

A-Z

# Guide to American English Pronunciation



Amanda Lillet



---

A: Accept Your Accent	3
B: Be Brave	4
C: Contractions	5
D: Dictionaries	6
E: -ed Ending	7
F: Fake it	8
G: Glottal Stop /ʔ/	9
H: Hire a Professional	10
I: International Phonetic Alphabet or “IPA”	11
J: Just Ask	12
K: Kill the Self-Consciousness	13
L: Listener Fatigue	14
M: Muscle Memory	15
N: Never Give Up!	16
O: Organize Your Learning	17
Q: Quit Comparing	18
R: R-Controlled Vowels	19
S: Schwa /ə/	20
T: Trust the Library in Your Head	21
U: Unvoiced and Voiced Sounds	22
V: Vocal Tract	23
W: Watch Videos	24
X: Explore	25
Y: You Can Do It!	26
Z: Zero Judgement	27
Appendix: Sound Chart	28
Keep Learning!	29

---





---

## A: Accept Your Accent

---

Accent is part of your identity and who you are. It shows that you are from somewhere else, maybe somewhere exotic or even somewhere sexy! Americans like hearing and interacting with foreign accents. We like that you speak multiple languages. As long as it isn't a struggle to understand you, we want to talk to you and hear your accent! So, if you haven't already, accept your accent and realize that it's an asset to you.

Also, you can't fight biology. Unless you're younger than 12 or 13 years old, your brain is probably not going to allow you to sound exactly like you were born in a native-English speaking country. And that's fine!

When it comes to spoken English, the problem isn't having an accent; the problem is when pronunciation errors cause "listener fatigue," (see [L: Listener Fatigue](#)) or worse, miscommunication. Listener fatigue happens when your listener needs to use too much energy to understand your speech. When that happens, listeners just stop *listening*. Miscommunication occurs when listeners think they heard something entirely different than what you actually said or meant. Too many miscommunications cause frustration for both the speakers and the listeners.

Correcting pronunciation errors won't erase your accent, but it will make it easier for your listener to understand exactly what you said and what you meant. Good, clear pronunciation allows you to use the more subtle tools of speech like contractions (see [C: Contractions](#)), pitch and rhythm.

Always remember that having good pronunciation does not mean erasing your accent!

---

## B: Be Brave

---

Learning about and trying to improve pronunciation can be an awkward process. To do it successfully, you need to be brave. Pronunciation improvement requires different skills and a different kind of learning than improving grammar or vocabulary.

You can't learn pronunciation just by memorizing facts about speech. You need to actually learn to reshape the muscles of your vocal tract (see [V: Vocal Tract](#)). This means creating new muscle memory — the ability of the body to create a specific muscle shape without needing to think about it (see [M: Muscle Memory](#)).

As you try to make your mouth create sounds it has never created before, you might feel strange. You might even sound artificial to yourself (see [F: Fake It](#)). That's okay and it's normal. Everyone feels that way when they really start to *spea*k another language, no matter what language it is.

So be brave. Try learning and using new skills, even if it feels weird to you.

---

## C: Contractions

---

Using contractions (words like *isn't*, *he's*, *couldn't*, *you're*, *won't* and *can't*) is important for creating the rhythm of spoken English. Contractions make the function words of a sentence smaller and can delete an entire syllable from a set of joined words.

Contractions with *be* and *have* (*I'm*, *he's*, *they're*, *he'd*, *you'd*) allow you to emphasize the important main verbs of a sentence instead of the grammatical auxiliary verbs. This is critical if you want to speak with fluent English rhythm.

The contractions *can't*, *don't* and *won't* are particularly difficult in English pronunciation. Sentences with the words *can* and *can't* have surprisingly different rhythms. The affirmative *can* is usually unstressed in a sentence and the verb that follows it is often stressed. (I *can* **swim**.) In contrast, the negative *can't*, is usually stressed in the sentence and the verb that follows it has less stress. (I **can't** swim.) In addition, the vowel sounds in the two words is different! The word *can* often rhymes with the word *win*, whereas the word *can't* comes closer to rhyming with the word *plant*.

The words *don't* and *won't* rhyme with each other but not many other words in English. The vowel sound in these words is the 'long o' /**ou**/, the sound in the word *home*. If that sound isn't pronounced fully, miscommunication can occur. In particular, the word *won't* becomes very similar to the word *want*.

Beyond the everyday contractions taught in English grammar books, native English speakers also use spoken informal contractions. These are words like *gonna* (for *going to*), *wanna* (for *want to*), and *hafta* (for *have to*). Many students worry that using these contractions will make them sound too informal, but that's not the case. You will simply sound more fluent and relaxed if you choose to use words like those.

