



FREE RESOURCE · PRONUNCIATION

Short vowel sounds

British English has six short vowel sounds: /ɪ/ as in sit, /e/ as in set, /æ/ as in sat, /ʌ/ as in cup, /ɒ/ as in hot and /ʊ/ as in put. Each is quick, and each needs its own mouth shape, so the sound is not decided by the spelling alone.

What to know

The six short vowels

A short vowel is a vowel sound that is quick and does not glide to another sound. In standard British English (RP-style), there are six strong short vowels. There is also a weak short vowel, /ə/, which is covered in its own article.

- /ɪ/ as in sit: sit, big, six, village
- /e/ as in set: bed, pen, ten, many
- /æ/ as in sat: cat, bad, map, family
- /ʌ/ as in cup: bus, love, young, number
- /ɒ/ as in hot: dog, stop, want, watch

How the mouth moves

The first three vowels, /ɪ/, /e/ and /æ/, are front vowels. Start with /ɪ/: the jaw is almost closed. For /e/ the jaw opens a little more, and for /æ/ it opens more again. Say sit, set, sat and feel the jaw drop at each step.

Why spelling is a poor guide

Each written vowel can stand for more than one sound. The letter u is /ʌ/ in cup and bus, but /ʊ/ in put and full. The letter o is /ɒ/ in hot, but /ʌ/ in love and come. The letter a is /æ/ in cat, but /ɒ/ in want and watch.

The pairs that cause problems

Most learners find that two or three short vowels sound like one. These are the usual problem groups.

- /ɪ/ and /e/: bit and bet, pin and pen.
- /e/ and /æ/: bed and bad, men and man.
- /æ/ and /ʌ/: cap and cup, ran and run.
- /ʌ/ and /ɒ/: cut and cot, luck and lock.
- /ʊ/ and /ʌ/: look and luck, book and buck.

A daily routine for short vowels

Take one pair each day. Say the key words slowly, then say a few more words that share each vowel. For example, with /e/ and /æ/ you can use bed, men, pen and then bad, man, pan. Say each list in a steady beat, one word for each beat, with a small gap between words.

How to make the sound

1. Say sit, set, sat in a row and feel your jaw open step by step.

2. For cup, keep your lips relaxed and make a short, central 'uh'.
3. For hot, open your mouth, round your lips a little and keep the tongue low and back.
4. For put, round your lips a little and keep the sound very short.

Exercises

1. Which word has the short vowel /ʌ/?
 - a. cap
 - b. cup
 - c. cop
2. Which word does NOT have a short vowel?
 - a. sit
 - b. seat
 - c. set
3. The letter u is said /ʊ/, like a short 'oo', in _____.
 - a. put
 - b. bus
 - c. cut
4. Which word has the vowel /e/ in British English?
 - a. hat
 - b. head
 - c. heat
5. Find the mistake and write the right form: (1) For the vowel in cat, (2) open your jaw clearly (3) and keep the vowel (4) very long and slow.
6. Write the word that has the same consonants as *pen* but the vowel in *cat*.
7. Which word has the rounded vowel /ɒ/, as in hot?
 - a. wait
 - b. want
 - c. went
8. In British English, the vowel in *love* is the same as the vowel in _____.
 - a. cup
 - b. look
 - c. cop

Listening items (2) 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/short-vowel-sounds/practice/

IELTS tip. In the Speaking test, a wrong short vowel can change the word you mean: pen and pan, or bad and bed. Choose three vowel pairs that you confuse and use them to check your speech when you record a practice answer. In the Listening test, hearing the short vowels clearly helps you catch words such as ten and tan, or ship and shop, when they carry the answer.

FOR TEACHERS · PRONUNCIATION

Short vowel sounds

AIM	Learners will hear and produce the six short vowels of British English with clear differences in the mouth.
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 six key words (sit, set, sat, cup, hot, put) on the board. Say them slowly and ask learners to say which one they find hardest.

Lesson steps

1. Introduce the key words and the jaw positions. Let learners feel the jaw open from sit to set to sat.
2. Run a listening round with minimal pairs such as bit/bet, bad/bed and cut/cot, using cards.
3. Pair work: one learner says a word from a list and the other writes it down. Swap, then compare.
4. Move to phrases such as 'ten red pens' and 'a big black bag', then to a short answer from IELTS Part 1.

Extension

Add the vowel-before-consonant length effect with bad/bat and bed/bet, and discuss how it helps listeners.

Answer key

1. b) cup. Cup has /ʌ/, a relaxed central sound. Cap has /æ/ and cop has /ɒ/.
2. b) seat. Seat has the long vowel /i:/. Sit has /ɪ/ and set has /e/, which are both short.
3. a) put. Put is /pʊt/. In cut and bus the letter u is /ʌ/.
4. b) head. Head is /hed/, even though it is spelled with ea. Heat has /i:/ and hat has /æ/.
5. Part 4: *very long and slow*. → **short and quick**. The vowel /æ/ is a short vowel. It needs an open jaw, but it is not stretched.
6. pan. Pan is /pæn/. Pen has /e/ and pan has the more open /æ/.
7. b) want. Want is /wɒnt/ in British English, with a rounded vowel. Went has /e/ and wait has a glide.
8. a) cup. Love is /lʌv/, with the same vowel as cup. The spelling o is misleading here.

Questions learners often ask

How many short vowel sounds are there in English? Standard British English has six strong short vowels: /ɪ/, /e/, /æ/, /ʌ/, /ɒ/ and /ʊ/. There is also the weak vowel /ə/ in unstressed syllables.

Are short vowels the same as the letters a, e, i, o, u? No. Those are letters. Each letter can be a short vowel in some words and a long or glided vowel in others. Always learn the sound, not just the spelling.

Which short vowel is the hardest? It depends on your first language. Many learners find /æ/ and /ʌ/ hard because /æ/ sounds like /e/ to them, and /ʌ/ sounds like /ɒ/ or /ɑ:/.

Is the vowel in cup and hot the same? No. Cup uses /ʌ/ with relaxed lips, and hot uses /ɒ/ with a rounded mouth shape in British English.

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