

Note: Make sure you have covered the lesson describing the **sounds of English** before you read this one!

Even though English spelling, for historical reasons, is unfortunately not “logical” (much like French, by the way), there are still some **general rules** that apply most of the time, and some **common principles** which can make your life somewhat easier, in spite of the exceptions.

Unstressed syllables – reduced sounds

In English words, **unstressed vowels** are most often **reduced to /ə/ /ɪ/ or /u/**, especially between 2 stressed syllables. This is very important, because French speakers tend to **pronounce full vowels** (short or long vowels) instead of reduced ones, which sounds **very unnatural!**

For example: America = /ə'merɪkə/; Canada = /'kænədə/; Britain = /'brɪtən/

=> This is why it is so important to learn which syllable of the word carries the primary or secondary stress, because **vowels in unstressed syllables most often need to be reduced!**

Stressed syllables – short, long, or diphthong?

For every new English word you learn, you must **learn the stressed vowel sound**. Which of these sounds is it: **long, short, diphthong**? Even though there is no absolute rule, there are some **frequent links** between spelling and sounds that you should know to help you pronounce more words correctly.

a) Short vowels

- Most words **ending in a single stressed vowel followed by a single consonant** have a short vowel sound.
For instance: cap, sit, lot, but, let, etc.

Careful! Remember that **unstressed vowels** will be reduced to **ə, ɪ or u** (see above), not short vowels.

- Most **single stressed vowels** followed by a combination of **two consonants** will also make a short vowel sound.
For instance: lost, cash, back, thing, hand, bent, action, etc.

Careful! A combination of the **letter -r + a consonant** is different, as -r “colors” the pronunciation. See below for long vowels and diphthongs.

b) Long vowels

- Double vowel** spellings usually correspond to a long vowel sound.
- This is also true for some **vowels (o, a, i, u)** **followed by the letter -r** (vowel “colored by -r”)

Below is a table of the **most common spelling** for the long vowel sounds of English:

Sound	Spelling	Examples
	ee ea ie + consonant	see, meet, tee sea, meat, tea field, thief
	oo ue	food, moon blue, true
	a+r	car, hard, dark
	o+r(e) oa+r	for, more board, roar
	i+r u+r e+r	girl, bird, stir turn, hurt her, prefer

Careful! These are **not absolute rules, but tendencies** – there are a lot of exceptions!

⇒ **Summary of the changes due to r-coloring:**

Orthographe	a	e	i	o	u	
forme sous-jacente	æ	e	ɪ	ɒ	ʌ	ʊ
exemple	cat	gem	film	fog	luck	Pull
Valeur modifiée	ɑː	ɜː	ɜː	ɔː	ɜː	
exemple	cart	germ	firm	form	lurk	

Orthographe	ai, ay, ei, ey	ee, ea, ie	oo	oa	Eu/ew
forme sous-jacente	eɪ	iː	uː	əʊ	juː
exemple	faith	feat	pool	boat	
Valeur modifiée	eə	ɪə	ʊə	ɔː	
exemple	fair	fear	moor	boar	

Note: in American English, /eə/, /ɪə/, and /ʊə/ are not used – the ə is dropped (see below)

c) Diphthongs

Diphthongs most often correspond to **digraphs (two vowels)** both in terms of spelling and pronunciation. The table below summarizes **some frequent spellings** corresponding to the diphthongs of English.

Careful! As for most points so far, these are **tendencies and not absolute rules**. Some of these spellings may correspond to other pronunciations as well.

(For example, -ow- in “low” is /oʊ/, not “aʊ”)

Symbol	Spelling(s)	Examples	AMERICAN ENGLISH
əʊ	oa	boat, coast	əʊ => /oʊ/ (go)
aʊ	ow ou	cow, now out, round	
ɔɪ	oy oi	boy, toy noise, boil	
aɪ	ye igh	bye, dye night, high	
eɪ	ai/ay ei/ey	fail, bay veil, eight, grey	
eə	a +re	dare	/eə/ => /e/ + /r/ (pear)
ɪə	e +re	mere	/ɪə/ => /ɪ/ + /r/ (fear)
ʊə	u +re	cure, sure	/ʊə/ => /ʊ/ + /r/ (cure)
juː	ew ue	few, crew, new due, sue	/juː/ => /uː/ after /t, d, n, l s, z/ (tune, due, news, etc.)

Links spelling – pronunciation: frequent patterns

a) Silent –e rule

This is a **very simple and very productive** rule – in 2 minutes, you will be able to pronounce many English words correctly! :-) *The rule is linked to the short vowel spelling and goes like this:*

- 1) Most words ending in a single vowel followed by a **single consonant** have a **short vowel sound**.
- 2) If a word ends with a **single consonant and silent letter –e** (not pronounced), then the previous stressed vowel is a **diphthong** or **long vowel**, NOT a short vowel anymore.

Spelling	a	e	i	o	u
Short vowel	æ	e	ɪ	ʊ	ʌ
With C+silent -e	eɪ	iː	aɪ	əʊ	juː

Examples:

A **cap** /kæp/ (short –a) => a **cape** /keɪp/ (diphthong)
To **sit** /sɪt/ (short –i) => a **site** /saɪt/ (diphthong)
Not /nɒt/ (short –o) => a **note** /nəʊt/ (diphthong)
Cut /kʌt/ (short –u) => **cute** /kjuːt/ (diphthong)
A **car** //kɑː(r)/ (long –a colored by –r) => **to care** /keə(r)/ (diphthong colored by –r)

Easy, right ? Problem: there are **exceptions**, and these exceptions are usually **very common words** in English: for instance, **have, love, live, give, come, some, one, none, gone, done, lose, move, are, were...** so look up the pronunciation of these words and **memorize these exceptions!**

b) Consonant doubling

The **doubling of a consonant** letter turns a long vowel into a **short vowel**. **For instance, compare:**

coma /'kɒmə/ vs comma /'kɒmə/
cater /'kjuːtər/ vs cutter /'kʌtər/

This is particularly important and useful with verbs, when adding **–ed** or **–ing**:

- If the verb ends in a **single stressed vowel** followed by a **single consonant**, then it is **doubled**.
put – putting ; drop – dropped; clip – clipping

However, there is **no doubling** if:

- If the verb already ends in **two consonants** (+e),
start – starting; paste – pasting; track – tracking
- If there are already **two vowels** before the consonant (already long V or diphthong):
remain – remaining
- If the **final vowel is not stressed**:
counter – countered; abandon – abandoning

=> Therefore, **if the consonant has been doubled, the vowel is short. If it has not been doubled, it remains as it was before conjugating the verb:** reduced, colored by –r, or a long vowel or diphthong.

c) Pronunciation of –ed and –s suffixes:

We use the suffix **–ed** for the past or past participle, and **–s** for plurals or for the 3rd person in the present. However, a lot of students still mispronounce these suffixes they use in almost every sentence !

It is actually very easy to know how to pronounce them -a quick explanation can be found here:

<http://epronunciation.com/pronunciation-rules/pronunciation-words-ending-s-ed.html>