



FREE RESOURCE · PRONUNCIATION

The th sound: how to pronounce th

English has two th sounds. The voiceless /θ/ is in think, three and bath, and the voiced /ð/ is in this, that and mother. For both, touch the back of your top front teeth with the tip of your tongue and let the air flow. When you practise slowly, you can let the tip show a little between your teeth. For /ð/, add your voice.

What to know

Two sounds, one spelling

The spelling th stands for two different sounds in English. They are made in the same place and in the same way. The only difference is the voice.

- *think · this*
- *three · they*
- *bath · bathe*

How to make the sounds

Touch the back of your top front teeth with the tip of your tongue. When you practise slowly, you can let the tip show a little between your teeth, but do not bite it. The tongue is flat and relaxed, and a thin stream of air flows over it.

- Tongue tip: light contact with the top teeth.
- Air: a continuous flow, not a stop.
- Voice: off for /θ/, on for /ð/.
- Lips: relaxed, not touching each other.

Which th is it? Simple rules

Most of the time you can choose with these rules. They are not perfect, but they cover most common words.

- Grammar words are voiced /ð/: the, this, that, these, those, they, them, then, there, than, though.
- Many words with th between vowels are voiced: mother, father, brother, weather, together, other, rather. There are exceptions, such as author and method.
- Most other words are voiceless /θ/: think, thing, thank, three, thirty, throw, theory, health, month, truth.
- Nouns ending in th are usually voiceless: bath, mouth, tooth, month. The matching verbs, such as bathe, are voiced.
- A few words keep the t sound: Thomas, Thames, Thailand.

Noun and verb pairs

Some pairs of words change from voiceless to voiced when the word is a verb. Bath is /bɑ:θ/, but bathe is /beɪð/. Breath is /breθ/, but breathe is /bri:ð/. Cloth is /klɒθ/, but clothe is /kləʊð/. Mouth as a

noun is /maʊθ/, but to mouth is /maʊð/. These pairs matter because a different sound means a different word.

Common mistakes

The most common mistakes are replacements. Many learners say /s/ or /z/ (sink for think, zis for this), /t/ or /d/ (tree for three, dis for this), or /f/ and /v/ (fink for think, vat for that). These are understandable, but the listener may hear a different word.

How to make the sound

1. Touch the back of your top front teeth with the tip of your tongue, without biting it.
2. For /θ/, blow air out gently with no voice: 'think'.
3. For /ð/, make the same shape and turn on your voice so you feel a buzz: 'this'.
4. Pull the tongue back quickly into the next sound, without a stop.

Exercises

1. Which word starts with the voiced th, /ð/?
 - a. thought
 - b. this
 - c. thing
2. Which word has a voiceless th, /θ/, in the middle?
 - a. brother
 - b. mother
 - c. author
3. Which word ends with the voiced sound /ð/?
 - a. bath
 - b. both
 - c. bathe
4. The th in _____ is voiced.
 - a. three
 - b. them
 - c. thank
5. Find the mistake and write the right form: (1) To make a th sound, (2) put your tongue tip (3) far behind your teeth (4) and let the air flow.
6. Write the number that comes after two. It starts with the voiceless th.
7. What is the difference between /θ/ and /ð/?
 - a. /θ/ uses the lips and /ð/ does not
 - b. /ð/ uses the voice and /θ/ does not
 - c. /ð/ is made in the throat

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/th-sound/practice/

IELTS tip. The th sounds appear in some of the most common words in English, including the, this, that, they, think and thing. In the Speaking test, a clear th in these small words makes your whole speech clearer. Practise a few phrases that you will use in Part 1, such as 'I think that', 'the three of us' and 'my brother and I'.

FOR TEACHERS · PRONUNCIATION

The th sound: how to pronounce th

AIM	Learners will produce /θ/ and /ð/ with the tongue at the teeth and will choose the correct one in common words.
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 'sink' and 'think' and notice what their tongue does in each word. Show a picture or video of the tongue tip touching the back of the top teeth.

Lesson steps

1. Model the tongue position and have learners practise with a mirror. Check that the tongue is light and that there is no biting.
2. Voice test: learners put fingers on their throat to feel /ð/ and not /θ/. Repeat with think/this and thing/then.
3. Sort words into voiced and voiceless groups using the rules, then check with a dictionary.
4. Practise phrases with both sounds, then a short Part 1 answer, with a partner listening for each th.

Extension

Teach the noun and verb pairs bath/bathe and breath/breathe and use them in short sentences.

Answer key

1. b) this. This starts with /ð/. Thing and thought start with the voiceless /θ/.
2. c) author. Author is /ˈɔːθə/ with /θ/. Mother and brother have the voiced /ð/.
3. c) bathe. Bathe is /beɪð/. Bath and both end with /θ/.
4. b) them. Them is a grammar word and starts with /ð/. Thank and three start with /θ/.
5. Part 3: *far behind your teeth* → **lightly against the back of your top teeth**. The tongue tip must touch the teeth lightly. Further back, it makes /s/, /t/ or /d/.
6. three. Three starts with /θ/: /θriː/.
7. b) /ð/ uses the voice and /θ/ does not. Both are made in the same place with the tongue at the teeth. Only /ð/ has voice.

Questions learners often ask

How do you pronounce th in English? Touch the back of your top front teeth lightly with the tip of your tongue and let air flow. Use no voice for think, and add your voice for this.

When is th voiced and when is it voiceless? It is voiced in grammar words like the, this and they, and in words like mother and brother. It is voiceless in most other words, such as think, three and month.

Can I say s or t instead of th in IELTS? Many learners do, and they can still be understood in context. But a clear th avoids confusion between words like think and sink, and it makes your speech sound more natural.

Why is th so hard? Many languages have no th sounds. The tongue position is unfamiliar, and the sounds look similar in spelling but differ in voice.

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