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Learning Phonetic Alphabets for English

Learning phonetic alphabets is not as difficult a task as it seems. The most difficult thing about learning to transcribe English is breaking your habits of association of English sounds with English spellings, and learning to hear the sounds in a word/sentence accurately. This comes with practice, practice, and more practice. You need to make a conscious effort to hear the sounds in a word and suppress any visual images or memory of the spelling of the word.

Most of the phonetic symbols are familiar to you from English spelling; there are some new symbols to learn: seven new consonant symbols, and seven new vowel symbols. Learning the new symbols is not the most difficult aspect of the task: the most difficult thing is learning to change which sounds you associate with certain letters, especially for the vowels. The pronunciation of the letters *i*, *e*, *a*, *o*, *u* as phonetic symbols is very close to their pronunciation in Spanish, Italian, or German.

It is also important to keep in mind that a phonetic symbol always has the same pronunciation. This is different from English spelling. For example, the letter 's' has various sound values in English spelling, for instance the /s/ of words like 'so', 'bus' and the /z/ of words like 'easy', 'busy'. In the phonetic alphabets presented here, the symbol /s/ always represents the sound of the 's' in 'see', 'bus'. The sounds spelled with 's' in 'easy', 'busy', are transcribed phonetically with /z/.

Here are the speech sounds of Standard American English, given in 2 phonetic alphabets, with an example word for each sound. The list is not in the familiar order of the English alphabet (A, B, C, D, E). For the consonants, the sounds are listed in order of kind (stop, fricative, etc.). The vowels are listed beginning with the high front vowels and going along to the low back vowels, then the diphthongs. For a list based on English alphabetical order, [please click here](#).

When you transcribe words (that is, write words using the IPA symbols), you do not have the same freedom as in handwriting. For instance, a /z/ should never be crossed. Do not use capital letters, even if you are transcribing a name. 'Pete' would be /pit/. Try to copy the symbols exactly. For help with drawing new symbols, visit the [Animated IPA symbols page](#).

Another NOTE: Some of these sounds, especially the vowels, vary from one region of the country to another. If some of the words listed don't seem right to you, this may be why. Answers to common student questions about some of the symbols can be found on the page entitled [Frequently-asked Questions About Phonetic Symbols](#).

There are two phonetic symbol systems in common use in the United States. One has been developed specifically for English, and is based on the work of linguists Trager and Smith (labeled 'TS' in the charts); the other is the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA), developed as an international tool for representing the sound of any language in the world (a universal phonetic alphabet). As you can see, most of the symbols are the same in both systems (this is noted using the '=' sign). Consult your instructor about which system will be used in your linguistics class.

The symbol charts are found on the next page.

Consonants

TS Symbol	IPA Symbol	Examples	TS Symbol	IPA Symbol	Examples
p	=	p <u>u</u> ppy	š	ʃ	<u>sh</u> e, mach <u>in</u> e
b	=	<u>b</u> abble	ž	ʒ	pleas <u>ur</u> e
t	=	t <u>a</u> ke	h	=	<u>h</u> ot
d	=	<u>d</u> o	č	tʃ	<u>ch</u> in, bat <u>ch</u>
k	=	<u>c</u> ake	ǰ	dʒ	<u>j</u> ewel, gym, bad <u>g</u> e
g	=	g <u>o</u> ggles	m	=	<u>m</u> e
f	=	<u>f</u> ee, <u>ph</u> one, laugh	n	=	<u>n</u> o
v	=	<u>v</u> ery	ŋ	=	sin <u>g</u> , ban <u>k</u>
θ	=	<u>th</u> ick, bat <u>h</u>	l	=	<u>l</u> ily, bill
ð	=	<u>th</u> is, brot <u>h</u> er	r	ɹ	<u>r</u> ing, <u>wr</u> ite
s	=	<u>s</u> ee	w	=	<u>w</u> e
z	=	<u>z</u> oo	ɰ	ʌ	<u>wh</u> en, <u>wh</u> ere**
** Most American dialects use /w/ for all 'wh' words.			y	j	<u>y</u> ou

Vowels

TS Symbol	IPA Symbol	Examples	TS Symbol	IPA Symbol	Examples
i	i, ij, ii	<u>bee</u> , <u>me</u> , <u>meat</u>	u	u, uw, uu	<u>soon</u> , <u>new</u>
ɪ	=	<u>bit</u> , <u>hid</u>	ʊ	=	<u>foot</u> , <u>could</u>
e	ey	<u>bake</u> , <u>day</u>	o	ou, ow	<u>boat</u> , <u>no</u> , <u>grow</u>
ɛ	=	<u>head</u> , <u>fed</u>	ɔ	=	<u>cough</u> , <u>small</u> **
æ	=	<u>hat</u> , <u>sad</u>	ɑ	=	<u>hot</u> , <u>father</u>
ə	=	<u>commit</u> , <u>sofa</u>	ɑj	aj	<u>fight</u> , <u>hide</u> , <u>eye</u>
ʌ	<u>but</u> , <u>some</u>		aw	=	<u>how</u> , <u>about</u>
**Most Californians do not have this vowel; /ɑ/ appears in its place.			oy	ɔj	<u>boy</u> , <u>coin</u>