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PHONETIC TRANSCRIPTION TIPS:

HOW TO AVOID SOME COMMON PITFALLS OF USING PHONETIC ALPHABETS

Phonetic alphabets are precise tools for representing speech sounds, similar to mathematical symbol systems. Whereas in personal handwriting we have some freedom to modify the shapes and features of letters, phonetic symbols must be reproduced as close to their printed form as possible. Changing a phonetic symbol often results in a symbol for a different sound. In other cases, failure to include all the characteristics of a symbol results in a symbol that is meaningless or ambiguous. You have to be unusually conscious of how you are writing when transcribing.

Certain problems recur consistently in students' transcriptions. Avoid these carefully. On tests, you will lose points if you add or leave out symbol characteristics. Some common problems are:

- (1) All of the symbols we will use in this course are lower case, that is, not capital letters. If you have the mannerism of writing in capital letters, you must suppress it in transcribing. Fancy flourishes have to be dispensed with, as well. Stay as close to block-printed lower-case letters as you can. Back to first grade! Watch your penmanship!
- (2) Do not capitalize the first letter of a proper name in transcription. Capital letters are used as phonetic symbols, so using one will mean you are designating a different sound from the one you intend.
- (3) Do not cross your **z**'s.
- (4) Distinguish carefully between symbols for vowels in the same space. [**i**] must have its dot; and [**I**] must have a top and bottom bar. Note that this is a small capital 'I' – it is the same height as [**i**]. Similarly, [**u**] must have its 'tail', while [**U**] must have its 'handles'. Symbols lacking these features, such as an [**i**] without a dot or bars or a [**u**] with neither handles nor tail, are ambiguous – a reader cannot tell which vowel you mean. This is important in cases like 'sit' vs. 'seat' or 'pool' vs. 'pull'. Also, [**e**] and [**ɛ**] must be differentiated; consider 'mate' vs. 'met'. Make sure [**ɛ**] faces to the right; it is a backwards '3'.
- (5) Be sure that symbols such as [**š**], [**č**] and [**ǰ**] have a 'v' above them. Do not write this 'v' upside down; and make sure it comes to a point. (The 'v' should be centered exactly above the [**j**]; my computer does not do this right.)
- (6) Attend carefully to the direction of the 'tail' in the symbol [**ŋ**]. It must bend back to the left, not to the right. The tail reaches below the line, just like a 'g'. Think of it as an 'n' with the tail of a 'g'.
- (7) The symbol theta, [**θ**], is a '0' with a bar through the middle. Do not write it in any cursive form. The bar must reach to the inside sides of the '0,' and the bar must be horizontal. It is the size of a

capital letter.

- (8) Learn the symbol [ǰ]. It is a crossed, backwards 6: ǰ . It is tall, like a 't' or 'd'.
- (9) The symbol [æ] is not written as an 'a' followed by an 'e'. It should be written in one, continuous movement, like a diagonal '8' with tails. Consult the "Drawing Unfamiliar Phonetic Symbols" page.
- (10) Schwa, [ə], is an 'e' turned counterclockwise onto its "head".

For other questions you may have, see my "Frequently-Asked Questions About Phonetic Symbols" page <http://cla.calpoly.edu/~jrubba/phon/ipafaq.pdf>.

For help drawing symbols, see "Drawing Unfamiliar Phonetic Symbols."
<http://cla.calpoly.edu/~jrubba/phon/drawsymbols/index.html>