
II American English Vowels

Objective:

To understand and master the vowel system in American English, focusing on their pronunciation, articulation, and usage in speech and writing.

II.1 Introduction to Vowels

II.1.1 What are Vowels?

- **Definition:** Sounds produced without any significant constriction or blockage of airflow in the vocal tract.
- **Role in Language:** Vowels form the nucleus of syllables and are critical in determining word pronunciation.

II.1.2 The American English Vowel System

- **Monophthongs:** Single vowel sounds (e.g., /i/, /æ/).
- **Diphthongs:** Combination of two vowel sounds (e.g., /aɪ/, /oʊ/).
- **Importance of Vowel Length and Tension:** Tense vs. lax vowels, and how they affect pronunciation.

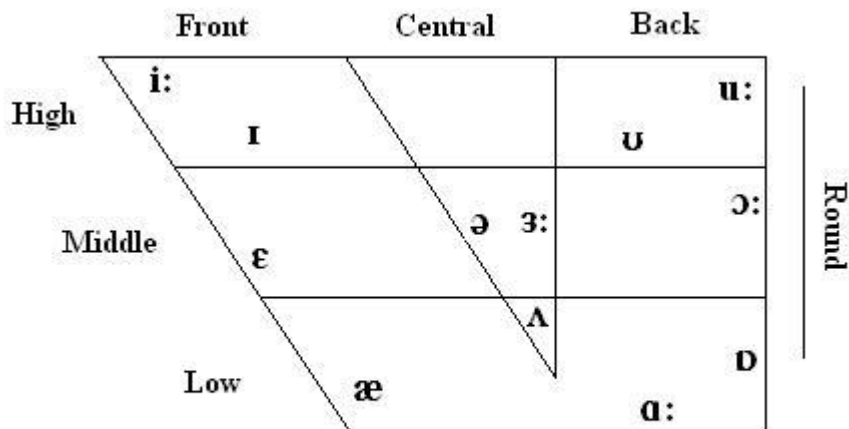


Fig 1. English vowels chart

II.2 American English Monophthongs

II.2.1 Front Vowels

1. /i/ (as in *beat*):
 - Tense, high front vowel.
 - Example words: *seat, feet, he.*
2. /ɪ/ (as in *bit*):
 - Lax, high front vowel.
 - Example words: *sit, hit, pin.*
3. /e/ (as in *bait*):
 - Mid front vowel.
 - Example words: *say, pay, way.*
4. /ɛ/ (as in *bet*):
 - Lax, mid front vowel.
 - Example words: *bed, head, get.*
5. /æ/ (as in *bat*):
 - Low front vowel.
 - Example words: *cat, hat, rat.*

II.2.2 Central Vowels

1. /ʌ/ (as in *but*):
 - Mid central vowel.
 - Example words: *sun, fun, up.*

2. /ə/ (schwa, as in *sofa*):
 - Unstressed, mid central vowel.
 - Example words: *about, banana, camera*.

II.2.3 Back Vowels

1. /u/ (as in *boot*):
 - Tense, high back vowel.
 - Example words: *food, mood, blue*.
2. /ʊ/ (as in *book*):
 - Lax, high back vowel.
 - Example words: *look, foot, good*.
3. /ɒ/ (as in *boat*):
 - Mid back vowel.
 - Example words: *go, no, so*.
4. /ɔ/ (as in *bought*):
 - Low-mid back vowel.
 - Example words: *thought, law, saw*.
5. /ɑ/ (as in *father*):
 - Low back vowel.
 - Example words: *car, star, father*.

II.3 American English Diphthongs

II.3.1 Rising Diphthongs

1. /aɪ/ (as in *bite*):
 - Glide from a low front vowel to a high front vowel.
 - Example words: *I, my, cry*.
2. /aʊ/ (as in *bout*):
 - Glide from a low front vowel to a high back vowel.
 - Example words: *now, house, brown*.
3. /ɔɪ/ (as in *boy*):
 - Glide from a mid back vowel to a high front vowel.
 - Example words: *toy, joy, annoy*.

II.3.2 Centering Diphthongs

1. /eɪ/ (as in *day*):
 - Glide from a mid front vowel to a high front vowel.
 - Example words: *say, lay, play*.
2. /oo/ (as in *go*):
 - Glide from a mid back vowel to a high back vowel.
 - Example words: *so, go, no*.

II.4 Phonetic Characteristics of American Vowels

II.4.1 Tense vs. Lax Vowels

- **Tense Vowels:** /i/, /e/, /u/, /o/, /ɑ/ (longer, with more muscle tension).
- **Lax Vowels:** /ɪ/, /ɛ/, /ʊ/, /æ/, /ʌ/ (shorter, with less muscle tension).

II.4.2 Vowel Length

- American English does not rely heavily on vowel length for meaning (unlike languages like Japanese or Finnish).
- However, tense vowels tend to be longer than lax vowels.

II.4.3 Nasalization

- Vowels become nasalized when followed by nasal consonants like /m/, /n/, and /ŋ/ (as in *man, can, song*).

II.5 Stress and Intonation with Vowels

II.5.1 Stress Patterns

- The role of vowels in stressed and unstressed syllables.
- Schwa (/ə/) in unstressed syllables and its significance.

II.5.2 Intonation Patterns

- How vowels affect the rise and fall of pitch in American English speech.

II.6 Practical Exercises

II.6.1 Listening and Pronunciation Practice

- Listen and repeat exercises focusing on minimal pairs (e.g., *beat* vs. *bit*, *cot* vs. *caught*).

