

Lesson 2

THE PHONETIC ALPHABET

The **phonetic alphabet** is a writing system in which each letter corresponds to a particular sound in a language. A word that is written in the phonetic alphabet will always be pronounced exactly the way that it is written, since the same sound is always represented by the same letter. The phonetic alphabet consists of the letters of the Latin alphabet plus a number of special letters and symbols.

2.1 The Significance of the Phonetic Alphabet

The reason why it is necessary to know a phonetic alphabet is because spelling is not consistent with pronunciation. A word may be mispronounced because of its unusual spelling. Studying the phonetic alphabet will help us break an incorrect correspondence between a letter and a sound. Moreover, it helps us know the right pronunciation of the words we have to speak, and we can correct our mistakes in pronunciation.

The following are some examples of such inconsistency in letters and sounds.

(i) Different sounds are spelled the same way

call	/ɔ/	to	/u/	push	/ʊ/	bough	/aʊ/
many	/ɛ/	son	/ʌ/	cut	/ʌ/	cough	/ɔf/
late	/e/	most	/o/	truth	/u/	tough	/ʌf/
part	/a/	cost	/ɔ/	bonus	/ð/	though	/o/
thanks	/æ/	woman	/ʊ/	bury	/ɛ/	through	/u/
above	/ə/	women	/I/	busy	/I/	thought	/ɔ/

cash	/k/	orchid	/k/	salt	/s/	take	/t/
ocean	/ʃ/	cheese	/tʃ/	sugar	/ʃ/	nation	/ʃ/
receipt	/s/	yacht	/θ/	easy	/z/	situation	/tʃ/
cello	/tʃ/	champagne	/ʃ/	pleasure	/ʒ/	listen	/θ/

(ii) Different spellings are used for the same sound

/i/	/a/	/u/	/aɪ/
me	star	to	time
see	bomb	two	die
seat	heart	too	sign
receive	bazaar	true	bright
field	father	threw	height
people	sergeant	through	cry
key	knowledge	truth	eye

/s/	/f/	/k/	/ʃ/	/z/
soap	find	kid	Wish	visit
guess	laugh	character	sure	rose
case	photo	car	tissue	dessert
choice	off	unique	special	lazy
cancel	life	back	machine	freeze

From the above examples, it is important to become aware of the differences between pronunciation and spelling. Every word may not sound the way it is traditionally spelled; therefore, we have to start to trust our ears rather than eyes when learning new vocabulary.

Many spelling rules shown in this book will help us know the correct correspondence between sounds and letters. Using the phonetic alphabet will help represent the spoken language more closely.

2.2 The Phonetic Alphabet in the Dictionary

There are several types of phonetic alphabets in use today but probably the most common is that of the International Phonetic Association which is usually called the **International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA)**. The IPA chart shows the full range of symbols and diacritics showing detailed features of the way speech sounds are made by the speech organs. Many symbols are directly related to the Roman alphabet we use, but other symbols have been created or drawn from other alphabets to serve the wide range of sounds in languages. In order to record the kind of sounds heard exactly, a range of diacritics and other symbols is also provided. Chart 2.1 records all the IPA symbols.

The International Phonetic Alphabet is just one possible system. Other books and dictionaries use slightly different systems.

The phonetic alphabet used in this book is based on the system in *A Pronouncing Dictionary of American English* by John S. Kenyon and Thomas A. Knott.

Charts 2.2 and 2.3 show some examples of different styles of transcription that we may find in some dictionaries or books on pronunciation. The symbols used in this course are in the first column, and symbols for other commonly used dictionaries follow. These include *Oxford Modern English Dictionary*, *Webster's New World Dictionary*, *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*, and *Collins Cobuild English Dictionary*.

