Pronunciation and phonetic symbols

Consonants

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

iː	see	/siː/	
i	happy	/ˈhæpi/	
ɪ	sit	/sɪt/	
e	bed	/bed/	
æ	cat	/kæt/	
ɑː	father	/ˈfɑːðə(r)/	
ɒ	got	/gɒt/	(*British English*)
ɔː	saw	/sɔː/	
ʊ	put	/pʊt/	
u	actual	/ˈæktʃuəl/	
uː	too	/tuː/	
ʌ	cup	/kʌp/	
ɜː	fur	/fɜː(r)/	
ə	about	/əˈbaʊt/	
eɪ	say	/seɪ/	
əʊ	go	/gəʊ/	
aɪ	my	/maɪ/	
ɔɪ	boy	/bɔɪ/	
aʊ	now	/naʊ/	
ɪə	near	/nɪə(r)/	(*British English*)
eə	hair	/heə(r)/	(*British English*)
ʊə	pure	/pjʊə(r)/	(*British English*)

Nasalized vowels, marked with /˜/, may be retained in certain words taken from French, as in **penchant** /ˈpɒ̃ʃɒ̃/.

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 /ˌlaɪk ˈðɪs/ 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 /ɔː/ or /ɑː/ instead. For these words there is some variation between /ɔː/ and /ɑː/ 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 /ː/). /i/ represents a weak vowel that can be sounded either as /iː/ or /ɪ/ or a compromise between them. The sequence /iə/ can be pronounced /jə/, so **union** can be /ˈjuːniən/ or /ˈjuːnjən/. In the same way /u/ represents a weak vowel between /uː/ 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** /ˈæktʃuəl, ˈæktʃwəl/.

Further information about a pronunciation may be given in square brackets [ˈlaɪk ˈðɪs], referring more specifically to sounds on the IPA chart[1]. This narrow transcription

1. www.internationalphoneticassociation.org/content/full-ipa-chart

is useful for representing pronunciations or sounds that are not British or American, for example the East African pronunciation [ˈboma] 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** /ˈfʊtbɔːl/ and **button** /ˈbʌtn/. 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 online 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 [ᵊl] or [ᵊn]. There is a syllabic /l/ at the end of **final** /ˈfaɪnl/, but for clarity the schwa /ə/ is shown in the transcription of **finally** /ˈfaɪnəli/ so that it is not confused with **finely** /ˈfaɪnli/.

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 this dictionary will enable the learner to sound natural and clearly communicate their intended meaning.

The mark /ˈ/ shows the main stress—compare **able** /ˈeɪbl/, stressed on the first syllable, and **ability** /əˈbɪlәti/, 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 /ˌ/ as in **abbreviation** /əˌbriːviˈeɪʃn/ and **agricultural** /ˌægrɪˈkʌltʃərəl/. 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 this dictionary.

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 ˌ**well-**ˈ**known** has the main stress on **known**, but in the phrase ˌ**well-known** ˈ**author** the main stress is shifted to the noun that follows.

Stress in phrasal verbs and idioms

Stress is indicated on phrasal verbs using one or two stresses. If more than one stress is possible, or the stress depends on the context, no stress is shown.

Phrasal verbs with the main stress on the first word—ˈ**come to sth**, ˈ**go for sb**, ˈ**look at sth**—should always be pronounced as indicated. Those shown with two stresses reflect the pattern to be used when the phrasal verb occurs without a noun phrase, adjective or adverb in the middle or immediately after it.

- *What time are you* ˌ***coming*** ˈ***back?***
- *He* ˌ***made*** *it* ˈ***up***.
- ˌ***Fill*** *them* ˈ***in***.

However, main stress is likely to be taken by any noun phrase, adjective or adverb inserted after or into the middle of the phrasal verb:

- *We* ˌ***came back*** ˈ*early.*
- *I* ˌ***filled in*** *a* ˈ*form.*
- ˌ***Fill*** *this* ˈ*form* ***in***.

Most idioms are shown in the dictionary with at least one main stress, for example **find your** ˈ**feet**. The learner should not change the position of this stress when speaking or the special meaning of the idiom may be lost.