How many letters, how many sounds?

Spelling and pronunciation

All sections with this symbol ☰ are on the recording. Listen to them while you read this page.

There are 26 letters in the English alphabet. 

A B C D E F G H I J K L M N O P Q R S T U V W X Y Z

There are five vowel letters. A E I O U

And there are 21 consonant letters. B C D F G H J K L M N P Q R S T V W X Y Z

But there are more than 40 vowel and consonant sounds in English.

In some words, the number of letters is the same as the number of sounds.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word</th>
<th>Letters</th>
<th>Sounds</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>best</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dentist</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

But sometimes the number of sounds is different from the number of letters.

In green, ee is one sound, and in happy, pp is one sound.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word</th>
<th>Letters</th>
<th>Sounds</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>green</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>happy</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In bread, ea is one sound.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word</th>
<th>Letters</th>
<th>Sounds</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>bread</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In some words there are silent letters (letters with no sound). In listen, t is silent.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word</th>
<th>Letters</th>
<th>Sounds</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>listen</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In some words, one letter is two sounds. The x in six is two sounds like k + s.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word</th>
<th>Letters</th>
<th>Sounds</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>six</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

We sometimes write the same sound differently in different words. For example, the e in red sounds like the ea in bread.

Sometimes two words have the same pronunciation but different spellings. (See Section E8 Homophones.)

know – no
A: Do you know? B: No, I don’t.

And sometimes two words have the same spelling but different pronunciations.

read (infinitive and present tense) – read (past tense)
A: Do you want to read the newspaper? B: No, thanks, I read it this morning.

Because there are more sounds than letters, we use symbols for pronunciation.

The symbol / sounds before stressed syllables (see Section B Syllables and words).
Exercises

1.1 Write the number of letters and the number of sounds in these words.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>letters</th>
<th>sounds</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>all</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>back</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>could</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>knee</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>sixty</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>thing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>who</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>address</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Check with the Key (on page 138). Then listen and repeat.

1.2 Some pronunciation symbols are easy. Write these words in their normal spelling.

**EXAMPLE** /best/ ... best

Check with the Key. Then listen and repeat.

1.3 All five words in each group have the same vowel letter – a, e, i, o or u – but one has a different vowel sound. Circle the word with the different vowel sound in each group.

**EXAMPLE** on top stop one gone
1 give time sit think rich
2 apple bad wash catch bank
3 much bus sun push up
4 many maths man hat flat

Check with the Key. Then listen and repeat.

1.4 Write words that rhyme (the end part of the word sounds the same).

**EXAMPLE** red _ p _  d
1 key _ tr_ _
2 blue _ sh_ _
3 not _ w_ _
4 one _ r_ _
5 date _ w_ _
6 lie _ w_ _
7 so _ sh_ _
8 beer _ n_ _

Check with the Key. Then listen and repeat.
Pizza for dinner

/i:/ and /ɪ/

How to make the sound /i: /

• /i:/ is a long sound. Look at the diagram. Listen and then say the sound. Make your mouth wide, like a smile. Your tongue touches the sides of your teeth. Target sound: /i:/

Sound and spelling

• /i:/ is usually spelled ee or ea. Listen and say these words.
  see  agree  eat  seat  team

• Listen and say these other words with /i/.
  ie  field  piece
e  these  metre  secret  evening  equal  Peter  museum  European  Chinese  Japanese  complete
ey  key
i  ski  kilo  litre  pizza  police  machine  magazine
eo  people

• Now listen and say these sentences. You will need to pause the recording to give yourself enough time to repeat.
  1 Can you see the sea?
  2 A piece of pizza, please.
  3 Peter’s in the team.
  4 A kilo of peaches and a litre of cream.
  5 Please can you teach me to speak Portuguese?

How to make the sound /ɪ/

• /ɪ/ is a short sound. Look at the diagram. Listen and then say the sound. Make your mouth a bit less wide than for /i:/ Your tongue is a bit further back in your mouth than for /i/. Target sound: /ɪ/

Sound and spelling

• /ɪ/ is usually spelled i. Listen and say these words.
  if  listen  miss  dinner  swim

• Listen and say these other words with /ɪ/.
  busy  business  building  system

• Now listen and say these phrases.
  1 fifty-six
  2 dinner in the kitchen
  3 a cinema ticket
  4 a picture of a building
  5 big business

Note: Eight letters of the alphabet have the sound /ɪ/. Listen and repeat.
B C D E G P T V

Note: Units 2 to 10 focus on vowel sounds in stressed syllables (see Section B Syllables and words).