CONSONANTS (PULMONIC)													
	Bilabial	Labiodental	Dental	Alveolar	Postalveolar	Retroflex	Palatal	Velar	Uvular	Pharyngeal	Glottal		
Plosive	p b		t d			ʈ ɖ	c ɟ	k ɡ	q ɢ		ʔ		
Nasal	m	ɱ	n			ɳ	ɲ	ŋ	ɴ				
Trill	ʙ		r						ʀ				
Tap or Flap			ɾ			ɽ							
Fricative	ɸ β	f v	θ ð	s z	ʃ ʒ	ʂ ʐ	ç ʝ	x ɣ	χ ʁ	ħ ʕ	h ɦ		
Lateral fricative			ɬ ɮ										
Approximant		ʋ	ɹ			ɻ	j	ɰ					
Lateral approximant			l			ɭ	ʎ	ʟ					

Where symbols appear in pairs, the one to the right represents a voiced consonant. Shaded areas denote articulations judged impossible.

CONSONANTS (NON-PULMONIC)													
Clicks	Voiced implosives			Ejectives									
◌ ɸ	Bilabial	ɓ	Bilabial	as in:									
◌ ɗ	Dental	ɗ	Dental/alveolar	p'		Bilabial							
◌ ɗ̥	(Postalveolar)	ɗ̥	Palatal	t'		Dental/alveolar							
◌ ɗ̥	Postalveolar	ɗ̥	Velar	k'		Velar							
◌ ɗ̥	Alveolar lateral	ɗ̥	Uvular	s'		Alveolar fricative							

VOWELS													
	Front	Central	Back										
Close	i y	ɨ ʉ	ɯ u										
Close-mid	e ø	ɘ ɵ	ɤ o										
Open-mid	ɛ œ	ɜ ɞ	ɔ										
Open	a ɶ	ɶ	ɑ ɒ										

Where symbols appear in pairs, the one to the right represents a rounded vowel.

OTHER SYMBOLS													
◌ ɸ	Voicless labial-velar fricative	◌ ɸ	◌ ɸ	◌ ɸ	◌ ɸ	◌ ɸ	◌ ɸ	◌ ɸ	◌ ɸ	◌ ɸ	◌ ɸ	◌ ɸ	◌ ɸ
◌ ɸ	Voiced labial-velar approximant	◌ ɸ	◌ ɸ	◌ ɸ	◌ ɸ	◌ ɸ	◌ ɸ	◌ ɸ	◌ ɸ	◌ ɸ	◌ ɸ	◌ ɸ	◌ ɸ
◌ ɸ	Voiced labial-palatal approximant	◌ ɸ	◌ ɸ	◌ ɸ	◌ ɸ	◌ ɸ	◌ ɸ	◌ ɸ	◌ ɸ	◌ ɸ	◌ ɸ	◌ ɸ	◌ ɸ
◌ ɸ	Voicless epiglottal fricative	◌ ɸ	◌ ɸ	◌ ɸ	◌ ɸ	◌ ɸ	◌ ɸ	◌ ɸ	◌ ɸ	◌ ɸ	◌ ɸ	◌ ɸ	◌ ɸ
◌ ɸ	Voiced epiglottal fricative	◌ ɸ	◌ ɸ	◌ ɸ	◌ ɸ	◌ ɸ	◌ ɸ	◌ ɸ	◌ ɸ	◌ ɸ	◌ ɸ	◌ ɸ	◌ ɸ
◌ ɸ	Epiglottal plosive	◌ ɸ	◌ ɸ	◌ ɸ	◌ ɸ	◌ ɸ	◌ ɸ	◌ ɸ	◌ ɸ	◌ ɸ	◌ ɸ	◌ ɸ	◌ ɸ

Affricates and double articulations can be represented by two symbols joined by a tie bar if necessary.

kp ts

Chart 2.1: The International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA)

(Source: Kuiper & Allan, 1996, p. 2)