### Informal Contractions

Words like:

gonna  
/'gʌ nə/

wanna  
/'wɒ nə/

hafta  
/'hæf tə/

gotta  
/'gɒ tə/

Learn more about informal contractions in American English here: <https://pronuncian.com/informal-contractions>

---

## D: Dictionaries

---

Dictionaries are your friends, people. Trust me on this. If you're using the right dictionary for the job, you can know anything you want about a word.

In addition to the typical definition dictionaries we all use, there are specialized dictionaries that can help you as a learner. Some dictionaries I often use are:

- Pronunciation dictionaries — *Longman Pronunciation Dictionary* is my favorite, even though it isn't available in a digital format. (<http://www.pearsonlongman.com/dictionaries/LPD/>)
- Learners' dictionaries — *Merriam-Webster online* is my favorite (<http://learnersdictionary.com/>)
- Frequency dictionaries — *A Frequency Dictionary of Contemporary American English* is my favorite (<http://www.goodreads.com/book/show/9188631-a-frequency-dictionary-of-contemporary-american-english>)

If you're really serious about learning English pronunciation, pick up a pronunciation dictionary and learn the International Phonetic Alphabet or "IPA" (see [I: International Phonetic Alphabet](#)). The IPA uses the most universal symbols that represent sounds. A good pronunciation dictionary will show you both American English and British English pronunciation as well as variations in pronunciation.

Learners' dictionaries provide important grammatical and usage information about words. They will note if a noun is count or non-count or if a verb cannot be used in the progressive or if it is transitive or not. Learners' dictionaries also will also often tell you if a word is usually paired with another word (such as a preposition). While learners' dictionaries are great for vocabulary and word usage, I don't recommend using a learner's dictionary to check pronunciation because the symbols they use are often oversimplified.

Frequency dictionaries tell you how often a word is used and what other words are usually used with that word. For instance, the top ten most-used words in English are: 1) *the* 2) *be* 3) *and* 4) *of* 5) *a* 6) *in* 7) *to* — as an infinitive 8) *have* 9) *to* — as a preposition 10) *it* ) You could also use a frequency dictionary to see that the word *love* (ranked #401 as a verb) is often used with the words *I, you, her, him, really* and *other*.



---

## E: -ed Ending

---

The -ed ending in English remains difficult for many non-native English speakers to master. Because native English speakers link words together, these endings often blend into the words after them and can be difficult to hear.

The -ed ending has three pronunciations: /əd/, /t/, and /d/. Which pronunciation to choose depends on the final sound of the word and is mostly dictated by whether the final sound of a word is voiced or unvoiced (see [U: Unvoiced and Voiced Sounds](#)).

How to Pronounce the -ed ending	
<b>1. /əd/</b>	
/t/	wanted
/d/	needed
after <b>/t/</b> or <b>/d/</b>	
<b>2. /t/</b>	
/tʃ/ 'ch'	watched
/f/	stuffed
/k/	walked
/p/	stopped
/s/	missed
/ʃ/ 'sh'	wished
/θ/ 'th'	unearthed
after <b>unvoiced</b> sounds	
<b>3. /d/</b>	
/b/	stabbed
/dʒ/ 'j'	judged
/g/	hugged
/l/	called
/r/	stared
/ð/ 'th'	bathed
/v/	loved
/z/	caused
/ʒ/ 'zh'	massaged
after <b>voiced</b> sounds	

**NOTE:** All vowels are voiced. The -ed after a vowel sound is always /d/.

Once the -ed endings are learned, practicing linking words that end in them into the following word is a perfect next step. If you are able to link from them, great! If you can't, still be sure to say the -ed endings!

Learn more about linking words in American English here: <https://pronuncian.com/introduction-to-linking/>

---

## F: Fake it

---

Faking it, and acting like you are comfortable pronouncing English in a way that might sound strange to you, is the key to learning better pronunciation. Let yourself be vulnerable. Hearing yourself say a word or phrase differently from how you're used to hearing yourself say it can be uncomfortable. That's normal.

Remember this: just because you sound strange to yourself when you change your pronunciation doesn't mean you sound strange to anyone else. Nobody thinks you're trying to pretend you were born in the United States if you learn to pronounce the /t/ in "meeting" more like an English /d/ or begin using the glottal stop (see [G: Glottal Stop](#)). The same is true if you start using informal contractions like *gonna* and *wanna* (see [C: Contractions](#)). The more tricks you learn, the more relaxed your English will sound. Your listeners will notice that you are more confident and comfortable with English, even if they don't know why you suddenly sound so fluent.