Vowel sounds in unstressed syllables often have the weak vowel /ɪ/. Listen and repeat.

Note: There is sometimes an /ɪ/ sound at the end of a word in an unstressed syllable (see Section B Syllables and words), e.g. happy, coffee, busy. This sound is like /ɪ/ but shorter. Listen and repeat.

happy  coffee  busy  sixty
Exercises

2.1 Put these /i:/ words in the dialogues.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>email</th>
<th>evening</th>
<th>police</th>
<th>secret</th>
<th>Steve</th>
<th>TV</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

1. A: What shall we do this ____________? 
   B: Let's stay at home and watch ____________.
2. A: Let me read that ____________.
   B: No – it’s a ____________!
3. A: You know my friend ____________? 
   B: Yes. 
   A: Well, he’s got a new job. He’s joined the ____________!

Listen to check your answers. Check with the Key. Then listen and repeat.

2.2 Find the /ɪ/ words from these clues.

**EXAMPLE** A thousand thousand is a ____________.
1. You can use a ____________ to go up and down in a building.
2. There are sixty seconds in a ____________.
3. A ____________ is a book of words to help you with your English.
4. It's too warm in here – open the ____________.
5. Would you like a ____________ with your coffee?
6. Birds and planes have ____________.
7. You can see yourself in a ____________.
8. Don’t drop ____________ – put it in a bin!

Listen to check your answers. Check with the Key. Then listen and repeat.

2.3 Circle all the /ɪ/ sounds and underline all the /I/ sounds.

big busy dinner give green in listen meet office people pizza
please repeat six tea three

Listen to check your answers. Check with the Key. Then listen and repeat.

2.4 Match the beginnings and endings of the sentences.

**EXAMPLE** Let’s have pizza ____________.
1. We’re always busy ____________.
2. Would you like tea ____________.
3. Give me that big ____________.
4. There were only three ____________.
5. Listen and ____________.
6. Let's meet at ____________.

a repeat  
b people in the museum  
c six o’clock  
d in the office  
e or coffee?  
g green book, please.

Check with the Key. Then listen and repeat.

2.5 Listen and circle the word you hear. Check with the Key. If any of these are difficult for you, go to Section E3 Sound pairs for further practice.

1. leave / live  
2. knee / near  
3. litter / letter

(sound pair 1)  
(sound pair 2)  
(sound pair 3)
A spoonful of sugar
/u:/ and /u/

How to make the sound /u:/

/u:/ is a long sound. Look at the diagram. Listen and then say the sound. Make your lips into a tunnel shape.
Your tongue is a long way back in your mouth. Target sound: /u:/

Sound and spelling

/u:/ is often spelled oo, ou, oe, u, ue or ew. Listen and say these words.

too group shoe blue

• When the spelling is u or ew, there is often a /j/ sound before the /u/. Listen and say these words.
music new

• There are also other spellings of /u/. Listen and say these other words with /u/.
two fruit juice

• Now listen and say these phrases.
  1 me too
  2 work in groups
  3 new shoes
  4 red and blue
  5 listen to the music
  6 forty-two
  7 fruit juice

⚠️ Note: /ju:/ is the name of the letter U in the alphabet.

How to make the sound /u/

/u/ is a short sound. Look at the diagram. Listen and then say the sound. Your tongue is not so far back as for /u:/.
Target sound: /u/

Sound and spelling

/u/ is often spelled u, oo or ou. Listen and say these words.

full sugar book foot would

• Listen and say this other word with /u/.
woman

• Now listen and say these phrases.
  1 My bag’s full.
  2 Where’s my book?
  3 my left foot
  4 a kilo of sugar
  5 Who’s that woman?
Exercises

3.1 Circle the words with /uː/.

There are nine.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>/uː/</th>
<th>four</th>
<th>June</th>
<th>look</th>
<th>news</th>
<th>room</th>
<th>school</th>
<th>soup</th>
<th>spoon</th>
<th>sugar</th>
<th>town</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Listen to check your answers. Check with the Key. Then listen and repeat.

3.2 Put the /uː/ words from Exercise 3.1 in the sentences.

1. Do you like fast _________?
2. Are you coming to _________?
3. It’s _________ the second of _________.
4. Let’s watch the _________.
5. _________ _________ is over there.
6. Here’s a _________ for your _________.

