

Vowels Sounds and American English Pronunciation

Words do not exist in English without a vowel sound. As a reminder, vowels are defined as five of the twenty-six letters in the alphabet known as /A, E, I, O and U/. Every syllable in a word has a vowel. Words cannot exist without them. Vowel sounds are extremely important because they give a word shape and specific meaning. Words will take on a different meaning when an unintended vowel sound is used. If one vowel sound is mispronounced the entire word will be affected, which is a big part of speaking with an accent.

How Vowels Are Pronounced

All American sounds are pronounced in the mouth. No sounds are pronounced in the lower or back area of the throat, which is a very important distinction to understand for many accented speakers. Back vowel sounds are placed (launched) from the back of the mouth. No American vowel sounds are formed in the throat which makes speaking English challenging for some European speakers. There should not be any pushing or pulling from the wall of the back throat when speaking American English with cultural correctness.

Long and Short Vowels: The American Classification

When foreigners learn English and even when American children learn English, information is presented on the long and short vowel sounds, which is the foundation for American vowel sound classification. Below are how vowel sounds are classified.

Long Vowels

/A/ as in ape and bake (*Front & Diphthong*)

/E/ as in eat and peaa (*Front*)

/I/ as in ice and pie (*Front & Diphthong*)

/O/ as in open and boat (*Back & Diphthong*)

/U/ as in choose and new (*Back & Diphthong*)

Short Vowels

/a/ as in at and bat (*Front*)

/e/ as in echo and bet (*Front*)

/i/ as in is and flip (*Front*)

/o/ as in awful and saw

/u/ as in book and shook

Other Vowels

/uh/ (known as schwa) as in up and run (*Center*)

/er/ vocalic /R/ as in runner and wonderful (*Center*)

/oi/ as in soil and boy (*Back & Diphthong*)

/ow/ or /au/ as in ot and cow (*Back & Diphthong*)

/iu/ as in university (*Back & Diphthong*)

Everyone studying English has learned that there are rules for long and short vowels when it comes to pronunciation and spelling. Oddly enough, when it comes to the spoken cultural style of English, the rules aren't exactly true. When it comes to speaking English in the American cultural style, often how a long or short vowel sound is produced is surprisingly not the point. How long a vowel sound is held is influenced by the consonant that comes after the vowel.

American Resonance and Why It Is Important for American Vowel Sounds

To speak American English closer to the American cultural style and to produce the vowel sounds more accurately is to understand and demonstrate oral resonance. American resonance is placed in the center of your mouth. To achieve this, it will be necessary to speak using full range of motion of the speech articulators, use optimal pitch and have less muscular tension, particularly in the throat and back of your mouth.

American Intonation and Muscular Tension: Why It Matters with Vowels

Speaking English with accuracy requires much bigger mouth movements than what you are probably used to, which is a big part of how American intonation is spoken. The same is also true with the amount of muscular tension applied to sound segments. Accurate vowel pronunciation requires that you speak using American intonation, applying minimal muscular tension and launching your speech from your oral cavity not the throat or nasal cavity. The cultural habits from your first language are what make it difficult to speak “perfect American English.” When I work with my clients, that is never the goal. The goal is to speak English in the American cultural style and get the vowel sounds better approximated to the standard model of American English.

Thank you for your interest in our “Look Inside” article for Accent Reduction 101. I hope you have a sense on how helpful the book can be for reducing your accent and speaking with better speech clarity. We offer a wide variety of ways to reduce your accent. Please review the website for further information at www.SpeechAndVoice.com Training opportunities we offer include:

1. Work with a speech coach privately or online
2. Accent Reduction 4 Week Class in Denver or online
3. Self Study
 - a. Book and choice of auditory support
 - b. Book, auditory support and watch our recorded-live Accent Reduction Seminar