- Exercises to practice distinguishing between tense and lax vowels.

II.6.2 Phonetic Transcription

- Practice transcribing words using the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) for better understanding of vowel sounds.

II.6.3 Vocabulary and Spelling Practice

- Recognize vowel patterns in American English spelling and how they correspond to different vowel sounds.
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Minimal Pairs Listening and Repeat

Exercise 1: /i:/ vs. /ɪ/

1. **beat / bit**
2. **seat / sit**
3. **sheep / ship**

Instructions:

1. Listen to each pair carefully.
2. Repeat each word, focusing on the vowel sound.
3. Pay attention to the mouth position: /i:/ is tense and longer, /ɪ/ is lax and shorter.

Exercise 2: /ɑ:/ vs. /ɔ:/

1. **cot / caught**
2. **lot / law**
3. **hot / haul**

Instructions:

1. Listen to each pair closely.
2. Repeat each word, emphasizing the differences in vowel quality.
3. Note that /ɑ:/ is more open, while /ɔ:/ is rounded.

Tense vs. Lax Vowel Practice

Exercise 3: Tense /i:/ vs. Lax /ɪ/

1. **heat / hit**
2. **leap / lip**
3. **peach / pitch**

Instructions:

1. Practice saying each pair, focusing on the tension in your tongue.
2. Tense vowels are longer and require more muscular effort.

Exercise 4: Tense /u:/ vs. Lax /ʊ/

1. **fool / full**
2. **pool / pull**
3. **Luke / look**

Instructions:

1. Say each word pair, concentrating on the tongue and lip positions.
2. /u:/ is tense with rounded lips, /ʊ/ is more relaxed.

Additional Tips

- **Record Yourself:** Use a recording device to listen to your pronunciation and compare it to native speakers.
- **Use Online Resources:** Websites and apps like Forvo or YouGlish can be helpful for hearing authentic pronunciations.
- **Practice Regularly:** Consistency is key to improving pronunciation.

By regularly practicing these exercises, you'll improve your ability to distinguish and produce American English vowels effectively.

Exercises on American English Diphthongs

Diphthongs are vowel sounds that involve a transition or glide from one vowel to another within the same syllable. In American English, there are several common diphthongs. Below are exercises to practice recognizing, transcribing, and analyzing diphthongs in American English.

Exercise 1: Identify the Diphthongs

In the following list of words, identify which words contain diphthongs and write down the diphthong you hear. The most common American English diphthongs are: /aɪ/ (as in "my"), /aʊ/ (as in "house"), /oʊ/ (as in "go"), /eɪ/ (as in "day"), and /ɔɪ/ (as in "boy").

1. **Play**
 2. **House**
 3. **See**
 4. **Boat**
 5. **Mine**
 6. **Toy**
 7. **Good**
 8. **Mouse**
 9. **Sky**
 10. **Rain**
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Answer Key:

1. **Play** - Diphthong: /eɪ/
2. **House** - Diphthong: /aʊ/
3. **See** - No diphthong
4. **Boat** - Diphthong: /oʊ/
5. **Mine** - Diphthong: /aɪ/
6. **Toy** - Diphthong: /ɔɪ/
7. **Good** - No diphthong
8. **Mouse** - Diphthong: /aʊ/

9. **Sky** - Diphthong: /aɪ/
 10. **Rain** - Diphthong: /eɪ/
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Exercise 2: Transcribe Diphthongs in Phonetic Script

Using the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA), transcribe the diphthongs in the following words.

1. **Night**
 2. **Brown**
 3. **Phone**
 4. **Sky**
 5. **Oil**
 6. **Cow**
 7. **Stay**
 8. **Loud**
 9. **Boy**
 10. **Snow**
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Answer Key:

1. **Night** - /naɪt/
2. **Brown** - /braʊn/
3. **Phone** - /foʊn/
4. **Sky** - /skaɪ/
5. **Oil** - /ɔɪl/
6. **Cow** - /kaʊ/
7. **Stay** - /steɪ/
8. **Loud** - /laʊd/
9. **Boy** - /bɔɪ/
10. **Snow** - /snoʊ/

Exercise 3: Minimal Pairs

Identify which diphthong differentiates the meaning between the following pairs of words.

1. **Buy** vs **Bay**
2. **Bow** vs **Boy**
3. **Coat** vs **Cot**
4. **How** vs **High**
5. **Light** vs **Late**

Answer Key:

1. **Buy** /aɪ/ vs **Bay** /eɪ/
2. **Bow** /aʊ/ vs **Boy** /ɔɪ/
3. **Coat** /oʊ/ vs **Cot** (no diphthong in "cot")
4. **How** /aʊ/ vs **High** /aɪ/
5. **Light** /aɪ/ vs **Late** /eɪ/

Exercise 4: Classify the Diphthongs by Type

The following words contain either closing diphthongs (which move toward a high vowel) or centering diphthongs (which move toward a mid-central vowel like schwa /ə/). Classify each diphthong as a **closing diphthong** or a **centering diphthong**.

1. **Fear**
 2. **Cry**
 3. **Fire**
 4. **Go**
 5. **Sure**
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Answer Key:

1. **Fear** - Centering diphthong (/ɪə/)
 2. **Cry** - Closing diphthong (/aɪ/)
 3. **Fire** - Centering diphthong (/aɪə/)
 4. **Go** - Closing diphthong (/oʊ/)
 5. **Sure** - Centering diphthong (/ʊə/)
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