

Difference Between Vowels versus Consonants

The problem is, the English language is not phonetic. The first thing you must know is the difference between vowels and consonants. There are 26 letters in the English alphabet. 5 represents vowels and 21 for consonants.

The main difference is the way you produce the sound.

Vowel sounds can be produced by continuous airflow. Try speaking A, E, I, O, U. The sound is made without interrupting (like closing the lips or blocking the air with your tongue).

On the other hand, consonant sounds are made when you obstruct the airflow by closing your mouth (try producing the “m” sound), blocking your tongue (try the “l” sound), or similar actions (try saying the “p” and “k” sound).

The Difficulty of Learning English Words

But these sounds can differ when based on the position of the vowels and their combinations with the consonants. And sometimes, it just isn't apparent. It makes learning English words more difficult.

Certain words that look alike might not be said the same way. It is because words with similar spelling might not represent the same sounds.

For example, similar-looking words like “tear” (as in the fluid when you cry) and “tear” (as in to pull apart in pieces by force) have different pronunciations despite having the same spelling.

Another example is words like “stair” and “stare.” They have different spellings but the same pronunciations.

The International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) Standard

Linguists all over the world recognized this problem not only in English but also in learning other languages. That's why the International Phonetic Standard (IPA) was developed in the 19th century.

The IPA is a set of unique symbols that represent only one sound for pronouncing words. These symbols are currently used in numerous dictionaries and English Pronunciation books to guide you in learning English pronunciation.

Knowing the commonly used IPA symbols for English will give you an advantage in your English learning journey. Here are some of the symbols you should be familiar with.

Short Vowels

These are vowels you pronounce with a short breath. Here are the common symbols for short vowels.

æ (sound) – pass, back, have, had, contact

ɛ (sound) – every, ever, never, necessary, end

ʌ (sound) – cup, flood, love, come, thumb

ʊ (sound) – book, foot, woman, full, would

ɒ (sound) – of, often, office, squat, offer

ə (sound) – mother, stuff, ago, action, never

Long Vowels

These are vowels that are pronounced the same way you pronounce its name. Here are the common symbols for long vowels:

i: (sound) – be, need, feel, she, free

ɜ: (sound) – her, word, turn, world, girl

ɔ: (sound) – your, more, also, small, sure

u: (sound) – new, too, value, school, you

ɑ: (sound) – ask, party, father, star, bar

Diphthong Vowels

These are sounds produced by combining two vowel sounds. Here are the common symbols for Diphthong vowels:

ɪə (sound) – here, period, idea, career, clear

eə (sound) – care, share, where, there, hair

eɪ (sound) – later, eight, day, play, age

ɔɪ (sound) – voice, enjoy, join, boy, choice

aɪ (sound) – life, buy, why, guy, high, five

oʊ (sound) – open, only, follow, home, hold

aʊ (sound) – town, house, allow, now, how

Plosives

These are consonants that are pronounced by blocking the airway with your teeth, mouth, lips, or palate and releasing the air afterward. Here are the common symbols for plosives:

p (sound) – happen, program, keep, play, pay

b (sound) – but, before, best, maybe, job

t (sound) – take, tell, time, study, talk

d (sound) – day, idea, decide, friend, do

k (sound) – can, require, think, take, school

g (sound) – give, go, group, agree, good

Fricatives

These are consonants where the sound is produced by blocking the airway that causes friction when you pronounce it. Here are the common symbols for fricatives:

f (sound) – from, phone, self, fact, family

v (sound) – move, value, live, provide, even

θ (sound) – thing, month, thank, health, truth

ð (sound) – with, smooth, brother, they, then

z (sound) – these, reason, those, zone, citizen

ʃ (sound) – push, show, sure, wish, finish

ʒ (sound) – decision, pleasure, television, vision, version

h (sound) – whole, help, perhaps, who, hello

Nasals

These are consonants pronounced by lowering your soft palate and producing the sound through your nose. Here are the common symbols for nasals:

m (sound) – man, summer, more, million, come

n (sound) – not, know, into, number, woman

ŋ (sound) – thank, think, feeling, thing, song

Affricates

These are consonants that pronounced beginning as a plosive and ends as a fricative. Here are the common symbols for affricates

tʃ (sound) – church, century, culture, change, challenge

dʒ (sound) – job, join, general, energy, huge

Approximants

These are consonants that are frictionless and sounds like a vowel. Here are the common symbols for approximants:

r (sound) – carry, program, very, ring, road

j (sound) – unit, beyond, argue, during, usually

w (sound) – where, world, wait, require, we

l (sound) – leave, last, look, control, people