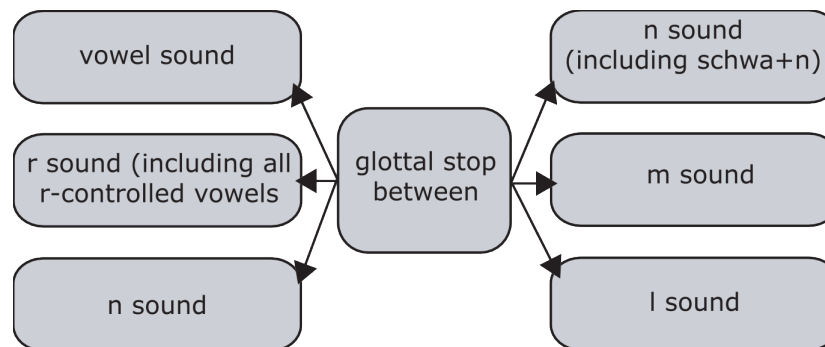
---

## G: Glottal Stop /ʔ/

---

Uh-oh, you've never heard of the glottal stop? The glottal stop is that weird sound that isn't actually a *sound*. Wait — what? What is a sound that isn't a sound?

Say uh-oh (like you made a mistake). That pause between the “uh” and “oh” sounds is the glottal stop (IPA symbol /ʔ/). You create the glottal stop by closing your vocal cords, building up a small bit of air, and then releasing the vocal cords. In American English, the glottal stop is used in place of a /t/ in specific circumstances. For instance, we use a glottal stop in a /rtn/ combination (as in *partner* /'pɑ:ʔ nɑ:/) or when the /t/ follows a vowel and comes before a syllabic /n/ (as in *kitten* /'kɪʔ n/).



An extra benefit to learning the glottal stop is that it allows you to start noticing other things about English pronunciation that you might not have realized before. For instance, the /t/ in the words *water* or *meeting* sounds more like a /d/ (though some languages, like Arabic or Spanish, might hear it as an /r/). Also, did you ever notice that the /t/ in *Internet* is often completely silent?

Is it necessary to learn the sounds that native speakers use in place of /t/? No, it isn't at all. Native English speakers will understand you just fine if you always use /t/. But that doesn't mean there isn't a benefit to learning them: you will sound more fluent and more relaxed in your speech.

Learn more about the glottal stop, and other /t/ allophones in American English here:  
<https://pronuncian.com/when-t-doesnt-sound-like-t>

If you'd like to see if the glottal stop exists in your language, check the chart here:  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Glottal\\_stop](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Glottal_stop)

---

## H: Hire a Professional

---

How can anyone know what they don't know? Until your ears are trained to hear all of the tiny events that happen when you speak, you will have a very hard time correcting your own speech.

A well-qualified professional will teach you how to become an independent learner of pronunciation. This person should provide you with an inventory of sounds and concepts important for your specific English pronunciation issues and then give you the tools for making permanent change.

Through focused interaction and corrective feedback from a professional, you will learn to hear the errors that you are making. Then you become able to self-correct. Your teacher will also serve as a coach while you are becoming consistent with your new speech habits and muscle memory (see [M: Muscle Memory](#)).

### ASSESSMENTS

Includes:

- Immediate feedback
- Written report for self-study



I'm not saying you can't learn a lot on your own through self-study. Anything you study before taking pronunciation classes will make your classes more efficient and will help you to learn faster. If you want help knowing where to start for self-study, simply getting a pronunciation assessment from a professional is a great place to begin.

*If you'd like to learn more about purchasing our specialized pronunciation assessment, see the details here: <https://pronuncian.com/books-products/assessment>*

---

## I: International Phonetic Alphabet or “IPA”

---

If you use a pronunciation dictionary (see [D: Dictionaries](#)), you’ll want to learn what sounds all of those symbols represent. You’ll be amazed how much easier and less frustrating English pronunciation is when you understand the full inventory of English sounds.

If your favorite dictionary uses a set of symbols that are different from the International Phonetic Alphabet, just learn those instead! I prefer dictionaries that *do* use the IPA (like the *Longman Pronunciation Dictionary*) because they tend to be more accurate and give pronunciation details that other dictionaries don’t. However, any dictionary is better than no dictionary.

Frustratingly, many online dictionaries don’t have a key that’s easy to find. If this is the case, you can use the [Sound Chart Appendix](#) at the back of this book to compare with whatever dictionary you use. Check the key words in the chart and write the symbol your dictionary uses next to each word.

Then, if you want to know what the pronunciation of the ‘o’ is in the word *boss*, you have a reference for yourself. If your dictionary uses a symbol of /ô/, you can scan through the chart and see that it matches the word *dog*, pronounced with the ‘aw sound.’ Now if you know you need more help pronouncing the ‘aw sound,’ you can go to [Pronuncian.com](#) and learn more about the spelling and pronunciation of that sound and get more practice.

You can also use the International Phonetic Alphabet chart at the back of this book to compare English to your first language. For instance, the sound /ɑ/ (as in *top* in English) causes a lot of problems because it’s often spelled ‘o’ in English, but ‘a’ in many other languages. A quick Wikipedia search for the International Phonetic Alphabet sounds of your first language allows you to compare your native sounds to their English counterparts. One Italian student became much better at understanding the difference between /ɑ/ (as in *top*) and /ɔ/ (as in *dog*) after realizing that they were the same sounds as in *alto* and *otto* in Italian, respectively.