Listen to check your answers. Check with the Key. Then listen and repeat.

3.3 Circle the words with /u/.

There are six.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>/u/</th>
<th>book</th>
<th>cookery</th>
<th>cough</th>
<th>could</th>
<th>good</th>
<th>looking</th>
<th>lunch</th>
<th>soon</th>
<th>sugar</th>
<th>thought</th>
<th>through</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Listen to check your answers. Check with the Key. Then listen and repeat.

3.4 Put the /u/ words from Exercise 3.3 in the sentences.

1. Do you take _________?
2. _________ you help me? I’m _________ for a _________ _________.

Listen to check your answers. Check with the Key. Then listen and repeat.

3.5 Circle the words that have /uː/ or /u/, then put them in the correct column.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>/uː/</th>
<th>/u/</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>true</td>
<td>foot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>_________</td>
<td>_________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>_________</td>
<td>_________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>_________</td>
<td>_________</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Listen to check your answers. Check with the Key. Then listen and repeat.

3.6 Listen and circle the word you hear. Check with the Key. If any of these are difficult for you, go to Section E3 Sound pairs for further practice.

1. pool / pull (⇒ sound pair 4)
2. look / luck (⇒ sound pair 5)
3. soup / soap (⇒ sound pair 6)
Father and mother
/ɑː/ and /ʌ/

How to make the sound /ɑː/

• /ɑː/ is a long sound. Look at the diagram. Listen and then say the sound. Open your mouth wide. Target sound: /ɑː/

Sound and spelling

• /ɑː/ is usually spelled a or ar. Listen and say these words.
  after  afternoon  ask  answer  bath  bathroom  can’t  class  dance  fast  father  glass  tomato  bar  car  card  far  park  star  start  
  - Listen and say these other words with /ɑː/.
    aunt  laugh  heart  half  (The letter l in half is silent.)
  - Listen and say these words.
    1 How far’s the car park?
    2 We went to a large bar full of film stars.
    3 We’re starting in half an hour.

In words with a letter r after the /ɑː/ sound, most Americans and some British people pronounce the r. Listen to the same sentences, this time with the letter Rs pronounced.

Some people, especially in the north of England, pronounce the letters a or au as /æː/ in some of these words. Listen.

• In words with a letter r after the /ɑː/ sound, most Americans and some British people pronounce the r. Listen to the same sentences, this time with the letter Rs pronounced.

How to make the sound /ʌ/

• /ʌ/ is a short sound. Look at the diagram. Listen and then say the sound. Open your mouth wide. Target sound: /ʌ/

Sound and spelling

• /ʌ/ is usually spelled u, but sometimes ou or o. Listen and say these words.
  bus  colour  come  cup  front    London  luck  Monday  month  mother  much  nothing  number  run  study  sun  uncle  under  
  - Listen and say these words.
    1 Good luck with your exam next month!
    2 Take the number one bus.
    3 I said ‘Come on Monday’, not ‘Come on Sunday’.
    4 My brother’s studying in London.

Some people, especially in the north of England, say /ʊ/ instead of /ʌ/. Listen to the same sentences, this time with /ʊ/.

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## Exercises

### 4.1
Listen and write the words in the correct column.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>artist</th>
<th>garden</th>
<th>March</th>
<th>part</th>
<th>square</th>
<th>talk</th>
<th>warm</th>
<th>watch</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

**words with /æ/**

- artist
- square

**words with other vowel sounds**

- garden
- March
- part
- talk
- warm
- watch

Check with the Key. Then listen again and repeat.

### 4.2
Listen and write the words in the correct column.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>business</th>
<th>country</th>
<th>fun</th>
<th>home</th>
<th>lots</th>
<th>money</th>
<th>mother</th>
<th>push</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

**words with /ʌ/**

- country
- business

**words with other vowel sounds**

- fun
- home
- lots
- money
- mother
- push

Check with the Key. Then listen again and repeat.

### 4.3
Complete the sentences with one /æ/ word and one /ʌ/ word.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>butter</th>
<th>carpet</th>
<th>dark</th>
<th>hard</th>
<th>husband</th>
<th>love</th>
<th>Prague</th>
<th>son</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

1. The _butter's_ too _carpet_.
2. I'd _push_ to buy that _business_!
3. Their _mother_ 's got _dark_ hair.
4. I first met my _Prague_ in _hard_.