Comparative Chart of Phonetic Alphabets

<i>Key Word</i>	<i>This Book</i>	<i>Oxford Modern English Dictionary</i>	<i>Webster's New World Dictionary</i>	<i>Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English</i>	<i>Collins Cobuild English Dictionary</i>
1. <u>key</u>	i	i:	ē	i:/i	i:
2. <u>sit</u>	ɪ	ɪ	ɪ	ɪ	ɪ
3. <u>cake</u>	e	eɪ	ā	eɪ	eɪ
4. <u>met</u>	ɛ	e	e	e	e
5. <u>bad</u>	æ	æ	a	æ	æ
6. <u>bird</u>	ɜː	ɜ:	ɜr	ɜ:/ ɜ	ɜ: ʳ
7. <u>cut</u>	ʌ	ʌ/ə	u	ʌ/ə	ʌ/ə
8. <u>mother</u>	əː	ə	ər	ə	ər
9. <u>among</u>	ə	ə	ə	ə	ə
10. <u>heart</u>	a	ɑ	ä	ɑ : /ɑ	ɑ
11. <u>food</u>	u	u:	oo	u:	u:
12. <u>good</u>	ʊ	ʊ	oo	ʊ	ʊ
13. <u>no</u>	o	əʊ	ō	əʊ	oʊ
14. <u>bought</u>	ɔ	ɔ:	ô	ɔ:/ɔ	ɔ:
15. <u>white</u>	aɪ	aɪ	ī	aɪ	aɪ
16. <u>now</u>	aʊ	aʊ	ou	aʊ	aʊ
17. <u>boy</u>	ɔɪ	ɔɪ	oi	ɔɪ	ɔɪ

Chart 2.2: Vowels: Commonly Used Symbols

(Adapted from: Hagen & Grogan, 1992, p. xvi)

Key Word	This Book	Oxford Modern English Dictionary	Webster's New World Dictionary	Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English	Collins Cobuild English Dictionary
1. <u>p</u> en	p	p	p	p	p
2. <u>b</u> us	b	b	b	b	b
3. <u>t</u> op	t	t	t	t	t
4. <u>d</u> og	d	d	d	d	d
5. <u>c</u> at	k	k	k	k	k
6. <u>g</u> o	g	g	g	g	g
7. <u>f</u> at	f	f	f	f	f
8. <u>v</u> oice	v	v	v	v	v
9. <u>th</u> ink	θ	θ	th	θ	θ
10. <u>th</u> ey	ð	ð	th	ð	ð
11. <u>s</u> ee	s	s	s	s	s
12. <u>z</u> oo	z	z	z	z	z
13. <u>sh</u> op	ʃ	ʃ	sh	ʃ	ʃ
14. <u>zh</u> eaure	ʒ	ʒ	zh	ʒ	ʒ
15. <u>h</u> ope	h	h	h	h	h
16. <u>ch</u> ild	tʃ	tʃ	ch	tʃ	tʃ
17. <u>ch</u> oke	dʒ	dʒ	j	dʒ	dʒ
18. <u>m</u> an	m	m	m	m	m
19. <u>n</u> ot	n	n	n	n	n
20. <u>ng</u>	ŋ	ŋ	ŋ	ŋ	ŋ
21. <u>l</u> ike	l	l	l	l	l
22. <u>r</u> ead	r	r	r	r	r
23. <u>w</u> alk	w	w	w	w	w
24. <u>y</u> es	y	j	y	j	j

Chart 2.3: Consonants: Commonly Used Symbols

(Adapted from: Hagen & Grogan, 1992, p. xv)

2.3 **Phonetic Transcription**

A **phonetic transcription** refers to the spelling of a word using the phonetic alphabet to show its pronunciation.

Phonetic transcription can be either broad or narrow (Katamba, 1989, pp. 69-72).

(i) **Broad transcription**

The broad or **phonemic** transcription shows differences between sounds which are used to convey different meanings. It only uses a basic set of symbols and does not show a great deal of phonetic details (See Charts 2.2 and 2.3). Broad transcriptions are marked by **slant brackets** (/ /) in order to distinguish them from traditional orthography or regular spelling. For example, the word *tenth* is transcribed as /tɛnθ/.

(ii) **Narrow transcription**

The narrow or **phonetic** transcription shows the physical process involved in the production of sounds as many details of the sounds as possible by using a wide range of symbols and **diacritic marks** (See Chart 2.1). **Square brackets** ([]) are used to distinguish between traditional orthography and phonetic symbols. The same word *tenth* can be transcribed as [t^h _⊥ ε : n_n θ]. The narrow phonetic transcription shows the audible puff of air or **aspiration** of the first consonant by means of the [h]. It also shows the pronunciation of the vowel before [n] by means of the symbol [ε], and the dental production of the [n] before [θ] by means of the symbol [n_n]. Moreover, the symbol [:] represents the length of the vowel.

