

Boost your pronunciation and feel more confident when speaking in English

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A PDF handbook from www.yohannbrulley.com

The main objective of this handbook is to help you start developing what we might call a “correct” pronunciation. The content of this handbook stems from the work I’ve done with hundreds of learners of the English language, and should provide you with everything you need to start feeling more confident when speaking English.

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1. What is a correct pronunciation?

It is quite tricky to define the meaning of “correct” pronunciation. Is the pronunciation of the British native speaker more “correct” than the Indian one? Is a working-class Southern U.S. speaker less “correct” in the way they pronounce than an upper-class New England speaker? For the purpose of this booklet, we’ll consider that a correct pronunciation is:

- easily **understandable** for other speakers, including native speakers
- **not resorting** to any specifically **non-native traits** (anything that would identify the non-native speaker as such)
- **respectful of the most usual defining characteristics of the English language** (stress, rhythm, vowel types...)

To summarize, I aim to help you learn how to speak **clearly and efficiently**, while progressively **losing (or at least concealing really well) your non-native accent** and reinforcing **your understanding of what makes English sound so particular**. While it won’t happen overnight and will require a lot of practice and research on your part, this guide should be a great start.

Too long, didn’t read?

- This guide will help you progressively developing a clear and understandable pronunciation.

2. Fake it until you make it

Don't believe what they're telling you in those clickbaity YouTube videos: you won't be able to suddenly sound exactly like a native speaker. It is a **long** process that will start by you **imitating**, or I should probably say **exaggerating**, the speech patterns of native speakers. As you'll need to practice a lot, you will probably believe you're sounding incredibly stupid. **You're not**. It is only your brain feeling uncomfortable as it processes new information.

As you'll be doing an imitation, a **performance** we could say, you'll feel awkward for some time—you'll be feeling your accent is fake and mechanical. The more you'll speak, the more fluent you'll become, and the less mechanical you will sound. That's why I always tell my students they should **fake it until they make it**. Apply the rules, respect my recommendations as carefully as possible, and your imitation of a native English pronunciation will soon become your own, individual, and correct pronunciation. You won't have to fake it anymore: you'll have made it and won't ever lose the dramatic progress made—you'll finally feel comfortable and confident with your English.

As we'll be trying to imitate native speakers as much as possible, we'll need to **learn how to listen** properly before speaking. The next few sections will focus on how to properly understand the speech dynamics of the English language—then and only then we'll start producing our own sounds!

Too long, didn't read?

- Before speaking well, you'll need to focus your efforts on listening well.
- You'll then start imitating native speakers before developing your own personal pronunciation.

3. Rhythm, and how to listen for it

English is a **rhythmic** language. If you listen carefully to the music of native speech without attempting to understand the meaning, you'll soon realize that English is based on the alternation of strong and less strong sounds. If you listen to a sentence like "the **CAT** is **EAT**ing the **CU**te **MOU**se with a **LIT**tle **SPI**cy **SAU**ce," you should be able to hear that the voice of the speaker keeps going up and down, up and down. Some syllables sound loud while some others sound very weak and almost disappear.

The inherent rhythm of the English language, the way it **alternates between weak and strong syllables**, is one of the reasons why some learners find English difficult to understand. Those learners have the impression that some native speakers are "eating" some syllables, that they're not pronouncing "fully" the language. You should not see it as a problem, but as a **different language system** that you simply need to understand. It is essential for you to accept the fact that English pronunciation probably doesn't follow the conventions of your native language—while it might seem obvious, trust me that most learners, including advanced ones, tend to rely too much on the mechanics of their native language! You wouldn't feel happy pronouncing English with a strong Spanish, French, or Japanese accent, right? So how do you hope understanding the rhythm of English if you keep expecting native speakers to more or less follow the speech patterns of your native language?

The "up and down" rhythm (and the feeling of "half-eaten" syllables) is mainly due to the way English uses alternating **stressed and unstressed** syllables. Let's dig into that.

Too long, didn't read?

- Be aware of the rhythm of the English language, always going up-down-up-down etc.
- Accept that the rhythm of English probably has nothing to do with the rhythm (or absence of rhythm !) of your native language.

4. Stress

Say the word *table*. You said TA-ble, right? You insisted on the first syllable, because it is the stressed one. Words in English typically have one stress, symbolized in most dictionaries by a little **stress mark** ['] just before the **stressed syllable**. *Table* would be written as [ˈtɑːbl̩]. Same pattern applies to longer words. When you say the word *computer*, you should insist on the second syllable, because it is the stressed one: [kəmˈpjuːtər]. Go on, open a dictionary and look for the little stress mark. Remember a stressed syllable is typically louder, longer, higher in pitch, and very clearly. When listening to a native speaker speaking at a very fast pace, you'll mainly be **hearing the stressed syllables**—your (hopefully trained) brain should fill in the blanks! You'll discover that some words can have multiple stresses, and that some grammatical words (that don't carry any meaning and only allow the sentence to work right, like *for, of, the* etc.) often don't carry any stress. Don't worry about it for now.

Understanding the existence of alternating stressed and unstressed syllables is essential to start assimilating the rhythm of English. Now that we know that stressed syllables are pronounced loud and in full, let's see what should be done with unstressed ones.

Too long, didn't read?

- A stressed syllable is pronounced louder and more clearly than its unstressed counterpart.

