

Vowel sounds

Vowel: a sound we make when the breath flows out through the mouth freely, without being blocked.

The English letters **a, e, i, o, u** are called Vowels, because they represent such sounds.

There are 20 vowel sounds in English, divided into 3 types of vowel sounds:

Pure Vowels 1) Long vowel sounds = **5** sounds

2) Short vowel sounds = **7** sounds

3) Diphthongs = **8** sounds

Vowels → 5 letters → = **20** sounds

Table 01: Twenty Vowel Sounds.

Vowels = 20 sounds		
Pure Vowels = 12 sounds		Diphthongs = 8 sounds
Short = 7 sounds	Long = 5 sounds	
/ɪ/ bit, busy, started /e/ bed, said, dead /æ/ cat, mat, apple /ʌ/ cup, up, money /ʊ/ good, put, should /ɒ/ got, what, because /ə/ about, the, police	/ɑ:/ bath, car, safari /ɔ:/ door, saw, walk /ɜ:/ bird, work, hurt /i:/ sheep, eagle, field /u:/ moon, grew, through	/ɪə/ year, beer /eə/ chair, there /əʊ/ joke, vote /eɪ/ they, bathe /aɪ/ my, dice /ɔɪ/ joy, noise /aʊ/ out, vow /ʊə/ poor, moor

Short Vowels: “Today, we’re going to learn about **short vowels** and a special sound called the **schwa**.

Let’s start with the short vowels”!

Part 1: The Seven Short Vowel sounds

Short vowels are vowel sounds that we say **quickly and clearly**. They are not long sounds like in *name* or *ride*, they are short — like *cat* or *bed*.”

“Let’s look at the five short vowel sounds:”

- /æ/ as in **pan, cat, cap, ask**
- /e/ as in **pet, bed, stem, wet**
- /ɪ/ as in **sit, bin, hit, flip**
- /ɒ/ as in **clock, pond, lot, mom**
- /ʌ/ as in **cup, bus, bump, run**
- /ə/ as in **banana, pleasant, again**

➤ The Schwa Sound /ə/

Now let’s learn about a very special vowel sound called the **schwa**. Can everyone say *schwa*? (Pause for students to repeat.). The **schwa** is the most common sound in English. It sounds like a **soft ‘uh’**, and it happens in **unstressed syllables**, the parts of words we don’t say strongly. For example:

- *again* — we don’t say ‘AGAIN’, we say **uh-GAIN**.

- *support* — we don't say 'SUP-port', we say **suh-PORT**.
The *uh* sound is the schwa!"

❖ **Examples from the Chart:** "Here are some examples of schwa sounds in different vowels:"

Table 02: examples of schwa sounds.

Vowel	Example Words		
a	pleasant	again	balloon
e	problem	celebrate	enemy
o	parrot	bottom	freedom
u	support	circumstance	album
y	syringe	analysis	Pennsylvania

"Each of these words has a soft 'uh' sound somewhere — that's the schwa!"

Wrap-Up: "So remember:

- **Short vowels** are said quickly and clearly in stressed syllables.
- The **schwa** /ə/ is a soft, lazy sound that happens in unstressed syllables."

"Let's say it together"

- *Short vowels – quick and clear!*
- *Schwa – soft and relaxed!*

In phonics, a **breve** (˘) is used to indicate **short vowel sounds**. It helps learners visually distinguish between **short** and **long vowels** during reading and pronunciation practice. For example, short vowels are shown as **ă, ě, ĭ, ǒ, ŭ**, while long vowels use a **macron** (¯), as in **ā, ē, ī, ō, ū**. Here are some **simple examples** of short vowel patterns using **pa, pe, pi, po, pu**.

Table 03: Short Vowel Spelling Patterns.

