



The  
University  
Of  
Sheffield.

School  
Of  
English.



# Support Materials: Sounds of English

# Sounds of English

In their first semester at university, students of English Language and Literature and students of English Language and Linguistics take a core module called 'Sounds of English'. The focus of this module is the pronunciation of English – the speech sounds that make up the words of the language and the methods we use to study them. Being able to talk about pronunciation accurately is useful if you want to go on and study other areas of English Language or Linguistics:

- If you are interested in exploring different accents and dialects of English, it's important to be able to describe differences in pronunciation accurately.
- Researchers who focus on child language acquisition need to be able to analyse the stages children go through as they learn to pronounce their first language.
- Learning about the History of the English language also means exploring how pronunciation has changed over time.

So 'Sounds of English' will equip you with skills and insights that will be useful in many other areas of English Language.

## Sample Exercise 1

The spelling of English is a very unreliable guide to how words are pronounced (and this makes life difficult for speakers of other languages when they study English). Look at the following six words. All of them include the letter combination EA somewhere in the word but think about how you pronounce each of them. How many different sounds does the combination EA represent?

(Your answer will depend to some extent on where you are from and what accent of English you speak with – focus on your own pronunciation when you do this.)

(1) WEAR, (2) EARLY, (3) EASY, (4) HEART, (5) HEAD, (6) FEAR

---

For many speakers of British English the pronunciation of EA is different in each of the six words:

1. WEAR has the same vowel sound as AIR
2. EARLY has the same vowel sound as TURN
3. EASY has the same vowel sound as SEE
4. HEART has the same vowel sound as CAR
5. HEAD has the same vowel sound as BED
6. FEAR has the same vowel sound as SHEER

Because the standard spelling is so inconsistent in the way it is pronounced, people who do research on the English language use the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) to transcribe pronunciation. Each character in the IPA has just one sound and so it provides a clear and unambiguous way to record the pronunciation of words and sentences not only in English but in languages spoken all around the world.

Here is how the sounds in the words we looked at earlier are written in the IPA:

1. The sound in WEAR and AIR /eə/
  2. The sound in EARLY and TURN /ɜ:/
  3. The sound in EASY and SEE /i:/
  4. The sound in HEART and CAR /ɑ:/
  5. The sound in HEAD and BED /e/
  6. The sound in FEAR and SHEER /ɪə/
- 

## **Sample Exercise 2**

We don't always notice the details of how our language is pronounced and 'Sounds of English' is partly about learning to listen more carefully to our own speech. For example, we often say that we form (many) plurals in English by 'adding s': one dog – two dogs, one cat – two cats, one horse – two horses. But do we pronounce the 's' in the same way in all three words: cats, dogs, and horses? Try saying these words out loud and listen in particular to your pronunciation of the 's' ending.

---



Well the answer to the question is 'no'. In 'cats' the final sound is like the sound at the beginning of 'sea', whereas in 'dogs' the final sound is like the sound at the beginning of 'zoo'. What is more, in 'horses' we add a whole syllable to the word to form the plural – that syllable sounds just like the word 'is'. In IPA we would write the plural forms like this:

cats /kæts/

dogs /dɒgz/

horses /hɔ:sɪz/

But when do we use each of the three pronunciations of the 's' ending (/s/, /z/, and /ɪz/)? The answer is to do with how we use our vocal organs to produce the sounds.

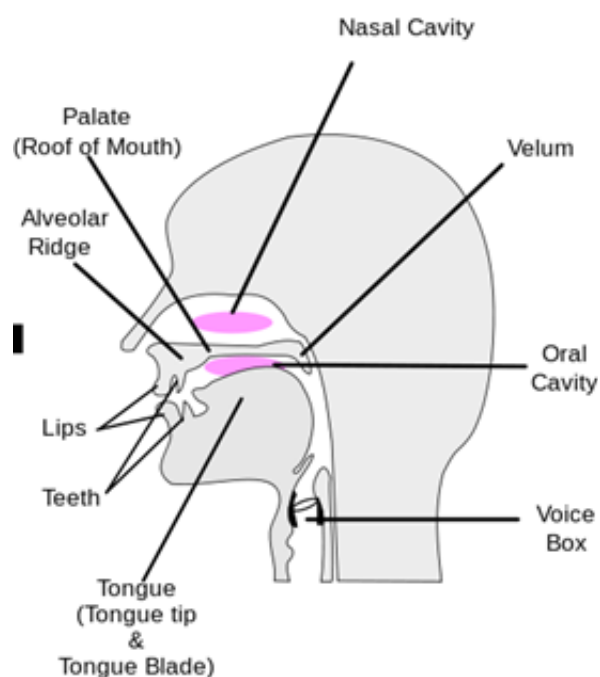
When we produce the /g/ sound in 'dogs', our vocal folds vibrate. These are membranes in the larynx or voice box. (See the diagram to the right for the location of the voice box.) Sounds that involve the vibration of the vocal folds are said to be 'voiced' and /z/ is also a voiced sound and so it's easier to produce /z/ after /g/ than /s/.

When we produce the /t/ sound in 'cats' our vocal folds don't vibrate. Sounds that don't involve the vibration of the vocal folds are said to be 'unvoiced' and /s/ is also an unvoiced sound, so it's easier to produce /s/ after /t/ than /z/.

In our final example, 'horses', the singular noun 'horse' ends with the sound /s/ and rather than trying to say /ss/ or /sz/ we insert a vowel and say /hɔ:sɪz/. This is also true of words that end in /z/ (like 'cause') and /ʃ/ (like 'brush').

Knowing how particular sounds are made – whether they involve vibration of the vocal folds, for example – helps us to understand patterns like the different pronunciations of the plural ending '-s', so as well as learning how to use IPA to record pronunciation, we also learn about how we use our vocal organs to produce the sounds.

If you'd like to find out a little more about the study of speech sounds, a field known as Phonetics, the International Phonetic Association has links to all kinds of resources: <https://www.internationalphoneticassociation.org/content/phonetics-speech-and-hearing>



**Diagram of the Vocal Tract**

This diagram was posted by Tavin at <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Tract.svg>. It is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 Unported [License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/).