

Pronunciation Guide (English/Academic Dictionaries)

This guide will help you to understand and use the pronunciation symbols found in the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* and the *Oxford Learner's Dictionary of Academic English*.

Consonants

p	pen	/pen/
b	bad	/bæd/
t	tea	/ti:/
d	did	/dɪd/
k	cat	/kæt/
g	get	/get/
tʃ	chain	/tʃeɪn/
dʒ	jam	/dʒæm/
f	fall	/fɔ:l/
v	van	/væn/
θ	thin	/θɪn/
ð	this	/ðɪs/
s	see	/si:/
z	zoo	/zu:/
ʃ	shoe	/ʃu:/
ʒ	vision	/ˈvɪʒn/
h	hat	/hæt/
m	man	/mæn/
n	now	/naʊ/
ŋ	sing	/sɪŋ/
l	leg	/leg/
r	red	/red/
j	yes	/jes/
w	wet	/wet/

The symbol (r) indicates that British pronunciation will have /r/ only if a vowel sound follows directly at the beginning of the next word, as in **far away**; otherwise the /r/ is omitted. For American English, all the /r/ sounds should be pronounced.

/x/ represents a fricative sound as in /lɒx/ for Scottish **loch**, Irish **lough**.

Vowels and diphthongs

i:	see	/si:/
i	happy	/'hæpi/
ɪ	sit	/sɪt/
e	bed	/bed/
æ	cat	/kæt/
ɑ:	father	/'fɑ:ðə(r)/
ɒ	got	/gɒt/ (<i>British English</i>)
ɔ:	saw	/sɔ:/
ʊ	put	/pʊt/
u	actual	/'æktʃuəl/
u:	too	/tu:/
ʌ	cup	/kʌp/
ɜ:	fur	/fɜ:(r)/
ə	about	/ə'baʊt/
eɪ	say	/seɪ/
əʊ	go	/gəʊ/
aɪ	my	/maɪ/
ɔɪ	boy	/bɔɪ/
aʊ	now	/naʊ/
ɪə	near	/nɪə(r)/ (<i>British English</i>)
eə	hair	/heə(r)/ (<i>British English</i>)
ʊə	pure	/pjʊə(r)/ (<i>British English</i>)

Nasalized vowels, marked with /~/, may be retained in certain words taken from French, as in **penchant** /'pɒ̃ʃɑ̃t/.

While represented by the same symbols in the dictionary, some vowels and diphthongs differ in quality between British and American English.

Pronunciation in the dictionary

The pronunciations given are those of younger speakers of 'mainstream' or 'unmarked' Received Pronunciation (British English) and 'General' or 'Network' American (American English). These models represent accents that are widely taught and easily recognized as British or American. They enable clear communication, are not old-fashioned or strongly regional, and are acceptable in formal and informal situations.

Pronunciations given between slashes /,laɪk 'ðɪs/ are transcribed broadly, using a phonemic system. This means that symbols from the International Phonetic Alphabet are used to represent the sounds and features that distinguish one word from another in English. If the symbols are treated simply as sounds the speaker will be clearly understood — words such as **cap** /kæp/ and **cup** /kʌp/ will not be confused. The more advanced learner will understand that these symbols

(phonemes) represent groups of related English sounds (allophones), and that the choice of symbols is guided by a long tradition of teaching and representing English pronunciation in this way.

The broad approach to transcription is accompanied by a selective approach to variant pronunciations. For example, the transcriptions make clear that the vowel /ɒ/ occurs only in British English, with American pronunciations usually having /ɔ:/ or /ɑ:/ instead. For these words there is some variation between /ɔ:/ and /ɑ:/ among speakers of American English, but only one such pronunciation is given.

Some variant pronunciations are represented by the special use of /i/ and /u/ (without a length mark /:/). /i/ represents a weak vowel that can be sounded either as /i:/ or /ɪ/ or a compromise between them. The sequence /iə/ can be pronounced /jə/, so **union** can be /'ju:niən/ or /'ju:njən/. In the same way /u/ represents a weak vowel between /u:/ and /ʊ/. If followed by a consonant sound it can be pronounced as /ə/, and the sequence /uə/ can be pronounced /wə/, as in **actual** /'æktʃuəl, 'æktʃwəl/.

Further information about a pronunciation may be given in square brackets ['laɪk 'ðɪs], referring more specifically to sounds on the [IPA chart](#). This narrow transcription is useful for representing pronunciations or sounds that are not British or American, for example the East African pronunciation ['boma] given at [boma](#).

Allophones

Allophones can be demonstrated by looking at the /t/ phoneme. In addition to [t], the /t/ phoneme also contains tap [ɾ] and glottal stop [ʔ] sounds, which are used in certain contexts. The [ɾ] **tap** sound is very much like the /d/ in **rider**. It is widely used by American speakers when the /t/ is between two vowels and the second vowel is not stressed, as in **writer**. Both British and American speakers sometimes use the glottal stop [ʔ] (a momentary tight closure of the vocal cords) for the /t/ in words like **football** /'fʊtbɔ:l/ and **button** /'bʌtn/. Use of the glottal stop for /t/ in these positions is more common and more widely accepted than its use between vowels, as in **water**.

Such considerations are not limited to the /t/ phoneme. For example, the /l/ phoneme encompasses a clear [l] sound for words such as **like** /laɪk/ (where the /l/ is before or between vowels) and a dark [ɫ] sound for other positions, as in **full** /fʊl/ or **milk** /mɪlk/. The sound files that accompany our phonemic transcriptions are intended to supplement the phonemic transcriptions and demonstrate such detail.

Syllabic consonants

The sounds /l/ and /n/ can often be syllabic — that is, they can form a syllable by themselves. They can be thought of as representing a sequence of [ɹl] or [ɹn].

There is a syllabic /l/ at the end of **final** /'faɪnl/, but for clarity the schwa /ə/ is shown in the transcription of **finally** /'faɪnəli/ so that it is not confused with **finely** /'faɪnli/.

Weak and strong forms

Some pronunciations are labelled as strong or weak forms. The first pronunciation given usually represents the one most commonly used, but where a strong form is indicated it should be used when the word is stressed. A strong form is also usually used when the word is at the end of a sentence. For example:

Can /kən/ *you help?*
I'll help if I can /kæn/.

Stress

Stress is very important in English — it can be used to distinguish the meaning of similar-sounding words, compounds, phrasal verbs and idioms. The stress patterns indicated in our dictionaries will enable the learner to sound natural and clearly communicate their intended meaning.

The mark /' / shows the main stress — compare **able** /'eɪbl/, stressed on the first syllable, and **ability** /ə'biləti/, stressed on the second. A stressed syllable is relatively loud, long in duration, said clearly and distinctly, and made noticeable by the pitch of the voice. A stressed syllable does not usually contain the weak vowels /ə/, /i/ or /u/.

Longer transcriptions may have one or more secondary stresses before the main stress. These are marked with /, / as in **abbreviation** /ə,bri:vi'eɪʃn/ and **agricultural** /,ægrɪ'kʌltʃərəl/. They feel like beats in a rhythm leading up to the main stress. Weak stresses after the main stress can sometimes be heard, but they are not marked in our dictionaries.

A word or compound that has two stresses in its dictionary form may show a shift of stress when used in a phrase. For example, the adjective ,well-'known has the main stress on **known**, but in the phrase ,well-known 'author the main stress is shifted to the noun that follows.

Further reading

You can find a fuller discussion of the way pronunciation is indicated in the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* [here](#).

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