

Sarah's Sound Guide

General American English

This is a guide to the sound symbols I use when teaching accents and dialects of English. You will find this guide useful whether you are one of my students or are pursuing self-study.

While the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) can be useful, it is rather complicated and can take months of study to master. **It is NOT necessary to learn the IPA to study pronunciation or accents.** All you need is an intuitive, straightforward set of symbols and a good ear. (And you can train your ear of course).

As you go through each sound, look at the word examples to the right to see how sounds can be represented with a variety of different letters in English. This is the reason that you cannot trust spelling when studying accents and pronunciation. I hope you find this guide useful as you learn a new accent or improve your pronunciation. Enjoy!

This resource is free and not copyrighted. Feel free to download it, pass it around, and edit it to fit your needs. I created this list using inspiration from dictionary pronunciation guides, the IPA, and resources from other teachers. See the last page for references.

Front Vowels: Tongue at the front of the mouth

IPA	Symbol Use	Word Example
i	EE	spe <u>ed</u> , se <u>a</u> , de <u>cent</u> , negot <u>i</u> ate
ɪ	IH	s <u>i</u> t, m <u>i</u> ss, s <u>i</u> p
e / eɪ	AY	s <u>a</u> me, p <u>a</u> y, s <u>a</u> y
ɛ	EH	w <u>e</u> nt, b <u>e</u> st, b <u>e</u> d
æ	AE	b <u>a</u> d, d <u>a</u> nce, h <u>a</u> t

Back Vowels: Tongue at the back of the mouth

IPA	Symbol I Use	Word Example
u	UU	<u>boot</u> , <u>sou</u> p, <u>wh</u> o
ʊ	ʊ	<u>book</u> , <u>shook</u> , <u>loo</u> k
o / ɔʊ	OH	<u>know</u> , <u>throu</u> , <u>g</u> o
ɔ	AW	<u>caugh</u> t, <u>co</u> ffee (Not all dialects of English use /AW/. They use /AH/ instead)
ɑ	AH	<u>cot</u> , <u>to</u> p, <u>w</u> atch (You can say both “cot” and “caught” with /AH/. I do.)

Central Vowels: Tongue in the center of mouth

IPA	Symbol I Use	Word Example
ʌ	UH (stressed)	<u>but</u> , <u>shu</u> t, <u>lu</u> ck
ə	uh (unstressed)	<u>care</u> er, <u>econ</u> omy, location

R-colored Vowels (Both Central)

IPA	Symbol Use	Word Example
ɜ	UHR (stressed)	<u>urn</u> , <u>pearl</u>
ə	uhr (unstressed)	weath <u>er</u> , start <u>er</u>

Diphthongs: Two-vowel transitions

IPA	Symbol Use	Word Example
aɪ	AI	k <u>i</u> te, f <u>i</u> ght, fl <u>y</u>
ɔɪ	OI	<u>j</u> oy, b <u>o</u> y, t <u>o</u> y
aʊ	OW	m <u>o</u> uth, s <u>o</u> uth, n <u>o</u> w

Consonants

Consonants are not listed in alphabetical order but rather from where they are pronounced in the mouth, starting from the lips to the back of the throat (larynx).

IPA Symbol	Symbol I Use	Word Example
p	P	<u>p</u> op, <u>p</u> ath
b	B	<u>b</u> ig, <u>b</u> ottle
w	W	<u>w</u> hen, <u>w</u> ow
m	M	<u>m</u> ice, <u>m</u> en
f	F	<u>f</u> ear, tou <u>gh</u>
v	V	<u>v</u> ery, <u>v</u> eal
θ, ð	TH	θ: <u>th</u> in, <u>th</u> eory ð: <u>th</u> is, we <u>th</u> er
t	T	<u>t</u> op, <u>t</u> en
d	D	<u>d</u> eal, <u>d</u> o
r	ɾ (Flapped/Light T)	bu <u>tt</u> er, ma <u>tt</u> er

Consonants Continued

IPA	Symbol I Use	Word Example
s	S	<u>s</u> ale, s <u>u</u> n
z	Z	<u>z</u> oo, z <u>e</u> bra
l	L	<u>l</u> ook, <u>l</u> ove, fu <u>ll</u>
n	N	<u>n</u> o, <u>n</u> on <u>s</u> en <u>s</u> e
ʃ	SH	<u>sh</u> ip, pu <u>sh</u>
ʒ	ZH	mea <u>z</u> ure, trea <u>z</u> ure
tʃ	CH	<u>ch</u> ease, pa <u>ch</u>
dʒ	J	<u>j</u> udge, <u>j</u> ury
j	Y	<u>y</u> ou, <u>y</u> oy, <u>y</u> ellow
r	R	<u>r</u> ed, <u>r</u> un

Consonants Continued

IPA	Symbol Use	Word Example
k	K	<u>k</u> ick, ca <u>k</u> e
g	G	go, ge <u>t</u>
ŋ	NG	si <u>ng</u> , lu <u>ng</u>
h	H	<u>h</u> ard, <u>h</u> appy
ʔ	T̚ (Glottal stop, swallowed T)	wi <u>t</u> ness, bu <u>t</u> ton

References

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