

# Phoneme

**Phoneme**, in [linguistics](#), smallest unit of [speech](#) distinguishing one word (or word element) from another, as the element *p* in “tap,” which separates that word from “tab,” “tag,” and “tan.” A [phoneme](#) may have more than one variant, called an [allophone](#) (*q.v.*), which functions as a single sound; for example, the *p*’s of “pat,” “spat,” and “tap” differ slightly phonetically, but that difference, determined by [context](#), has no significance in English. In some languages, where the variant sounds of *p* can change meaning, they are classified as separate phonemes—*e.g.*, in [Thai](#) the aspirated *p* (pronounced with an accompanying puff of air) and unaspirated *p* are distinguished one from the other.

[Phonemes](#) are based on spoken language and may be recorded with special symbols, such as those of the [International Phonetic Alphabet](#). In transcription, linguists conventionally place symbols for phonemes between slash marks: /p/. The term *phoneme* is usually restricted to vowels and consonants, but some linguists extend its application to cover phonologically relevant differences of pitch, [stress](#), and rhythm. Nowadays the phoneme often has a less central place in phonological theory than it used to have, especially in American linguistics. Many linguists regard the phoneme as a set of simultaneous distinctive features rather than as an unanalyzable unit.

**A phoneme is the smallest unit of sound** that distinguishes one word from another word in a language. This chart shows all the phonemes used when speaking English.

s sat	t tap	p pan	n nose	m mat	a ant	e egg	i ink	o otter
g goat	d dog	c k click	r run	h hat	u up	ai rain	ee knee	igh light
b bus	f farm	l lolly	j jam	v van	oa boat	oo cook	oo boot	ar star
w wish	x axe	y yell	z zap	qu quill	or fork	ur burn	ow now	oi boil
ch chin	sh ship	th think	th the	ng sing	ear near	air stair	ure sure	er writer

Words, such as: cat, nap, pin, tap, etc. have three distinct sounds (phonemes). For example, cat has the three sounds: /c/ /a/ and /t/.

Phonemes that are established by the use of minimal pairs, such as *tap* vs *tab* or *pat* vs *bat*, are written between slashes: /p/, /b/. To show pronunciation, linguists use [square brackets](#): [p<sup>h</sup>] (indicating an [aspirated](#) *p* in *pat*).

. However, a phoneme is generally regarded as an [abstraction](#) of a set (or [equivalence class](#)) of [speech](#) sounds ([phones](#)) that are perceived as equivalent to each other in a given language. For example, the

English *k* sounds in the words *kill* and *skill* are not identical (as described [below](#)), but they are distributional variants of a single phoneme /k/. Speech sounds that differ but do not create a meaningful change in the word are known as [allophones](#) of the same phoneme.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Phoneme#Distribution of allophones](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Phoneme#Distribution_of_allophones)

<https://www.britannica.com/topic/phoneme>