

The Phonetic Alphabet

The two central principles of the phonetic alphabet are:

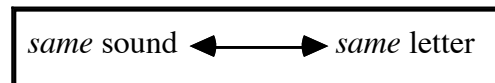
(i)



This means that spelling like ‘th’ in ‘*thin*’, ‘sh’ in ‘*short*’, or ‘ng’ in ‘*king*’ need to be replaced with new symbols.

For the opposite reason ‘x’ in ‘*box*’ will need to be replaced with 2 symbols.

(ii)



This means that in cases like ‘gem’ — ‘jet’ we will need to decide on a single symbol to use for this sound. Similar cases are ‘shed’ — ‘chef’, or ‘sing’ — ‘city’.

For the opposite reason we will need to make differences where spelling makes none, such as in ‘them’ — ‘theme’, or ‘gem’ — ‘get’.

Finally both of these principles mean that we want to give up ‘silent letters’ such as those in ‘*knee*’, ‘*psychology*’, ‘*right*’, etc.

The symbols

First of all we try to use familiar symbols as much as possible. From the consonants the following are used in exactly the way we are most familiar with:

b d f h k l m n p r s t v w z

Special care must be given to the use of the following 2 letters:

g

This letter is always used for the sound in ‘give’, ‘get’, never the sound in ‘gem’, or ‘page’.

j

This letter is used for the ‘y’ sound in ‘yes’. This is the same as in German, which always pronounces the letter ‘j’ in this way.

The following 4 letters are *never* used to spell English phonetically

c q x y

Finally we will need 5 new symbols to write sounds for which the English alphabet does not have any. Pay careful attention to the shapes, as well as the way the symbols go above and below the writing line:

θ

for the ‘th’ sound in ‘*thin*’

ð

for the ‘th’ sound in ‘*this*’

ʃ

for the ‘sh’ sound in ‘*shin*’

ʒ

for the middle sound in ‘*vision*’

ŋ

for the ‘ng’ sound in ‘*king*’

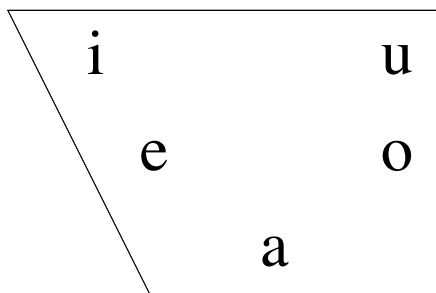
Pay close attention to the following:

- The symbols should be written clearly and always with the same shape
- The symbols should never be linked
- There are no capital letters

Transcription of Vowels

The 5 basic vowels

A very common set of vowels is the 5 vowel system. This is the kind of vowel system that Japanese and Spanish have. For this kind of system the IPA uses the 5 vowel letters of the roman alphabet:



Extra symbols

A language like English makes more vowel distinctions than just these five. For this reason more symbols are needed.

The basic vowels	'Extra' vowels
i	ɪ
e	ɛ
o	ɔ
u	ʊ

English has several low vowels as well:

a	æ	ʌ
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These symbols can be used to represent vowels that are similar but have a different quality from the basic 5 vowels.

Vowel length

The IPA also adds a symbol to show that a vowel is longer.

**Vowel distinctions in English**

English distinguishes different vowels in pairs of words like ‘late’ vs. ‘let’ or ‘feet’ vs. ‘fit’. In each of these pairs the first vowel is slightly longer, has a slightly different quality, and is somewhat diphthong like. This means that there are 3 ways that we could show this distinction:

	late	let	feet	fit
Quality	e	ɛ	i	ɪ
Quantity	e:	e	i:	i
Diphthong	ej or eɪ	e	ij or iɪ	i

or we can combine

all 3 methods	eɪ	ɛ	i:	ɪ
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The last method is the most accurate, but also the most complex.

Central Vowels

Finally the IPA also adds symbols for vowels made in the central area of the vocal tract.

The first is the typical unstressed vowel of English (as in *sofa* or *data* or *about*).

The second is the ‘r-colored’ vowel of American English (as in *bird* or *girl*).