---

## J: Just Ask

---

If you want help, you'll have to ask for it! So many of my students wonder why their colleagues, friends, or even romantic partners won't correct their speech. There are two simple answers to this question:

1. They feel rude correcting you.
2. Native English speakers often don't know *why* what you said was hard to understand.

First, about your listeners feeling rude: to get listeners to not feel like they are criticizing your English, you need to let them know that you want the feedback. However, you need to tell them *how* to give it to you. If you just say, "Tell me when I say something incorrectly," they probably won't. That request is too broad. Your job is to notice the clues that something was misunderstood. Sometime this is obvious — like you were asked to repeat yourself. Sometimes it is less obvious — like your listener suddenly moved their head differently or got a look on their face like they really had to concentrate. *That's* when to ask the question!

You can say, "It looked like something I just said was difficult to understand. Was there a word you had trouble with?" Or, if you're asked to repeat yourself, first repeat yourself and then ask what part of what you said was difficult to understand the first time. These situations give important clues about skills that need improvement.

Second, sometimes your listeners don't know why you were difficult to understand. Most native English speakers don't realize how many crazy details go into English pronunciation. People will hesitate correcting you if they worry that they can't explain why they misunderstood you. If you want to know what is going on with your speech, make it clear that your listeners don't need to know what just happened, they only need to let you know that something did happen. Then your job is to collect these clues and find patterns. If you're working with a coach ([see H: Hire a Professional](#)) bring lists of words that you had trouble with to your next lesson. A good teacher will know your weak points and should be able to tell you what probably happened in your dialog.

Just remember that before anyone is likely to offer you corrections and help, you'll need to ask for it!

---

## K: Kill the Self-Consciousness

---

Self-consciousness and being afraid of making a mistake is the biggest way to stop progress in English.

One of my students once said that learning English meant being willing to humiliate himself every single day. Sure, that might be a little dramatic, but there is truth that the more vulnerable you allow yourself to be when learning a new language, the faster you'll make progress.

There are times when making a mistake has a bigger cost than other situations, and it's okay to be more careful during those times. This might be especially true if your job requires you to speak in English and you're speaking with your boss. Therefore, it's also a very good idea to get into everyday conversations where mistakes are okay. Experiment and play with English. Try out a new phrase. Don't let fear and self-consciousness hold you back.

---

## L: Listener Fatigue

---

Listener fatigue happens if your accent is quite strong and your listener has to use too much energy to understand your speech. It's important to know that listener fatigue isn't personal to you. It isn't that people don't like talking to you or don't want to get to know you; it's that it takes a lot of brain power to understand some kinds of pronunciation errors. Once the listener becomes too tired, they simply stop listening.

As people adapt to hearing your speech, listener fatigue lessens. Your listeners learn how you personally pronounce certain words or sounds and they don't need to use the surrounding words to give meaning to the sentence anymore. This is great because, over time, communicating becomes easier for both you and the listener.

However, as people become used to your speech and stop asking you to repeat yourself, it becomes less obvious where your speech is difficult for new listeners to understand. Continuing to improve becomes harder.

If you are aware as a speaker, you will start to notice when people didn't understand something. If you are a brave speaker (see [B: Be Brave](#)) you can catch that the look on their face changed when they became confused about something you said and ask them why they had that expression. Asking, "It looked like I said something that was hard to understand. Do you remember which word was confusing?" is a great start. For more tips on asking for help, see [J: Just Ask](#).

Let me be clear, having an accent doesn't cause listener fatigue in itself; only having a very strong accent does. The more your spoken English improves, the less your listeners will tire during conversations.



---

## M: Muscle Memory

---

Muscle memory is what allows the body to automatically move a specific muscle or muscle group into a specific shape. It happens when we walk, drive a car, play a sport or instrument, or even brush our teeth. While we're first learning to speak in our native language, muscle memory develops to create the sounds of that language. Once we've learned to talk, we don't have to think about how to move our vocal tract into specific shapes to pronounce a word — it just happens.

However, when we learn another language, we need to create new muscle movements to match the sounds of the new language. And that, my friends, is hard. Our mouth doesn't *want* to go into the shape of a new sound. Our mouth prefers to create the comfortable shape of the native sound.

When it comes to muscle memory, it's important to remember that the phrase "Practice makes perfect" does not apply. *Good* practice makes perfect. Otherwise practice just makes permanent and bad habits become difficult to overcome.

So when you're learning the pronunciation of a new language, two things need to happen. First, you need to learn how to move your vocal tract (see [V: Vocal Tract](#)) into the new shape of the new sound. Second, you need to recreate that sound *thousands* more times until a new habit has developed and muscle memory allows you to use the new sounds without thinking about it.

