

A Guide to the Vowels of General American English

Simple Vowels

symbol	examples in english	examples in french
/æ/	bat, cat, pass, path, apple , slant*	fast, similar to 'plat', 'amour'
/æ:/	bad, lad, sad, mad, man*, land*	slow, like above
/ɑ/	lot, lock, not, wasp	fast 'a', 'ma', 'bas'
/ɑ:/	log, father, odd, palm	slow 'a'
/ɛ/	dress, bed, pet	'lait', 'jouet'
/ə/	run, won, flood, comma, about , uh, um	like 'le' but more open (<i>schwa</i>)
/ɪ/	sit, spotted, pit	between /i/ and /ə/
/i/	see, meat, Pete, happy, city	'si', 'vie'
/ɔ/	long*, law*, thought*, caught*, all*, talk*	'homme', 'ossements', 'otage'
/ɒ/	put, hood	similar to 'peu'
/u/	blue, threw, through, you	'ou'
/ʊ/	burn, earth, bird, winner, mother	similar to 'sœur'

Complex Vowels

symbol	examples in english	examples in french
/ɛi/	mate, tape, paint, create	'parlé'
/ɛi:/	made, table, pained , pain	'merveille'
/ai/	price, mice, flight	fast 'ail'
/ai:/	prize, eyes, wide, flied	slow 'ail'
/ɔi/	boy, choice	similar to 'œil', try to say "a u ille"
/ou/	no, toe, soap, cold	very much like 'au'
/au/	mouth, now, how	try to say "a o u"
/ɑr/	arm, car, smart	similar to 'car', 'tard'
/ɛr/	mare, bear, there	similar to 'mère'
/ir/	deer, beer, here, fear	similar to 'pire'
/ɔr/	north, warm, force, tour	similar to 'tort', 'force'
/jɔr/	pure, Europe	similar to 'dior'

Tensed Vowels

(*) *Vowel tensing* occurs in many American regional accents. An /æ/ is tensed when it is followed by an /n/ or /m/. All occurrences of /ɔ/ are tensed.

original	tensed	examples in english
/æ/	==> /ɛə/	man, am, lamp, sand, and
/ɔ/	==> /ɔə/	long, law, thought, caught, all, off

Note: Long vowels are marked with a ':'. However, only the most critical long-short distinctions are shown.

Written vs Spoken Vowels

The written English word consists of a sequence of letters of the alphabet, printed one after the other on a page. Analogously, the spoken English word consists of a sequences of sounds, generated one after the other by a speaker. Roughly speaking, these sounds are called *phonemes*.

Now, English is not written phonetically; there is no consistent correspondence between letters and phonemes. This means that although the written form of a word may suggest a spoken form (pronunciation), the spoken form must be memorized independently of the written form.

Schoolchildren are taught that English has five or six vowels: 'a', 'e', 'i', 'o', 'u', and perhaps 'y'. However, these would be more correctly termed *written* or *orthographic* vowels.

More important for speaking are the *spoken* or *phonetic* vowels. From here on, I will simply refer to them as *vowels*.

Duration

The duration (length) of English vowels is important for good pronunciation. If a vowel is followed by either an unvoiced consonant or /nt/, /lt/, /lp/, /mp/, or /lk/, the vowel is pronounced quickly (short). If a vowel is followed by a voiced consonant, it is generally pronounced slowly (long). Syllable-final vowels must be learned on a case-by-case basis.

A slow vowel may be marked with a colon (':') after the vowel symbol; e.g.:

'bat' /bæt/ contains a quick /æ/

'bad' /bæ:d/ contains a slow /æ/

However, not all dictionaries mark vowels for duration. Here I have only marked those vowels for duration for which differences in duration are most important.

Choice of Symbols

For this document I have chosen symbols from the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA), however some replacements have been made for simplicity. Moreover, some dictionaries may use different symbols to represent the same sounds. Some common equivalencies for simple vowels are:

/ɪ/ ~ /eɪ/ ~ /æ/ ~ /ɜ:/ ~ /ɪ/

/ə/ ~ /ʌ/

For the complex vowels, the symbols are even more approximate, so you will have to match up the symbols by looking up the example words in your dictionary.