

INTRODUCTION TO ENGLISH VOWELS

1. Definition of vowels

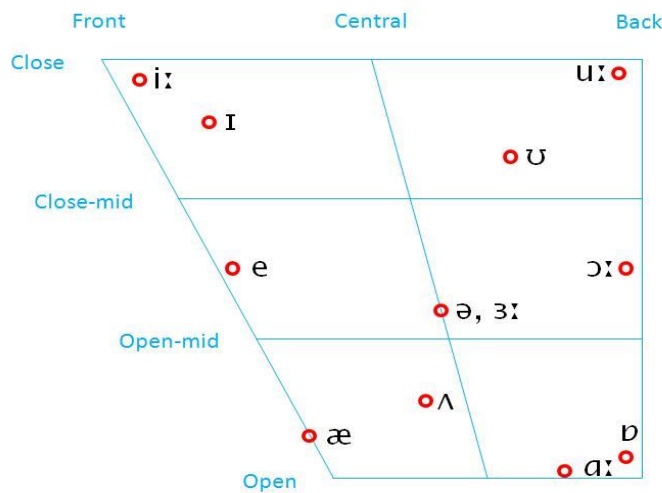
“The most common view is that vowels are sounds in which there is no obstruction to the flow of air as it passes from the larynx to the lips. A doctor who wants to look at the back of a patient’s mouth often asks them to say “ah”; making this vowel sound is the best way of presenting an unobstructed view. But if we make a sound like s, d it can be clearly felt that we are making it difficult or impossible for the air to pass through the mouth.” (Roach, 2009, p. 10).

The first matter to consider when dealing with vowels is the shape and position of the tongue. It is usual to simplify the very complex possibilities by describing just two things: firstly, the vertical distance between the upper surface of the tongue and the palate (i.e., close, close-mid, open-mid, or open) and, secondly, the part of the tongue, between front and back, which is raised during the pronunciation (i.e., front, central, or back). These dimensions are presented in the English vowel chart below.

2. Types of Vowels in English

2.1. Monophthongs (pure vowels)

A monophthong is a pure vowel sound, one whose articulation at both beginning and end is relatively fixed, and which does not glide up or down towards a new position of articulation. The vowel chart below presents all of the monophthongs in the English language.



English has a large number of vowel sounds; the first ones to be examined are short vowels.

2.1.1. English short vowels

In English, short vowels are the type of vowels that take a short duration to be pronounced. The symbols for these short vowels are: /ɪ/, /e/, /ə/, /æ/, /ʌ/, /ɒ/, and /ʊ/.

Short vowels	Example words
/ɪ/	'bit', 'pin', 'fish'
/e/	'bet', 'men', 'yes'
/ə/	'about', 'oppose', 'perhaps'
/æ/	'bat', 'man', 'gas'
/ʌ/	'cut', 'come', 'rush'
/ɒ/	'pot', 'gone', 'cross'
/ʊ/	'put', 'pull', 'push'

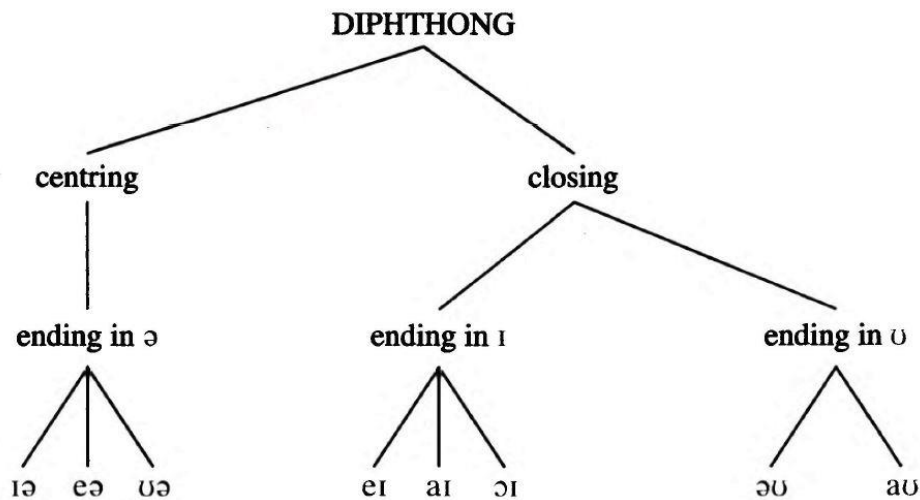
2.1.2. English long vowels

Long vowels are the vowels which tend to be longer than the short vowels. The symbols consist of one vowel symbol plus a length mark made of two dots /:/. Thus, we have /i:/, /ɜ:/, /ɑ:/, /ɔ:/, /u:/. The five long vowels are different from the six short vowels we saw previously, not only in length but also in quality. If we compare some similar pairs of long and short vowels, for example /ɪ/ with /i:/, or /ʊ/ with /u:/, or /æ/ with /ɑ:/, we can see distinct differences in quality resulting from differences in tongue shape and position, and lip position as well as in length. We will now look at each of these long vowels individually.