---

## N: Never Give Up!

---

You already know that you can't learn everything there is to learn about a language at once. As one language skill gets better and better, the brain is automatically preparing for learning the next skill. The reason few teachers spend much time on pronunciation when you're a beginner learner of a language is that there is simply so much else to learn at that time. You're learning brand new vocabulary, grammar rules, verb conjugations, and sometimes even a whole new alphabet. Most teachers and learners will allow horrible pronunciation at that stage because there is simply so much else to learn. It's a success when you're able to have even a simple English conversation, no matter how poor your pronunciation is.

However, studying pronunciation now, when you're already fluent enough to read this text in English, can be frustrating. You might wonder: *Why didn't anyone ever teach me these things before? Why are people still misunderstanding me? Why don't people correct my speech? Why is that word pronounced **that** way? It doesn't make any sense!*

The good news is that it will get easier, just like irregular verbs or verb tenses eventually got easier. Keep practicing, keep learning, keep listening, and keep speaking. And never give up.

---

## O: Organize Your Learning

---

The list of things you might want to learn and practice about pronunciation could go on and on. The students of mine who learn best organize what they want to remember in a way that personally works for them.

Some students put colored tabs in their books, some keep a notebook of words to practice when they have a few minutes while waiting to pick their kids up at school, some make elaborate spreadsheets for themselves, some use apps on their phones.

As long as it works for you, which system you choose doesn't matter. Just the process of creating a system to organize yourself allows your learning to become long term. Beyond that, you gain a reference system for yourself so that when you do forget something, you have a way to quickly find the answer you're looking for.

One place you can begin organizing your learning is by filling in the sound chart at the back of this book (see [Appendix: Sound Chart](#)).

---

## Q: Quit Comparing

---

Comparing your pronunciation to native English speakers or even other non-native English speakers is a good way to make yourself feel terrible. We all have talents and skills in different areas. If someone else who speaks the same first language as you do has “better” English pronunciation, there may have been a lot of factors that are beyond your control.

For instance, I met a group of French-speaking Canadians in a bar in Seattle once (yes, even teachers go to bars). Some had very strong accents and some had very slight accents. I asked one of the people with a very slight accent how his pronunciation was so native-like. His response was, “I watched a lot of English-speaking cartoons when I was growing up and I imitated them.” He unknowingly played the biology card. He learned things about English pronunciation before his brain made it very difficult to learn the things we struggle with as adults. It would have been unfair for any of the other people in his group to have compared their English pronunciation to his.

Factors (outside of age) for learning pronunciation include:

- exposure to native English speakers
- natural language talents
- access to a teacher or coach
- amount of time available to study and practice
- how different your first language is from English
- how many other languages you speak

So don't worry if it seems like you should be improving faster than you are. If you're paying attention to pronunciation at all, you're probably improving.

---

## R: R-Controlled Vowels

---

R-controlled vowels (sometimes called r-colored vowels) are a main difference between a North American accent and the accents of the United Kingdom and Australia. Most of the native English speakers in North America say the /r/ where it is written. Other places drop the /r/ unless it's between vowel sounds. If your first exposure to English was not American English, you'll probably need to spend a little extra time learning to add the /r/ back into words.

### American English r-controlled vowels

SOUND	IPA	KEY WORD
schwa+r:	/ə/	stir: /stə/
ar sound:	/ɑr/	star: /stɑr/
or sound:	/ɔr/	store: /stɔr/
air sound:	/ɛr/	stair: /stɛr/

If you're practicing the accent of North America, it's good to know that the /r/ completely takes over or changes or the vowel sounds before it. We have four r-controlled vowels:

- schwa+r /ə/ (takes over the vowel and **only** the /r/ is pronounced) examples:
  - her, girl, burn, doctor
- air sound /ɛr/ examples:
  - stair, chair, scare
- ar sound /ɑr/ examples:
  - arm, car, start
- or sound /ɔr/ examples:
  - short, order, before

Learn more about r-controlled vowels in American English here: <https://pronuncian.com/r-controlled-vowels>

---

## S: Schwa /ə/

---

If you want to have good English rhythm, you've got to use reduced, unstressed vowel sounds. Native English speakers use the contrast of reduced syllables to allow the stressed syllable of a word or even whole words of a sentence to stand out. The most common way to reduce a syllable is to use schwa. What's schwa?

### What is schwa?



**banana:** /bə 'næ nə/

The mysterious unstressed vowel sound explained!

Schwa is a small, quick, reduced vowel sound that often occurs in unstressed syllables next to stressed syllables. It sounds like the “u” in the word *sun* and is the first and third vowel sound in the word *banana*.

Understanding schwa allows words to become more *phonetic*, or pronounced the way we expect based on its spelling. If you don't understand schwa, you're likely to use the same vowel sound in the first syllables of the words

*common* /'kɑm ən/ and *commit* /kə 'mɪt/. However, the vowel sound in the first syllable of *common* sounds like the vowel sound in the word *top* /tɑp/, but the vowel sound in the first syllable of *commit* sounds more like the vowel sound in *sun*. Why? Because we use schwa on unstressed syllables next to stressed syllables.

