the two words: fa-raway.
3. a) It touches nothing. For /r/ the tip is pulled back and touches nothing. For /l/ it touches the ridge.
4. Part 4: *is rolled strongly*. → **is not pronounced**. The word teacher ends with the weak vowel /ə/, and there is no r sound when nothing follows.
5. right. Right is /raɪt/. It starts with /r/, and the tongue tip touches nothing.
6. a) bird. Bird is /bɜ:d/, with no r because a consonant follows. In bring and very, the r comes before a vowel, so it is said.
7. b) It is smooth, not rolled. The English r is a smooth glide with no tap or trill.

Questions learners often ask

How do you pronounce r in English? Pull your tongue back and lift the tip so it touches nothing. Round your lips slightly and use your voice. The sound is smooth, with no tap or roll.

Is the r silent in British English? It is silent after a vowel at the end of a word or before a consonant, as in car and park. It is pronounced before a vowel, as in red and very, and in links such as 'far away'.

Is it wrong to say the r in car? Many accents, such as General American and Scottish English, do say it. For this course, we follow British English, where it is silent. Choose one pattern and use it consistently.

Why do I confuse r and l? Your first language may not separate them. In English, l touches the ridge behind the top teeth and r touches nothing. Minimal pairs like light and right help you hear and make the difference.

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/r-sound · Free to copy for classroom use.