In transcribing a word into phonetic symbols, the guiding principle to bear in mind is that the transcription must represent all the distinctive sounds heard when the sound is pronounced. Do not be misled by the traditional spelling. **Silent letters**-- those not heard in the pronunciation of the word -- are not transcribed, for example, the letter "k" in *know* /no/, and the letter "gh" in *night* /nait/.

The best way to avoid the pitfalls of spelling is to say aloud several times what we want to transcribe and then note each of the sounds we have pronounced. Write down the symbols of the sounds we have actually said. There must be a symbol for every such sound. Remember that there is no relationship between the number of spelling symbols and the number of phonetic symbols in a word.

In this book, the transcription is the broad or phonemic transcription and therefore uses slant brackets. The narrow or phonetic transcription is used only where the focus is on details of pronunciation. These systems will be useful in pronouncing the sounds of English.

EXERCISES

A. Sounds and spelling

I. Examine the following words. Say them out loud and write down the number of sounds in each one.

- | | | | |
|-----------|------------|------------|-------------|
| 1. add | 6. texts | 11. who | 16. juice |
| 2. these | 7. knock | 12. drunk | 17. twelfth |
| 3. cheque | 8. eye | 13. buy | 18. fix |
| 4. the | 9. thanks | 14. though | 19. guest |
| 5. quick | 10. strong | 15. should | 20. phone |

II. In each of the following sentences, find the word (s) that contain (s) the same sound as the underlined in the word given.

Example: feat

The old tree in my garden.

- | | |
|--------------------------|--|
| 1. <u>f</u> at | You must not forget to lock the door before you leave. |
| 2. <u>n</u> o | The alarm went off when the thieves got in. |
| 3. <u>s</u> ee | I must clean the windows. |
| 4. <u>ch</u> ea <u>p</u> | To which gin did you switch? |
| 5. <u>r</u> at | Please put the hot dish down on the mat. |
| 6. <u>z</u> oo | This is a bad business. |
| 7. <u>c</u> u <u>t</u> | She doesn't have enough money today. |
| 8. <u>b</u> ill | His father got robbed in the parking lot. |
| 9. <u>w</u> all | Which one do you want? |
| 10. <u>m</u> ay | I saw the fish take the bait. |

III. Underline the "Silent Letter (s)" in the following items.

- | | | | |
|-----------|--------------|-------------|------------|
| 1. column | 6. hour | 11. receipt | 16. ghost |
| 2. write | 7. comb | 12. listen | 17. autumn |
| 3. talk | 8. debt | 13. island | 18. aisle |
| 4. design | 9. Christmas | 14. calm | 19. light |
| 5. thumb | 10. salmon | 15. knife | 20. sign |

IV. Consider the different pronunciations represented by the initial letter "a" in each of the following words.

Group together the words that have the same vowel sounds.

- | | | | | |
|-----------|-------------|------------|--------------|-----------|
| 1. Alaska | 3. approach | 5. angel | 7. Africa | 9. Asia |
| 2. author | 4. about | 6. America | 8. Australia | 10. anger |

V. Answer the following questions.

- (a) How many different ways can you find to spell the sound represented by the ee of *keep*?
-

- (b) How many different pronunciations can you find for the spelling *ough*?
-

- (c) What silent letters can you find in the words *sword*, *knight*, *right*, *doubt*, *walk*, *would*, *psychology*, *honest*, and *whom*?
-

- (d) What 'extra' sound can you find in the pronunciation of the words *use*, *cute*, and *one*?
-

- (e) What mismatch do you find between the pronunciation and the spelling in the words *answer* and *tonight*?
-

VI. Give an example of a word which contains the following phonetic letters:

Example : /t/ as in take

- | | | |
|--------------|---------------|---------------|
| 1. /f/ | 6. /ʒ/ | 11. /ε/ |
| 2. /ŋ/ | 7. /tʃ/ | 12. /I/ |
| 3. /ð/ | 8. /dʒ/ | 13. /ʊ/ |
| 4. /y/ | 9. /æ/ | 14. /ə/ |
| 5. /θ/ | 10. /ɔ/ | 15. /a/ |