Because schwa is subtle, many non-native English speakers don't even realize that they are over-pronouncing vowels. Also, since schwa is a concept that many native English speakers use, but aren't aware of, they seldom offer pronunciation corrections regarding schwa. Schwa is one of the places a professional can offer a lot of help (see [H: Hire a Professional](#)).

Learn more about schwa pronunciation here: <https://pronuncian.com/intro-to-schwa>

---

## T: Trust the Library in Your Head

---

If you're fluent enough in English to be reading this, you have probably already created a huge library of English in your head. You've probably heard millions of words spoken in English — yes millions! Hearing those words over and over means that they now live in your head, ready to be accessed by your brain when you need them.

If you can quiet your brain enough to ask yourself if you know the answer, you will probably find that you already have more answers than you thought! When you get to this stage of learning, language becomes intuitive to you. You know things you didn't know you knew. How fun is that?

For instance, maybe you're not positive which syllable is stressed in the word *professional*, or if the 'h' in *honest* is silent or not. Just ask yourself: *Does this sound right?* If you don't know which syllable is stressed, try it multiple ways and ask yourself which one sounds right. If you don't know which vowel sound a word is pronounced with, try it a few different ways and listen to which seems most correct.

The library in your head also works with grammar and word usage, like which preposition goes with a specific verb. Try it multiple ways, then use the one that matches the library in your head.

---

## U: Unvoiced and Voiced Sounds

---

The terms unvoiced and voiced sounds describes whether the vocal cords are vibrating or not during a sound. Because unvoiced sounds don't use the vocal cords, they are also called "whisper sounds."

Sixteen of the English consonant sounds occur in an unvoiced/voiced pair. Unvoiced/voiced pairs have the same vocal tract shape (see [V: Vocal Tract](#)); the difference between the sounds is the vocal cords vibrating during the sound or not. Unvoiced sounds do not engage the vocal cords; voiced sound do. For instance, /p/ is an unvoiced sound; it's partner is /b/. The /p/ doesn't require the vocal cords to vibrate in order to say the sound; the /b/ does.


Of the nine unvoiced sounds, only /h/ doesn't have a voiced partner. In addition to the seven voiced consonant sounds without an unvoiced partner, all of vowels and r-controlled vowels (see [R: R-Controlled Vowels](#)) are voiced in English.

Voiced/Unvoiced Pairs	
Voiced	Unvoiced
/b/ boy	→ /p/ pen
/d/ dog	→ /t/ two
/g/ go	→ /k/ kid
/dʒ/ just	→ /tʃ/ chin
/ð/ the	→ /θ/ think
/v/ vote	→ /f/ few
/z/ zoo	→ /s/ so
/ʒ/ vision	→ /ʃ/ she

Other Voiced Consonants	/l/ let
	/m/ me
	/n/ no
	/ŋ/ sing
	/r/ red
	/w/ we
	/j/ yes

Other Unvoiced Consonant
/h/ him


Knowing which sounds are voiced and which are unvoiced is important because it tells us whether the *-ed* ending will be pronounced as /t/, /d/ or /əd/. For instance, the word "laugh," /læf/ ends in an /f/, which is unvoiced. Therefore, the would *laughed* is pronounced /læft/. The word *live*, on the other hand, ends in the /v/, which is a voiced sound. Because of that voiced sound, the word *lived* is pronounced /lɪvd/ (see [E: -ed Ending](#)).

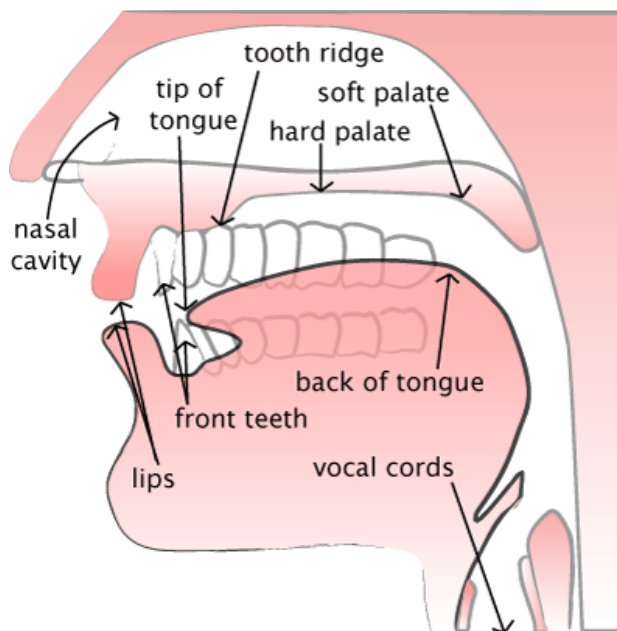


---

## V: Vocal Tract

---

Your vocal tract (the area responsible for creating speech sounds) is probably bigger than you think. It includes the nose (for instance, try saying the /m/ while holding your nose shut—you can't do it), all of the inside of the mouth, the tongue, the jaw and the muscles that control it, and the vocal cords deep in the throat. If you want to feel where your vocal cords are, put a few fingers on the front of your throat and say the /m/ again. The vibration you feel on your fingers is the vocal cords vibrating. Remember, not all sounds in English use the vocal cords (see [U: Unvoiced and Voiced Sounds](#)).



