

# Minimal Pairs

*desk disk, fan van*



A **minimal pair** is *two words that vary by only a single sound*, usually meaning sounds that may confuse English learners, like the /f/ and /v/ in *fan* and *van*, or the /e/ and /i/ in *desk* and *disk*.

A **minimal pair** or **close pair** consists of two words with sounds that are very similar but have different meanings.

A **minimal pair** is a pair of words that differ in a single phoneme. Minimal pairs are often used to show that two sounds contrast in a language. For example, we can demonstrate that [s] and [z] contrast in English by adducing minimal pairs such as *sip* and *zip*, or *bus* and *buzz*. Since the only difference in these words is the [s] vs. [z], we conclude that they belong to distinct phonemes.

In short, minimal pairs serve as tools to establish that two or more sounds are *contrastive*. A difference in sound means a difference in meaning.

## Examples of Minimal Pairs

- "We looked!  
Then we saw him step in on  
the *mat*!  
We looked!  
And we saw him!  
The *Cat* in the *Hat*!" (Seuss 1957).
- "*Cheers* and *Jeers* provides an opportunity to use music and humor to relax and release tension," (Holcomb 2017).
- "Unless someone like you cares a whole awful *lot*, nothing is going to get better. It's *not*," (Seuss 1971).

In [phonology](#), **minimal pairs** are pairs of [words](#) or phrases in a particular [language](#), spoken or [signed](#), that differ in only one phonological element, such as a [phoneme](#), [toneme](#) or [chroneme](#),<sup>[1]</sup> and have

distinct meanings. They are used to demonstrate that two [phones](#) are two separate phonemes in the language.

**Minimal Pair /ɪ/ and /i:/** *sit seat*

**Minimal Pair /e/ and /ɪ/** *desk disk*

**Minimal Pair /e/ and /eɪ/** *wet wait*

**Minimal Pair /æ/ and /ʌ/** *bat but*

**Minimal Pair /b/ and /v/** *berry very*

**Minimal Pair /b/ and /p/** *buy pie*

**Minimal Pair /n/ and /ŋ/** *thin thing*

**Minimal Pair /l/ and /r/** *alive arrive*

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Minimal\\_pair](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Minimal_pair)

<https://www.thoughtco.com/minimal-pair-phonetics-1691392>

<https://www.englishclub.com/pronunciation/minimal-pairs.htm>