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English Pronunciation

Vowels

The pronunciation of English vowels can be complicated because while there are only five vowels (the letters), there are more than 20 sounds. The pronunciation of a vowel depends on its position in the word and whether it's combined with other vowels. There are some rules, but unfortunately, there are many exceptions to the rules. I think learning the rules is a good place to start, however. After learning the rules, you can gradually learn all the words that are exceptions to the rules.

Vowels in English can have what we call "long" or "short" sounds. When a vowel has a "long" sound, the vowel "says its name" (is pronounced like the letter name).

Long Sound			Short Sound		
Letter	Phonetic Symbol	Example	Letter	Phonetic Symbol	Example
a	/eɪ/	cane	a	/æ/	can
e	/i:/	bead	e	/e/	bed
i	/aɪ/	site	i	/ɪ/	sit
o	/o:/	goat	o	/ɑ/ (USA) /ɒ/ (UK)	got (USA) got (UK)
u	/u:/	tube	u	/ʌ/	tub

Vowel Pronunciation Rules

These are some rules for vowel pronunciation, but there are many exceptions to the rules.

Consonant-Vowel-Consonant

When a word (or syllable) ends with a vowel between two consonants (Consonant-Vowel-Consonant), the vowel has a "short" sound (See the short vowel sounds in the table above.).

Examples:

tap	pot
let	bug
sip	

The Silent e

When a word ends with a consonant and then a letter **e**, the **e** is not pronounced (hence the term "silent e"), but the **e** makes the pronunciation of the vowel preceding the consonant longer. When children are learning to read, they say the **e** is magical because it changes the pronunciation of the other vowel.

Examples:

cap - cape
pet - Pete
pin - pine
rob - robe
tub - tube

The Silent e is magical, isn't it?

Consonant-Vowel

When a word (or a syllable) ends in a consonant and then a vowel, the pronunciation is long.

Examples:

me
hi
go

Combination of Vowels

When two vowels appear together, usually only the first vowel is pronounced, and it is pronounced in with the long vowel sound. Children learn the rhyme "When two vowels go walking, the first one does the talking. It says its name."

Examples:

rain
meat
coat

A common exception to this rule is diphthongs (see table below). Diphthongs are vowel combinations that have special pronunciations.

Phonetic Symbol	Diphthong	Example
/aɪ/	ie, uy	die
/aʊ/	ou, ow	house
/eɪ/	ei, ey, ay, ai	eight
/əʊ/	ow, oa	show
/eə/	ai, ea	fair
/ɪə/	ea, ee	hear
/ɔɪ/	oi, oy	point
/ʊə/	oo	poor

R-Controlled Vowels

When children are learning to read, they are also taught that the letter **r** is very bossy. It changes the pronunciation of the preceding vowel. See the list below for common pronunciations of vowels combined with **r**.

Vowel with r	Phonetic Symbol	Example
ar	/ɑr/	far
er	/ər/	her
ir	/ər/	stir
or	/ɔr/	for
ur	/ər/	fur

There is a big difference in the vowel sound when we add the **r**.

pat - part
gem- germ
fist - first
spot - sport
bust - burst

English Consonants

Next we'll explain a few consonants that can be confusing in English.

The Letter C

We pronounce the letter **c** as **s** when it comes before **e**, **i**, or **y**, but as **k** when it comes before other letters.

Examples:

central
city
cyst
car
code
cub

The Letter G

We pronounce the letter **g** as **j** when it comes before **e**, **i**, or **y**, but as **g** when it comes before other letters.

Examples:

gem
gist
gym
game
go
gum

Digraphs

When two consonants come together to make a new sound, it is called a digraph. Some digraphs in English are **ch**, **sh**, **th**, **ph** and **wh**.

Digraph	Phonetic Symbol	Example
ch	/tʃ/	chair
sh	/ʃ/	shoe
th	/θ/ /ð/	thin than
ph	/f/	telephone
wh	/w/	what