Take the time to study the vocal tract. Make sure you understand all the parts of it. It will make studying English pronunciation much easier.

---

## W: Watch Videos

---

It sounds too simple to be effective, but watching videos is a great way to practice your listening, and listening is the most important skill to build if you want to understand details about pronunciation.

The best videos are ones that you can turn on closed captioning or read a script while watching. Having a script available allows you to notice the words you didn't hear. These will often be function words (articles, pronouns, prepositions, auxiliary verbs, etc), contractions (can't, he's, you're), and -ed or -s endings. If you're not hearing them, you're probably not saying them.

Read through the script separately from watching the videos. Look for places you know you have a hard time hearing something. Mark those areas, then watch the videos again. Did you hear what you thought you would?

If you want to watch educational videos about English pronunciation, we've produced a number of them on some important topics. You can view them on our YouTube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/user/SeattleLearning>.



In addition to videos, you can listen to audio. If you're very excited to learn about pronunciation, listen to our *American English Pronunciation Podcast*. There is always a script to follow, plus you'll get pronunciation lessons while listening. It's perfect!

Subscribe to our podcast via iTunes here: <https://itunes.apple.com/us/podcast/american-english-pronunciation-podcast/id276921054?mt=2>

Or subscribe via SoundCloud here: <https://soundcloud.com/user-772841178>

---

## X: Explore

---

(Yeah, it's always hard to create something that works with "X," so let's go with this.)

There are lots of ways to learn a language, so be curious! Explore language. Play with it. Read children's books (Dr. Seuss is great for how his books play with sound and rhyme). Get exposure to authentic language by participating in social media like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. (Of course you can follow our Facebook page, too: <https://www.facebook.com/pronuncian>.) When you read what native English speakers write, you learn the patterns of language.

You can also explore language more formally by using a corpus. The *Corpus of Contemporary American English* (<http://corpus.byu.edu/coca/>), though not a beautiful website, allows you to search for words and phrases and then see those words and phrases in sentences from a variety of genres in both written and spoken English. I've learned huge amounts from exploring words in that corpus!

If you heard a word that sounded like slang to you, you can look it up in the Urban Dictionary (<https://urbandictionary.com/>). A word of warning, the *Urban Dictionary* contains a lot of swearing and other vulgarities, so use it with caution!

There are hundreds of good YouTube channels that focus on different aspects of learning English. Ours (<https://www.youtube.com/user/SeattleLearning>) focuses on English pronunciation, but there are many others, as well.

And, of course, if you can travel or live in an English-speaking country, do it!

---

## Y: You Can Do It!

---

When my students improve their pronunciation, lots of other fun things start to happen. They get excited about being understood when ordering from Starbucks at a drive-up window (yes, we have drive-through Starbucks in Seattle — kind of a lot of them, actually.) They feel more confident having business meetings over the phone. They become more comfortable speaking to people at parties and social events.

As your confidence grows in using language, your pronunciation continues to improve more quickly because you're not afraid to speak anymore. It starts with knowing you can do it, and then doing it.

So go do it!

---

## Z: Zero Judgement

---

Learning pronunciation can be hard, and it can be harder for some people than it is for others. However, never judge yourself for how quickly you're learning or not. You can't break old habits on a schedule. Changes in pronunciation don't work that way.

Changing pronunciation is a developmental process. You learn a little, try it out, play with it, and practice. Then you notice something new that you'd like to play with regarding pronunciation and you add that to your set of new skills. Trying to learn it all at once is overwhelming.

So don't judge yourself about your pace of learning, by your speed of breaking old habits, or by your accuracy with new sounds. Instead, celebrate that you're a multi-lingual human and you're fluent enough in English to have just read this whole book.

You're amazing!

