

English is not “phonetic.” That means that we do not always say a word the same way that we spell it. Consider the following excerpt of a poem:

The Chaos (English Is Tough Stuff)

Dearest creature in creation,
Study English pronunciation.
I will teach you in my verse
Sounds like corpse, corps, horse, and worse.
I will keep you, Suzy, busy,
Make your head with heat grow dizzy.
Tear in eye, your dress will tear.
So shall I! Oh hear my prayer.

Just compare heart, beard, and heard,
Dies and diet, lord and word,
Sword and sward, retain and Britain.
(Mind the latter, how it’s written.)
Now I surely will not plague you
With such words as plaque and ague.
But be careful how you speak:
Say break and steak, but bleak and streak;
Cloven, oven, how and low,
Script, receipt, show, poem, and toe.

[...]

Pronunciation—think of Psyche!
Is a paling stout and spikey?
Won’t it make you lose your wits,
Writing groats and saying grits?
It’s a dark abyss or tunnel:
Strewn with stones, stowed, solace, gunwale,
Islington and Isle of Wight,
Housewife, verdict and indict.

Finally, which rhymes with enough—
Though, through, plough, or dough, or cough?
Hiccough has the sound of cup.
My advice is to give up!

Gerald Nolst Trenite (1870-1946)

English Phonetic Transcription

1. Consonants

Voiced vs voiceless or why does b sound like p but not really?

Think about what your mouth is doing when you are saying words like 'bad' and 'pad' or 'down' and 'town'. Put your hand on your throat and say them again. You should notice that with 'b, d, g' there is something vibrating in your throat, whereas there is no vibration with 'p, t, k'. This is due to two ligaments in your throat called the vocal chords which either vibrate or do not vibrate during speaking. If they are vibrating, we talk about a voiced sound, if they are not, we call it a voiceless sound.

voiced consonants

[b]	bee, behind
[d]	do, had
[g]	go, beg
[l]	lamp, ill
[m]	man, am
[n]	no, manner
[ŋ]	long, sing
[r]	red, dry
[z]	zeal, these
[ʒ]	pleasure
[dʒ]	jam, object
[ð]	this, father
[v]	voice, live
[w]	water, we, which
[j]	youth, Indian

voiceless consonants

[p]	popular, happy
[t]	tea, fat
[k]	desk, milk
[h]	house
[s]	stand, sand, yes
[ʃ]	ship, station
[tʃ]	church, catch
[θ]	thank, death
[f]	father, wolf

2. Vowels

short vowels

[ɪ]	it, wish
[e]	get, bed
[æ]	man, sad
[ʌ]	but, son
[ɒ]	not, long
[ʊ]	push, look
[ə]	ago, better

long vowels

[i:]	bee, see
[ɑ:]	car, father
[ɔ:]	law, all
[u:]	you, do
[ɜ:]	bird, her

diphthongs

[eɪ]	name, lame
[aɪ]	life
[ɔɪ]	boy, oil
[əʊ]	no, low
[aʊ]	house
[iə]	here
[eə]	there, care
[ʊə]	poor, sure

3. Other symbols

The colon (:) after a vowel shows a long vowel:

The high mark (') shows the primary stress:

The comma (,) shows a weak stress:

Non-stressed syllables are not marked:

(to) leave [li:v] cf. [lɪv]

hotel [həʊ'tel]

photographic [ˌfəʊtə'græfɪk]

take [teɪk]

Exercise: Phonetic Transcription

[ˈfɪkʃn] _____

[kəˈmɜːʃl] _____

[rɪˈsiːv] _____

[ˈsɜːkl] _____

[ɪˌmædʒɪˈneɪʃn] _____

[ˈæktʃʊəlɪ] _____

[ɪnˈcʌrɪdʒ] _____

[ˈleɪzə taɪm] _____

[ˈɔːθə] _____

[ˈpəʊɪt] _____

[saɪˈkɒlədʒɪ] _____

[ðə][ðɪ] _____

[θæŋk] _____

[ðeə(r)] _____

[θɪn] _____

[ˈbreɪkfəst] _____

[ˈpɒlətɪks] _____

[ʌnˈfɔːtʃnətlɪ] _____

[səˈsaɪətɪ] _____

[ˈɑːgjuː] _____

[əˈlɒŋ] _____

[bɔːd] _____

[nəʊ] _____

[meɪl] _____

[piːs] _____

[sʌn] _____

[hiə(r)] _____

[ˈaʊə(r)] _____

[raɪt] _____

Exercise: Phonetic Transcription

[ˈfɪkʃn]	fiction
[kəˈmɜːʃl]	commercial
[rɪˈsiːv]	receive
[ˈsɜːkl]	receive
[ɪˌmædʒɪˈneɪʃn]	imagination
[ˈæktʃʊəli]	actually
[ɪnˈcʌrɪdʒ]	encourage
[ˈleɪzə taɪm]	leisure time
[ˈɔːθə]	author
[ˈpəʊɪt]	poet
[saɪˈkɒlədʒɪ]	psychology
[ðə][ðɪ]	the
[θæŋk]	thank
[ðeə(r)]	their, there
[θɪn]	thin
[ˈbrekfəst]	breakfast
[ˈpɒlətɪks]	politics
[ʌnˈfɔːtʃnətli]	unfortunately
[səˈsaɪətɪ]	society
[ˈɑːɡjuː]	argue
[əˈlɒŋ]	along
[bɔːd]	board, bored
[nəʊ]	know, no
[meɪl]	mail, male
[piːs]	peace, piece
[sʌn]	son, sun
[hɪə(r)]	hear, here
[ˈaʊə(r)]	hour, our
[raɪt]	write, right, rite,