5. The schwa [ə]

The schwa is the most common sound of the English language. Yes, you're read that right: it is the most common **sound** of the English language—so you'd better learn to pronounce it correctly! Making a schwa isn't too complicated. Just relax your lips and tongue completely, slightly open your mouth, and push slightly with your vocal chords to make a very relaxed "uh" sound. When I teach it to children, I always tell them about "Mr. Schwa," a slow-witted zombie who goes "uh" each time he takes a step forward. So Mr. Schwa walks very slowly and makes a series of [ə], [ə], [ə] sounds... Do it. Nobody's looking or judging you.

The schwa is also called the **neutral vowel**. It can be hidden behind any **unstressed syllable**. For example, in the word *correct*, the first syllable, being unstressed, will be pronounced with a schwa [ə], giving the sound [kə]. Another example could be the word... *example*. The second syllable is stressed, meaning the first and third ones are not. The first syllable will be pronounced [ægz] and the last one will be pronounced [pəl]. The schwa is everywhere!

Note: you will quickly realize that some unstressed vowels/syllables can also be replaced by a very brief short i [ɪ]. Don't bother about that for now, and focus on the basics!

Too long, didn't read?

- The schwa is the most common sound of the English language.
- It hides behind most unstressed syllables.

6. Practicing your consonants

Now that you understand the stressed/unstressed syllables system, it's time to start to learn how to **accurately** pronounce consonants and vowels. Accuracy is key concept that you'll encounter in many of your future readings: it's about how precise, correct, and articulate your English is. The main issue faced by non-native speakers is twofold: they **invent sounds** that don't exist in English, or they **don't make a clear distinction** between two different, existing sounds—we'll mainly focus on that specific problem. If you want to speak in an accurate fashion, you first need to be as accurate as possible with sounds in isolation.

Consonants are the first step. While relatively easy to pronounce, there are a few things that you should bear in mind:

- A clear distinction needs to be made between the [s] of *snake*, the [z] of *zoo*, the [ʃ] of *shop*, and the /ʒ/ of *vision*. Those four sounds are very often confused by learners and used interchangeably. You need to practice them to be able to pronounce them accurately—for example, with words that combine different sounds like *sushis*, *seizure*, and *shops*.
- A clear distinction needs to be made between the sounds [p] of *pike* and [b] of *bike* and between the sounds [t] of *tab* and [d] of *dab*. While the lips stay in the same position for each pair of sounds, the first sound of each pair doesn't make your vocal chords vibrate while the second one does. You need to be extremely careful with those pairs, both at the beginning and at the end of words. Compare *pat* with *pad*, or *bat* with *bad*, or *dap* with *dab*. It's more difficult than it seems, especially when speaking quickly!
- As a general rule of thumb, you should try to strongly insist on the first consonant of the word if it is stressed. The impulsion given will help you have enough breath until you reach the end of the word! Practice reading *fishing*, *valley*, *pinning*, *bandage*, *craving*, *dagger*.

Too long, didn't read?

- You need to be particularly careful when pronouncing the different consonant pairs.
- An effort needs to be made to correctly pronounce consonants located at the end of words.

7. Practicing your vowels

Vowels can be tricky—contrary to consonants, most of them don't have any direct correspondence to the vowels of other languages. Marking **clear differences** between each vowel sound and a **high level of accuracy** are once again the key to improving your pronunciation. It typically takes months, or even years of practice to accurately produce the different vowel sounds; however, there are a few guidelines that will help you tremendously in your learning:

- A clear distinction needs to be made between the sound of all the vowel sounds of English. Depending on who you ask, there are between 10 and 15 different vowel sounds—for now, just try to correctly pronounce the [æ] of *bat*, the [ɪ] of *bit*, the [e] of *bet*, the [ʌ] of *but*, and the [ʊ] of *foot*. Then play with them, making sure you pronounce differently a word like *hut* [ʌ] and a word like *hat* [æ]!
- A clear distinction needs to be made between short and long vowels. Most simple vowels exist in both short (as the [æ] sound of *bat*) and long form (as the [a:] of *car*). The typical learner won't pronounce the short vowels short enough and won't pronounce the long vowels long enough. I can't insist enough on that point: a short vowel sound, such as the short [ɪ] of *bit*, should be extremely brief, while the long [i:] sound of *beat* can be very long. Practice them in pairs and compare *bit* with *beat*, *cat* with *car*, *bed* with *bird*, *book* with *moon*.
- A clear distinction needs to be made between stressed and unstressed vowels.

This shouldn't come as anything new as you've read previously about the schwa [ə]! Always remember that unstressed vowels tend to be reduced to the [ə] sound.

Too long, didn't read?

- You need to be particularly careful when pronouncing the basic vowel sounds: they should all sound very differently.
- Short vowels should sound very short. Long vowels should sound very long.

8. Conclusion

Well done! You now have all the basics you need to start understanding better the way spoken English works. Please bear in mind that this handbook will help you best if you make the effort to read it multiple times; that way you'll assimilate its contents more easily. You should also remember that there are many things we haven't covered here, such as:

Intonation. Intonation is the going up and down of the spoken pitch. For example, intonation will differ whether you're asking a question or making a statement. While quite important in the long run, you should be able to develop decent pronunciation skills without touching the topic of intonation.

Sentence stress. Sentence stress exactly the same as word stress, but at the scale of the sentence. One word or more will typically be more important than the rest and will "stand out" in the sentence. I willingly excluded sentence stress for now as I'd really like you to focus on word stress to begin with!

Many, many, many more things. The topic of pronunciation in English is absolutely huge and it would be impossible to cover everything in such a short, practical guide. You now have all the required tools to keep exploring the topic, with or without my help! Remember to visit www.yohannbrultey.com for more content, or shoot me an email at yohann.brultey@gmail.com. I'd love to hear from you and know what I could do next to help you!