## Appendix: Sound Chart

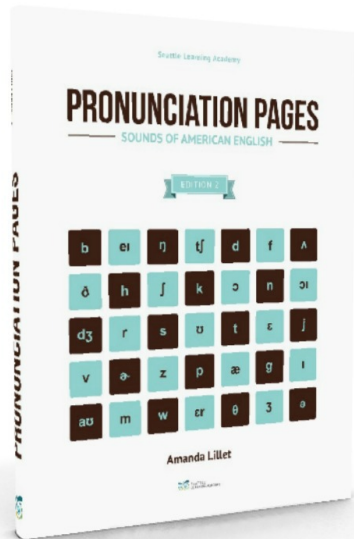
IPA SYMBOL	SOUND NAME	KEY WORD	YOUR DICTIONARY SYMBOL
/eɪ/	long a	<u>c</u> ake	_____
/æ/	short a	<u>c</u> at	_____
/i/	long e	<u>k</u> ee <u>p</u>	_____
/ɛ/	short e	<u>b</u> ed	_____
/aɪ/	long i	<u>b</u> i <u>k</u> e	_____
/ɪ/	short i	<u>s</u> it	_____
/oʊ/	long o	<u>h</u> o <u>m</u> e	_____
/ɑ/	short o	<u>t</u> op	_____
/ju/	long u	<u>c</u> u <u>t</u> e	_____
/ʌ/	short u	<u>s</u> un	_____
/ʊ/	other u	<u>p</u> u <u>t</u>	_____
/u/	oo sound	<u>s</u> o <u>o</u> n	_____
/ɔ/	aw sound	<u>d</u> o <u>g</u>	_____
/ɔɪ/	oi sound	<u>j</u> o <u>i</u> n	_____
/aʊ/	ow sound	<u>d</u> o <u>w</u> n	_____
/ə/	schwa+r	<u>s</u> t <u>i</u> r	_____
/ɑr/	ar sound	<u>s</u> t <u>a</u> r	_____
/ɔr/	or sound	<u>s</u> t <u>o</u> r <u>e</u>	_____
/ɛr/	air sound	<u>s</u> t <u>a</u> i <u>r</u>	_____
/b/	b sound	<u>b</u> o <u>y</u>	_____
/tʃ/	ch sound	<u>c</u> h <u>e</u> e <u>s</u> e	_____
/d/	d sound	<u>d</u> o	_____
/f/	f sound	<u>f</u> ac <u>e</u>	_____
/g/	g sound	<u>g</u> o	_____
/h/	h sound	<u>h</u> e	_____
/dʒ/	j sound	<u>j</u> o <u>y</u>	_____
/k/	k sound	<u>c</u> at	_____
/l/	l sound	<u>l</u> et	_____
/m/	m sound	<u>m</u> e	_____
/n/	n sound	<u>n</u> o	_____
/ŋ/	ng sound	<u>s</u> ing	_____
/p/	p sound	<u>p</u> en	_____
/r/	r sound	<u>r</u> ed	_____
/s/	s sound	<u>s</u> o	_____
/ʃ/	sh sound	<u>s</u> h <u>e</u>	_____
/t/	t sound	<u>t</u> op	_____
/θ/	unvoiced th	<u>t</u> h <u>i</u> nk	_____
/ð/	voiced th	<u>t</u> h <u>e</u> m	_____
/v/	v sound	<u>v</u> er <u>y</u>	_____
/w/	w sound	<u>w</u> e	_____
/y/	y sound	<u>y</u> es	_____
/z/	z sound	<u>z</u> oo	_____
/ʒ/	zh sound	<u>u</u> s <u>u</u> al	_____

---

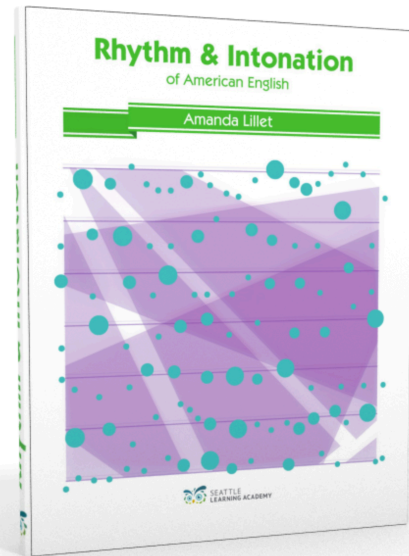
## Keep Learning!

---

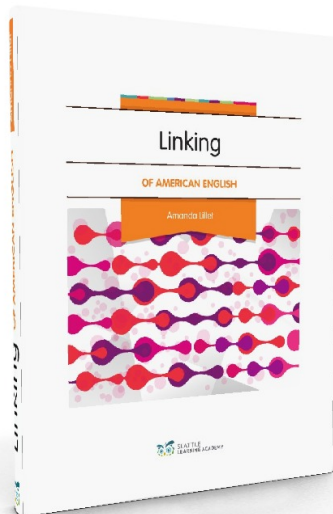
Download an ebook now to keep learning more about all the topics mentioned here!



[Pronunciation Pages 2](#)  
ebook \$42



[Rhythm and Intonation](#)  
ebook \$42



[Linking of American English](#)  
ebook \$18

See all of our books and other products at <https://pronuncian.com/books-products/>

Amanda Lillet  
[pronuncian.com](http://pronuncian.com) © 2017