Listen to check your answers. Check with the Key. Then listen again and repeat.

### 4.4
Listen and circle the word you hear. Check with the Key. If any of these are difficult for you, go to Section E3 Sound pairs for more practice.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>heart / hat</th>
<th>far / four</th>
<th>cat / cut</th>
<th>look / luck</th>
<th>luck / lock</th>
<th>butter / better</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>➞ sound pair 7</td>
<td>➞ sound pair 8</td>
<td>➞ sound pair 9</td>
<td>➞ sound pair 5</td>
<td>➞ sound pair 10</td>
<td>➞ sound pair 18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A dog in the corner

/ɒ/ and /ɔ/

How to make the sound /ɒ/

• /Å/ is a short sound. Look at the diagram. Listen and say the sound. Round your lips a little. The front of your tongue is low and towards the back of your mouth.

Target sound: /ɔ/

Sound and spelling

/ɒ/ is usually spelled o, and sometimes a. Listen and repeat.

bottle box chocolate clock coffee copy cost cross doctor dog gone
got holiday hospital hot job lock long lost lot not off often
possible shop song sorry stop top wrong
quality want wash wasn't watch what

Note: The word *cough* is pronounced /kɒf/. (See Unit 40.)

- Now listen and say these sentences.
  1. Have you got a lot of shopping?
  2. John’s gone to the shops.
  3. How much did your holiday cost?
  4. She said the coffee wasn’t very good, but I thought it was.

Most Americans pronounce these words differently. Listen.

1. Have you got a lot of shopping?
2. John’s gone to the shops.
3. How much did your holiday cost?
4. She said the coffee wasn’t very good, but I thought it was.

How to make the sound /ɔ:/

• /ɔ:/ is a long sound. Look at the diagram. Listen and say the sound. Round your lips more than for /ɔ/. Target sound: /ɔ:/

Sound and spelling

/ɔ:/ has different spellings. Listen and say these words.

a all ball call fall tall ar quarter warm
wall water or born corner forty horse
al talk walk short sort
au autumn oor door floor
aw saw ore before more
auh caught daughter taught our four
ough bought thought

- Now listen and say these phrases.
  1. quarter past four
  2. born in autumn
  3. have some more
  4. walking on water
  5. the fourth door on the fourth floor

When there is a letter r after /ɔ:/, most Americans, Scots and Irish, and some other English speakers pronounce this r. Listen.

1. quarter past four
2. born in autumn
3. have some more
4. walking on water
5. the fourth door on the fourth floor
Exercises

5.1 Write these words.

EXAMPLE /boks/ /klÅk/ /wÅnt/ /’sÅri/ /gÅn/ /’wÅntId/ /wÅt/

Listen to check your answers. Check with the Key. Then listen again and repeat.

5.2 Listen and complete the dialogues with these /ɒ/ words.

box chocolates clock doctor gone got holiday on stopped
what what

What time is it?

1 A: What time is it?
   B: I don’t know. The ...’s ...

2 A: ... have you ...?
   B: A ... of ...

3 A: Where’s the ...?
   B: He’s ... ...

Check with the Key. Then listen again and repeat.

5.3 Write the underlined verbs in the past tense.

EXAMPLE We buy everything at the supermarket. → We bought everything at the supermarket.

1 I think about you every day. → I ... about you every day.

2 We always walk home from school. → We always ... home from school.

3 I catch the first bus in the morning. → I ... the first bus in the morning.

4 My daughter teaches English. → My daughter ... English.

Check with the Key. Then listen and repeat.

5.4 Write the names of the things in the picture.

(They all have /ɒ/ or /ɔ:/.)

EXAMPLE ... a bottle

Check with the Key.

5.5 Listen and write the missing /ɒ/ and /ɔ:/ words.

This is our kitchen. On the table there’s a big ... full of shopping, a ... of wine and some ... and pepper. There’s a ... on the ... and the ...’s asleep in the corner behind the ...

Check with the Key. Then listen and speak together with the recording.

5.6 Listen and circle the word you hear. Check with the Key. If any of these are difficult for you, go to Section E3 Sound pairs for more practice.

not / note (⇒ sound pair 11) shot / short (⇒ sound pair 13)
luck / lock (⇒ sound pair 10) walk / work (⇒ sound pair 14)
coat / caught (⇒ sound pair 12)