Description of the English\(^1\) Vowel Sounds\(^2\)

**Note:** During the production of all the English vowels, the soft palate is raised and the vocal cords vibrate.

\(/i/\) The front of the tongue is raised to a height slightly below and behind the close front position; the lips are spread; the tongue is tense, with the side rims making a firm contact with the upper molars; the tongue tip is behind the lower teeth. Its quality is nearer to CV\(^3\) [i] than to CV [e]. It does not occur in a syllable closed by /\(\eta/\).

\(/e/\) A part of the tongue nearer to center than to front is raised just above the half-close position; the lips are loosely spread; the tongue is lax, with the side rims making a light contact with the upper molars; the tongue tip is behind the lower teeth. Its quality is that of a centralized CV [e]. /\(\eta/) may occur in all positions in the word.

\(/e/\) The front of the tongue is raised between the half-open and half-close positions; the lips are loosely spread and are slightly wider apart than for /\(\eta/\); the tongue may have more tension than in the case of /\(\eta/\), the side rims making a light contact with the upper molars; the tongue tip is behind the lower teeth. Its quality lies between that of CV [e] and that of CV [\(\varepsilon/\)]. /\(\varepsilon/) does not occur word-finally or in stressed open syllables.

\(/\varepsilon/\) (In RP) The front of the tongue is raised just below the half-open position, with the side rims making a very light contact with the back upper molars; the mouth is slightly more open than for /\(\varepsilon/\); the lips are neutrally open; the tongue tip is behind the lower teeth. It is often produced with considerable constriction in the pharynx (esp. in the south of England), the tongue having rather more tension than is the case of /\(\varepsilon/\). Its quality is nearer to CV [\(\varepsilon/\)] than to CV [\(\alpha/\)].\(^4\)

\(/\alpha/\) (In RP) The center of the tongue (or a part slightly in advance of center) is raised just above the fully open position, no contact being made between the tongue and the upper molars; the jaws are considerably separated and the lips are neutrally open; the tongue tip is behind the

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\(^1\) The English variety described here is known as RP English (or Received Pronunciation English), “the form of British pronunciation that many educated people in Britain use, and that is thought of as the standard form” (Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, 2000). It is said that this was the kind of English used by the King/Queen of England when receiving their guests during official visits.


\(^3\) CV stands for Cardinal Vowel.

\(^4\) In American English, /\(\varepsilon/\) is produced with the tongue closer to the half-open position than in RP.
lower teeth. Its quality is that of a centralized and slightly raised CV [a]. /ʌ/ does not occur word-finally or in stressed open syllables.5

/æ/ A part of the tongue between the center and the back is in the fully open position, no contact being made between the rims of the tongue and the upper molars; the jaws are considerably separated and the lips are neutrally open; the tongue tip is behind the lower teeth. Its quality is somewhat nearer to CV [a] than to CV [æ]. /æ/ does not normally occur before /ŋ/.

/ə/ The back of the tongue is just below the half-open position, no contact being made between the tongue and the upper molars; the jaws are wide open and there is slight, open lip-rounding; the tongue tip is behind the lower teeth. Its quality is that of an open lip-rounded CV [ə], i.e., secondary CV [o]. /ə/ does not occur word-finally or in stressed open syllables.

/ɔ/ The back of the tongue is raised between the half-open and half-close positions, no contact being made between the tongue and the upper molars; there is medium lip-rounding. Its quality lies between CV [ɔ] and CV [o]. /ɔ/ does not normally occur before /ŋ/.

/œ/ A part of the tongue nearer to center than to back is raised just above the half-close position; the tongue is laxly held, no firm contact being made between the tongue and the upper molars; the lips are closely but loosely rounded; the tongue tip is behind the lower teeth. Its quality is that of a centralized CV [œ]. This vowel occurs in both accented and unaccented syllables. /œ/ does not occur in stressed word-initial position or before word-final /ŋ/.

/u/ The back of the tongue is raised relaxedly from the closest position and is somewhat advanced from the true back; its articulation is tenser compared with that of /œ/, though no firm contact is made between the tongue and the upper molars; the tongue tip is behind the lower teeth. The lips tend to be closely rounded. Its quality is that of a relaxed, slightly lowered and centralized CV [u]. /u/ does not normally occur before /ŋ/.

/ɔː/ The center of the tongue is raised between the half-close and half-open positions, no firm contact being made between the tongue and the upper molars; the lips are neutrally spread. The tongue tip is behind the lower teeth. Its quality is remote from all peripheral Cardinal Vowel values, but it often coincides with that of unaccented /œː/. /ɔː/ does not normally occur before /ŋ/.

/æː/ In non-final word positions, the center of the tongue is raised between the half-open and half-close positions; in the vicinity of the velar consonants /k, g/ and /ŋ/, the tongue may be slightly more raised and retracted; in word-final positions, the tongue is in the half-open central position or in the most open region of the central area. The tongue tip is behind the lower teeth. The lips have a neutral position (i.e., are unrounded). So the quality of /æː/ will vary depending on its position in the word. This sound has very high frequency of occurrence in unaccented vowels. It is considered the neutral English vowel.

5 American English /æ/ is considered to be an unrounded back vowel, produced with the tongue just above the half-open position.