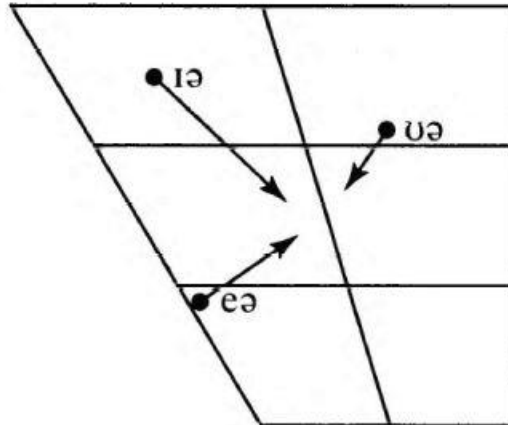
Long vowels	Example words
/i:/	'beat', 'mean', 'peace'
/ɜ:/	'bird', 'fern', 'purse'
/ɑ:/	'card', 'half', 'pass'
/ɔ:/	'board', 'torn', 'horse'
/u:/	'food', 'soon', 'loose'

2.2. Diphthongs

English pronunciation has a large number of *diphthongs* - sounds which consist of a movement or glide from one vowel to another. In terms of length, diphthongs are similar to the long vowels described above. Perhaps the most important thing to remember about all the diphthongs is that the first part is much longer and stronger than the second part; for example, most of the diphthong /aɪ/ (as in the words 'eye', 'I') consists of the /a/ vowel, and only in about the last quarter of the diphthong does the glide to /ɪ/ become noticeable. As the glide to /ɪ/ happens, the loudness of the sound decreases. The total number of diphthongs is eight (though ʊə is increasingly rare). The easiest way to remember them is in terms of three groups divided as in this diagram.

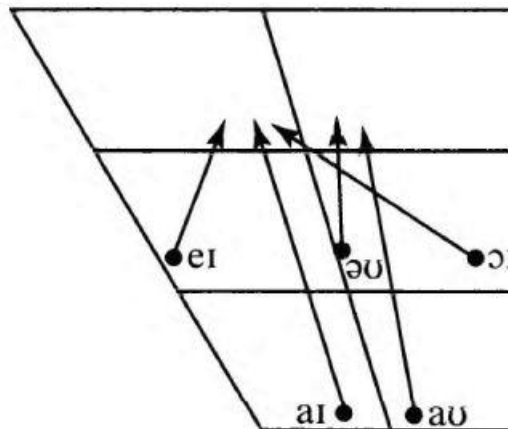


Centering diphthongs glide towards the ə (schwa) vowel, as the symbols indicate.



Centering diphthongs	Example words
/ɪə/	'beard', 'weird', 'fierce'
/eə/	'aired', 'cairn', 'scarce'
/ʊə/	'moored', 'tour', 'lure'

The **closing diphthongs** have the characteristic that they all end with a glide towards a closer vowel. Because the second part of the diphthong is weak, they often do not reach a position that could be called close. The important thing is that a glide from a relatively more open towards a relatively closer vowel.



Closing diphthongs (ending ɪ): three of the diphthongs glide towards /ɪ/, as described below:

Closing diphthongs (ending with /ɪ/)	Example words
/eɪ/	'paid', 'pain', 'face'
/aɪ/	'tide', 'time', 'nice'
/ɔɪ/	'void', 'loin', 'voice'

Closing diphthongs (ending ʊ): Two diphthongs glide towards ʊ, so that as the tongue moves closer to the roof of the mouth. At the same time, there is a rounding movement of the lips. This movement is not a large one, because the second part of the diphthong is weak.

Closing diphthongs (ending /ʊ/)	Example words
/əʊ/	'load', 'home', 'most'
/aʊ/	'loud', 'gown', 'house'

2.3. Triphthongs

The most complex English sounds of the vowel type are the **triphthongs**. A triphthong is a glide from one vowel to another and then to a third, all produced rapidly and without interruption. In most cases, a triphthong consists of a closing diphthong and the short vowel schwa /ə/. For example, a careful pronunciation of the word 'hour' begins with the /a/ vowel quality similar to /ɑ:/, goes on to a glide towards the back close rounded area (for which we use the symbol ʊ), then ends with a mid-central vowel (schwa, ə). We use the symbol /aʊə/ to represent the pronunciation of 'hour'. The following table provide examples for common triphthongs in the English language.

Triphthongs	Example words
eɪ + ə = eɪə	'layer', 'player'
aɪ + ə = aɪə	'liar', 'fire'
ɔɪ + ə = ɔɪə	'loyal', 'royal'
əʊ + ə = əʊə	'lower', 'mower'
aʊ + ə = aʊə	'power', 'hour'