

WHAT IS A VOWEL?

/wɒt ɪz ə 'vaʊəl/

A **vowel** is a sound in which the airstream from the lungs is not blocked in any way in the mouth or throat. It is usually pronounced with vibration of the **vocal cords** (see **articulators**).

Hold your hands over your ears and say the seven short vowels and five long vowels of English.

/æ/ /ɒ/ /e/ /ə/ /ɪ/ /ʌ/ /ʊ/
/ɑː/ /ɔː/ /iː/ /ɜː/ /uː/

You will notice that the vocal cords vibrate to produce each vowel sound.

The type of vowel sound produced depends largely on the position of the tongue:

- a) how far the tongue is raised,
- b) which part of the tongue is (the front, the middle, or the back) is raised.

a) Vowels are divided into **close vowels**, **half-close vowels**, **half-open vowels** and **open vowels** (according to how far the tongue is raised).

b) A division of vowels is made into **front vowels**, **central vowels**, and **back vowels** (according to what part of the tongue is raised).

Try saying /iː/ as in *tea*. How far is the tongue raised? What part of the tongue is raised?

/iː/ is defined as a **close front vowel**

Now try saying /ɑː/ as in *car*.

How far is the tongue raised? What part of the tongue is raised?

/ɑː/ is defined as an **open back vowel**.

Vowel sounds also depend on the shape of the lips. The lips are said to be **rounded** and **spread** (or **unrounded**).

Say the long vowel /uː/ as in *shoe*.

Are the lips rounded or spread? The lips are rounded.

Try saying /uː/ - a rounded vowel - and then begin to spread your lips to produce a big smile. Notice how the vowel sound changes and it is no longer /uː/.

Now say /iː/. Are the lips rounded or spread? The lips are **spread**.

Look in a mirror and work out how to define these vowels in terms of what part of the tongue is raised.

- | | |
|---------------------------|---------------------------|
| 1. /iː/ /ɪ/ /e/ /æ/ | These are front vowels. |
| 2. /ə/ /ɜː/ /ʌ/ | These are central vowels. |
| 3. /uː/ /ʊ/ /ɔː/ /ɑː/ /ɒ/ | These are back vowels. |

In all three groups, the mouth gradually opens as you move from the first sound to the last one of each.

All these vowel sounds can be represented on the vowel quadrilateral, or vowel chart. Say each word below several times and very consciously. Be aware of how far the tongue is raised and what part of the tongue is raised.

Then say the next word – either from front to back, or from close to open. Practise all the vowel sounds on the chart.

Pay particular attention to pronouncing the two sounds /æ/ and /ʌ/ in *had* and *cut*.

Notice that the English vowel /æ/ is an open front vowel, not a central vowel like /ʌ/.

