

## VOWELS

Though there are many consonants in English (and in general), much more than can be individually represented by the 26 letters in the alphabet, vowels can sometimes be even harder to describe.

While consonants can at least be described with precise terms and actions, vowels tend to be more of approximations in the IPA. This is because vowels tend to lie more on a spectrum than consonants, and also because vowels can change subtly from accent to accent and from language to language.

However, these subtleties can make a noticeable difference to our ears. Because I personally am an American English speaker, I am most familiar with the standard American accent (General American) and some of its variations, as well as the standard British accent (Received Pronunciation).

i: sheep	ɪ ship	ʊ good	u: shoot
e bed	ə teacher	ɜ: bird	ɔ: door
æ cat	ʌ up	ɑ: far	ɒ on

So some of the following examples will mostly serve as a way to get you familiar with some of these IPA symbols. But even the same symbol can represent slightly different vowels, since, as mentioned before, vowels tend to lie on a spectrum.

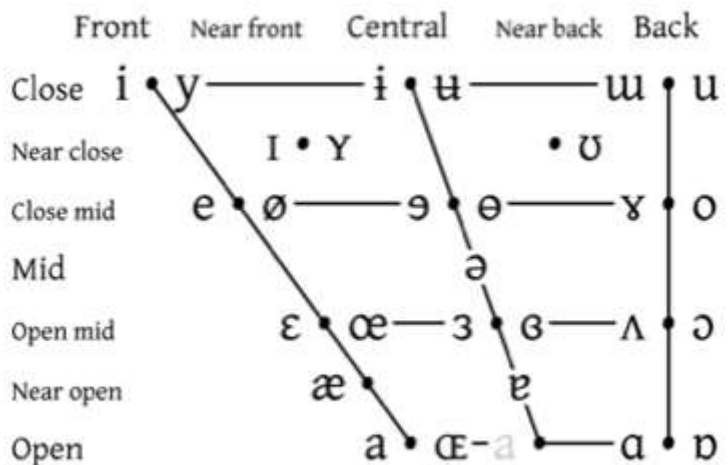
Really, it is best to use your ears to listen to how English is spoken by different people, and then compare that to the IPA symbols.

Three major factors in the production of vowels are the openness, or height, of the mouth, the position of the tongue, and the roundness of the lips.

- If a vowel is produced while the mouth is almost closed, it would be considered a **close** vowel. If the vowel is slightly more open, it would be considered a **mid** vowel. And if the mouth is open very tall, it would be considered an **open** vowel.
- If the tongue is positioned near the front of the mouth, any vowel produced would be a **front** vowel. If the tongue were set slightly more back in the mouth, the vowel would be a **central** vowel. If the tongue were set in the far back of the mouth, the vowel would be a **back** vowel.
- If a vowel is produced while the lips are tense and rounded, it would be considered a **rounded** vowel. If the vowel is produced while the lips are relaxed, it would be considered an **unrounded** vowel.

In order to better visualize these differences, it's helpful to look at a chart. Think of the following chart as a diagram of the mouth facing left sideways, where the position of the tongue traces along the different points to produce different vowels.

## VOWELS



Vowels at right & left of bullets are rounded & unrounded.

/æ/

Found in words like: **cat**, **lad**, **bat**

Letters that usually represent it: "a"

/ɑ/

Found in words like: **off**, **loss**, **cloth** (General American)

Letters that usually represent it: "o," "a"

Notice that this symbol is different from the symbol /ɑ/, which some people pronounce in the word “father.” However, the symbol has been omitted from this list.

/ɔ/

Found in words like: **law**, **caught**, **all**, **talk**

Letters that usually represent it: “a,” “aw,” “au,” “al”

At least in the General American accent, this is an interesting sound because it’s starting to fall out of usage. For example, there used to be a clear geographical distinction in the United States between people who pronounced the words “cot” and “caught” the same and those who pronounced with different vowels (/ɑ/ and /ɔ/).

These days, however, there is a much blurrier distinction between these two pronunciations, and many more Americans are beginning to pronounce both “cot” and “caught” with the /ɑ/ vowel. This is what linguists call the “cot-caught merger” and is an example of how certain sounds are currently dying out of English pronunciations.

/ə/

Found in words like: **about**, **the**, **spotted**, **lemon**, **basil**, **analysis**, **acumen**

Letters that usually represent it: almost any vowel

This symbol is known as the “schwa” and is often called the neutral vowel. Technically, it is the “mid central unrounded vowel,” and in English, it is only used for unstressed vowels. Stressed vowels that make a similar sound are represented by the /ʊ/ symbol.

What’s interesting about the schwa is that almost any vowel letter in English can make this sound, probably because it is the *neutral* vowel, and therefore a logical go-to for any vowel that becomes weakened from a lack of stress.

/ɪ/

Found in words like: **sit**, **hidden**, **amiss**

Letters that usually represent it: “i,” “y”

/i/

Found in words like: **city**, **see**, **meat**, **theme**, **fluorine**, **people**

Letters that usually represent it: “ee,” “ea,” “y,” “i”

This is one of the few IPA symbols where its uppercase counterpart is a separate symbol. Notice the difference between /i/ and /ɪ/.

/ɛ/

Found in words like: **bed**, **instead**, **friend**  
Letters that usually represent it: “e,” “ea”

In Australian and other accents, this sound is replaced entirely by the /e/ sound, which is a more close, front vowel and has a brighter sound.

/ɪ/ or /ə/

Found in words like: **burn**, **herd**, **earth**, **bird**, **worm**, **amateur**, **winner** (General American)  
Letters that usually represent it: “er,” “ear,” “ir,” “or,” “ur,” “eur”

These two symbols feature diacritics, which are small markings added to IPA symbols to modify their sounds. The small notch placed beneath the /ɪ/ symbol indicates that it can constitute its own syllable without the help of a vowel. Meanwhile the little tail added to the schwa colors it with the /ɪ/ sound.

/ɜ/

Found in words like: **burn**, **herd**, **earth**, **bird**, **worm** (Received Pronunciation)  
Letters that usually represent it: “er,” “ear,” “ir,” “or,” “ur,” “eur”

Not to be confused with the /ɛ/ symbol.

/ʌ/

Found in words like: **run**, **won**, **flood**, **sudden**, **alumnus**  
Letters that usually represent it: “u,” “o,” “oo”

/ʊ/

Found in words like: **put**, **look**, **would**  
Letters that usually represent it: “oo,” “oul,” “u”

Remember that this sound is very similar to the schwa sound, but it is typically reserved for stressed syllables.

/u/

Found in words like: **tube**, **you**, **choose**, **through**, **threw**, **issue**  
Letters that usually represent it: “oo,” “u,” “ou,” “ew”

In a broad transcription (general use of the IPA) of English, it is acceptable to simply use the /u/ symbol alone.

However, it is more accurate to use this symbol for sounds such as the “u” in the Spanish word “**tú**” or “**luna**,” where the vowel is much purer than in English. For a narrower transcription in English, you can use the symbols /ʊ/ or /əʊ/, depending on the accent.

/o/

Found in words like: **no, toe, soap, throw, though**

Letters that usually represent it: “o,” “oe,” “oa,” “ow”

Similar to /u/’s case, this symbol is acceptable to use in a broad transcription of English, but it really represents the sound that “o” makes in the Spanish word “**hola**” or “**gato**.”

In English, the “o” is sound is typically more of a diphthong and can be represented with something like [oʊ]. In Australian English, the sound is more of an [ɔʊ].

<https://www.myenglishteacher.eu/blog/phonetics-consonants-vowels-diphthongs-ipa-chart/>