Vowel	Sound Symbol	Example Words	Pronunciation Tip
A	ă (/æ/)	Pan, cat, cap, ask	Open your mouth wide and say a short "aah"
E	ě (/e/)	Pet, bed, stem, wet	Smile slightly and say a short "eh"
I	ĭ (/ɪ/)	Pin, sit, bin, flip, hit	Relax your mouth, say a short "ih"
O	ǒ (/ɒ/)	Pot, clock, pond, lot	Round your lips slightly, say a short "aw"
U	ŭ (/ʌ/)	Pup, cup, bus, run	Mouth relaxed, say a short "uh"

Practice Sentence:

"**Pam** has a **pet pig** on a **pot** near the **cup**."
(Each word has one of the short vowel sounds!)

Part 2: The five Long Vowel sounds

Long vowels are vowel sounds that are **longer than short vowels**. In **RP (Received Pronunciation) English**, long vowel sounds appear in words like: **seat, suit, sort, shirt, start**. The **phonemic symbols** for

long vowels include /:/ to show length. In English, **long vowel sounds** are the sounds that say their letter names (as in the alphabet): **ā, ē, ī, ō, ū**, for example, the long **a** sounds like the letter **A** in the alphabet.

Each long vowel sound can be spelled in **different ways**, using various letter combinations or patterns. The table below shows the **most common spelling patterns** for each of the **five long vowels, A, E, I, O, and U**. Learning these patterns helps improve reading, spelling, and pronunciation skills.

Table 04: Long Vowel Spelling Patterns.

A	E	I	O	U
ā	ē	ī	ō	ū
a-e	e-e	i-e	o-e	u-e
ai	ee	igh	oa	ue
ay	ea	y	ow	ew
eigh	y	ie	ou	eu
ei	ie	y-e	oe	ue
ey	ei	igh	oo	ui

❖ **Examples of Long Vowel Sounds**

Table 05: Five long vowel sounds.

Sound	IPA Symbol	Example Words
Long A	/ɑ:/	father, start, hard
Long O	/ɔ:/	thought, law, north, war
Long E	/ɜ:/	nurse, stir, learn, refer
Long EE	/i:/	fleece, sea, machine
Long U	/u:/	goose, two, blue, group

Part 3: The eight Diphthong Vowel sounds

Diphthongs are **double vowel sounds**, that means the tongue **glides from one vowel position to another** in a single syllable. So, a diphthong is **one sound made of two vowel elements**.

In phonetics, diphthongs are written with **two symbols** (for example, /aɪ/, /eɪ/). The first part of the sound is **stronger** than the second one.

❖ **Examples of the 8 Diphthongs:**

Table 06: Eight Diphthong vowel sounds.

aw	au	ew	oo	oi	oy	ow	ou
straw	haul	brew	food	boil	boy	cow	out
claw	fault	chew	room	point	toy	how	house
law	vault	blew	soon	coin	coy	bow	found
thaw	pauper	cashew	zoo	broil	joy	growl	round
hawk	author	stew	taboo	spoil	soy	down	cloud
saw	cause	few	kazoo	noise	oyster	brown	loud
draw	pause	dew	bamboo	oil	decoy	plow	ouch
crawl	applause	drew	shampoo	join	enjoy	flower	cough

The following table shows the eight main **diphthongs**, **IPA symbol**, **example words**, and the **sound movement** (from the first vowel sound to the second). This helps learners understand how the mouth and tongue change position to create each diphthong naturally when speaking English.

Table 07: Diphthongs, example words and IPA symbol.

No.	Diphthong	IPA Symbol	Example Words	Sound Movement (From → To)
1	Long A glide	/eɪ/	name, day, rain, play	e → ɪ
2	Long I glide	/aɪ/	my, time, kite, fine	a → ɪ
3	Long O glide	/ɔɪ/	boy, toy, enjoy	ɔ → ɪ
4	Long OW glide	/aʊ/	now, house, brown	a → ʊ
5	Long O close	/əʊ/	go, home, no, open	ə → ʊ
6	Ear sound	/ɪə/	here, idea, beard	ɪ → ə
7	Air sound	/eə/	care, chair, there	e → ə
8	Tour sound	/ʊə/	pure, sure, tourist	ʊ → ə

❖ **Remember**

- Diphthongs are **moving sounds**, the mouth shape **changes** while saying them.
- Practice slowly, then blend them smoothly to sound natural.