

The Sounds of English

A phoneme-grapheme reference for sound walls, lessons and spelling feedback. Slashes mark a sound, like /b/. Plain letters are spellings.

English has about 44 speech sounds but only 26 letters, so most sounds have more than one spelling. Exact counts vary with dialect and with how r-controlled vowels and the schwa are counted. Teach the sound first, then the spellings, starting with the most common.

Consonant sounds

Sound	Key word	Common spellings
/p/	pig	p, pp (happy)
/b/	bat	b, bb (rabbit)
/t/	top	t, tt, -ed (jumped)
/d/	dog	d, dd, -ed (played)
/k/	cat	c, k, -ck, ch (school)
/g/	goat	g, gg, gu (guest), gh (ghost)
/f/	fish	f, -ff, ph (phone), gh (laugh)
/v/	van	v, -ve (have)
/th/	thumb	th (unvoiced)
/th/	this	th (voiced)
/s/	sun	s, -ss, c (city), -ce (face), sc (science)
/z/	zip	z, -zz, s (is), -se (rose)
/sh/	ship	sh, ti (nation), ci (special), ch (chef)

Sound	Key word	Common spellings
/zh/	measure	s (vision), -ge (garage)
/ch/	chin	ch, -tch (catch), t (picture)
/j/	jam	j, g (gem), -dge (badge), -ge (cage)
/m/	map	m, mm, -mb (lamb)
/n/	net	n, nn, kn (knee), gn (gnat)
/ng/	ring	ng, n before k (think)
/l/	leg	l, -ll, -le (table)
/r/	run	r, rr, wr (write)
/w/	web	w, u after q (queen)
/wh/	whale	wh (in dialects that say it)
/y/	yes	y
/h/	hat	h, wh (who)

Vowel sounds

Short vowels

Sound	Key word	Common spellings
/ă/	apple	a
/ĕ/	edge	e, ea (head)
/ĭ/	itch	i, y (gym)
/ŏ/	octopus	o, a after w (want)
/ŭ/	up	u, o (son), ou (touch)

Long vowels

Sound	Key word	Common spellings
/ā/	cake	a (paper), a_e, ai, ay, eigh, ey (they)
/ē/	tree	e (me), ee, ea, e_e, y (happy), ie (chief), ey (key)
/ī/	kite	i (hi), i_e, igh, y (my), ie (pie)
/ō/	boat	o (go), o_e, oa, ow, oe
/yoo/	cube	u (unit), u_e, ew (few), ue (cue)

The schwa

Sound	Key word	Common spellings
/ə/	about	Any vowel in an unstressed syllable: a (about), e (taken), o (lemon), u (circus)

Other vowel sounds

Sound	Key word	Common spellings
/oo/	moon	oo, u_e (rule), ew, ue, ou (soup), ui (fruit)
/oo/	book	oo, u (put), ou (could)
/aw/	saw	aw, au, a before l (ball), augh, ough (thought)
/oi/	coin	oi, oy
/ow/	cow	ow, ou

R-controlled vowels

Sound	Key word	Common spellings
/er/	her	er, ir, ur, ear (learn), or after w (work)
/ar/	car	ar
/or/	corn	or, ore, oar, our (four), oor (door)

Position matters

Many vowel spellings depend on where the sound falls. The first spelling in each pair usually comes in the middle of a word, the second at the end:

ai / ay rain, play
oi / oy coin, boy
au / aw haul, saw
ou / ow out, cow

Teaching tips

- Say sounds clipped and clean. /s/ is a hiss, not "suh." Extra vowel sounds make blending harder.
- Start with continuous sounds (/m/, /s/, /f/, /l/). Students can stretch them, so blending is easier.
- Group sounds on a sound wall by how they are made in the mouth, not by letter.
- When a spelling is wrong, ask "What sound do you hear?" first, then "Which spelling fits in this spot?"
- Teach the most common spelling first. Add others once the first is automatic.
- Point students back to the key word whenever a sound is shaky.