VII. Say the following words aloud and write the phonetic symbols for the underlined letter (s).

Example : shoe /ʃ/

- | | | |
|-------------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------------|
| 1. <u>c</u> all | 11. <u>p</u> lay | 21. <u>v</u> ision |
| 2. <u>l</u> and | 12. <u>q</u> uick | 22. <u>m</u> anage |
| 3. <u>w</u> ing | 13. <u>f</u> ather | 23. <u>s</u> alad |
| 4. <u>b</u> ook | 14. <u>j</u> ump | 24. <u>l</u> augh |
| 5. <u>z</u> oo | 15. <u>t</u> ry | 25. <u>s</u> ocial |
| 6. <u>c</u> ome | 16. <u>m</u> onth | 26. <u>G</u> eorge |
| 7. <u>p</u> ath | 17. <u>n</u> ext | 27. <u>b</u> ought |
| 8. <u>v</u> oice | 18. <u>f</u> ield | 28. <u>p</u> assage |
| 9. <u>w</u> e | 19. <u>s</u> wim | 29. <u>d</u> esign |
| 10. <u>b</u> read | 20. <u>c</u> heap | 30. <u>p</u> ronounce |

VIII. Say each of the following words aloud and write them using normal English spellings.

Example : /let/ = late

- | | |
|------------------|-------------------------|
| 1. /roz/ | 16. /stæmp/ |
| 2. /tʌŋ/ | 17. /hɛlθ/ |
| 3. /prez/ | 18. /ʒθ/ |
| 4. /siks/ | 19. /yɛlo/ |
| 5. /nel/ | 20. /əlaɪv/ |
| 6. /daʊt/ | 21. /sofə/ |
| 7. /ritʃ/ | 22. /feməs/ |
| 8. /bɜːn/ | 23. /tʃoz/ |
| 9. /haɪt/ | 24. /tælənt/ |
| 10. /tʃɪz/ | 25. /yʊsfəl/ |
| 11. /sup/ | 26. /rɪsɪt/ |
| 12. /tiθ/ | 27. /tʃɔːklɪt/ |
| 13. /klɒθ/ | 28. /lɪŋgwɪstɪks/ |
| 14. /θɒt/ | 29. /fəneɪtɪks/ |
| 15. /ful/ | 30. /vaɪələɪt/ |

B. Dictionary Practice

- I. Some dictionaries use different phonetic letters from the ones presented in this book.

What is the name of your dictionary?

What symbols does your dictionary use for the phonetic letters used in this book?

Look up the following words and write the symbol for each of the underlined letters.

Example: /e/ (ate) = e^y (Longman Dictionary)

1. /i/ (feel) = _____
2. /ɛ/ (end) = _____
3. /æ/ (glad) = _____
4. /ɔ/ (all) = _____
5. /ʊ/ (look) = _____
6. /aɪ/ (time) = _____
7. /θ/ (thanks) = _____
8. /ʃ/ (should) = _____
9. /z/ (pleasure) = _____
10. /dʒ/ (jam) = _____
11. /ŋ/ (bring) = _____
12. /tʃ/ (chance) = _____
13. /ð/ (they) = _____
14. /y/ (year) = _____
15. /k/ (come) = _____

II. Look up the following words in your dictionary and write down their pronunciation using phonetic alphabets.

Optional: Write down the pronunciation of the word a second time using the phonetic symbols from this book.

- | | | | |
|---------------|-------|-------------|-------|
| 1. education | _____ | 6. tongue | _____ |
| 2. itinerary | _____ | 7. unique | _____ |
| 3. error | _____ | 8. xerox | _____ |
| 4. it's | _____ | 9. southern | _____ |
| 5. literature | _____ | 10. journal | _____ |

C. Optional Assignment

1. Write down words that you want to learn to pronounce. They could be words that you have tried to say but the native speaker could not understand or words from your reading materials.

2. Find each of your words in your dictionary and copy the phonetic symbols.

3. Practice pronouncing your words.