

## **Accent Reduction 101: Speaking English in The American Cultural and Business Style Free E-Book Copyright 2019 (*Fourth Edition In Press*)**

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This publication is both an excerpt and has new and expanded content from *Accent Reduction 101: Speaking English in The American Cultural and Business Style* (Fourth Ed. In Press, 2017, 2010, 2008)

This book contains four sections on how to reduce your accent

1. **Intonation:** The most important skill for reducing accent and speaking American English with better clarity.
2. **How to Reduce Muscular Force in Your Speech:** A common accented behavior is to speak American English with too much force on sound segments.
3. **American Consonant Sounds:** Learn the sound behaviors accented speakers make. Receive instruction on the 4 most common accented sounds /th, f, v, w/.
4. **American Vowels:** Learn why vowel sounds are mispronounced and the importance of speaking with oral resonance. Compare and contrast the different vowel sounds.

*I wish you great success!*

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### **Meet your Author Elizabeth Peterson, M.A.,CCC-SLP**

Elizabeth Peterson is an American speech-language pathologist with over 24 years of experience working with foreign business professionals on reducing accent and improving overall business communication. She has a practice in Denver, Colorado where she works with business professionals privately, trains teams for large companies and offers group instruction. She is the author of *Accent Reduction 101: Speaking English Closer to the American Business and Cultural Style*. (Fourth Ed.2019, 2017, 2011, 2008). She is considered to be a national expert in America and trains other speech language professionals how to analyze foreign accented speech and offer accent reduction programs in their businesses. She is passionate about helping business professionals improve their English communication proficiency and speak with great confidence in the

International business market. To learn more about her, the programs she offers and other publications, visit [www.SpeechAndVoice.com](http://www.SpeechAndVoice.com)

# American Intonation

## **Intonation: The Foundation for Speaking English in the American Cultural Style and with Better Clarity**

### **Why Accents Occur**

Every cultural group has their own melody style for talking. When someone learns a second language it is natural to speak it in the style of the first language. Applying too much muscular force and missing sounds also creates accent. The first step in reducing accent is to speak it in the American melody style known as intonation. Once American English is spoken in the American intonation and cultural style, communication immediately becomes clearer. Once American intonation is mastered, the next step is to address the missing sounds. All is covered in this 4<sup>th</sup> edition publication. In addition, you will also learn other aspects such as proper voicing, breathing and other cultural nuances that will have you speaking English with cultural correctness and confidence.

### **American Intonation: An Introduction to the Speech Staircase Strategy**

Speaking with skilled American intonation is considered to be the best speaking style for professional and business situations. It is also required to reduce an accent and speak English with cultural correctness. If it is your goal to reduce your foreign accent, speaking with American intonation is essential. This unit will teach a very simple strategy on how to speak with more engaging and dynamic intonation.

The best strategy for changing your intonation pattern is to think of your speech moving up and down a staircase. This is a very easy concept to apply and I use it with all on my clients. The visual analogy of a staircase is a helpful technique for understanding how to move your speech melody and therefore change your speaking style. Everyone understands the concept of moving speech up and down a staircase.

Speaking with American intonation is not a hard skill to learn, but it will feel funny and slower than how you are currently speaking. It will take a few weeks to get used to this new speaking pattern. After some practice, this new skill that once felt funny will feel natural, your speech melody will be more professional and



The next time you watch the news pay close attention to the broadcasters. You will be able to identify pitch changes and hear the “speech stairs” intonation in their statements. Identify this speaking style from colleagues at work.

**Be flat on the step:** When you are coming down the stairs on every syllable, be sure your speech is *flat* on every step *to avoid an upward inflection in pitch on the vowel sounds*. This is a common habit for accented speakers. English does not have any significant pitch rises on individual vowel sounds. I like the analogy of a staircase because steps are flat and do not curve up. Your pitch should not move up in inflection on vowel sounds.

**If you are a fast or quiet talker:** Hold the vowel sound segment a little longer with each syllable as you move up and down the speech stairs. Create separation between each syllable. Otherwise, your speech will lack clarity due to fast speed or mumbling behavior. Fast speech will cause you to omit final sounds in words or blend words together that should have some separation.

Stretching the vowel sound longer on each syllable will naturally slow your rate and also bring more volume to your voice. Your voice will become louder and more powerful because vowel sounds are voiced sounds therefore, bringing more volume to your voice for every word that you say. When you talk too fast or mumble, vowel sounds are held for too short of a time which makes your voice seem quiet and lack power. If you notice that you do not project as well as others, hold the vowel sound longer as a strategy to reduce fast speed and increase the volume in your voice.

### **Multisyllable Word Speech Stairs Strategy Practice**

If speaking with pitch changes is completely new to you, first practice with multisyllable words to establish what it feels like to move down in pitch and speak with this new intonation melody pattern. This is helpful if you are a monotone or fast talker and have never spoken with controlled pitch tones. Stretch the vowel sound longer and notice your speech has better projection and is more controlled. This exercise has three objectives:

- To practice moving down in pitch and feel the result of intonation applying the speech stairs strategy.
- Notice that your jaw and lips are moving with more range of motion.
- Notice the result of better projection, sharper articulation and a more professional style of speaking.

### **Four-Syllable Words**

Say each word moving down in pitch for every syllable as you practice the speech stairs strategy. Then select a word and create your own simple sentence using intonation.

Intelligent

Optimistic

Ballerina

Acquaintances



That behavior is from your natural style of talking. Moving up and down the speech stairs is easy. What will determine your success is how well you can change your behavior to speaking with slightly longer syllables. If your syllable or sound segment is too short, your speech will be too fast and choppy and not as clear or smooth sounding. Your change with intonation will not be as good as it could be.

**Added Voice Benefit:**

If you feel that people have a difficult time hearing you, be sure to hold the vowel sound longer to bring out more volume and power to your voice. Every syllable has a vowel sound. If you hold the vowel sound longer in every syllable your volume will be louder. People who speak with shorter syllables are have a problem with being heard by others.

**Syllable Separation:**

Syllable separation is also essential for accurate intonation. Often my clients will report that they “eat” or “swallow” their words. If you ever thought this, you are not placing enough separation between your sound segments or words. It should be, “peanut butter and jelly” not, penutbutteran jelly” where three words become one due to blending and lack of separation. It should be, “as a matter of fact” not “asamaaterof fact” where there is no separation between the words. To speak with your most professional and skilled intonation, be sure there is separation between sounds segments and words.

**Putting it all Together:**

Hold sound segments long enough on the step (or the vowel sound) to avoid fast choppy speech. Have separation between the steps (sound segments or words) to avoid eating your words or combining a few words into one nonsense giant word. The quality of your speech will come from the details on how you use the stairs.

**Let’s continue with simple sentence practice:**

It is always cold in this building.  
The doctor is in today.  
The candy jar is empty.

He is very interesting.  
He is back from surgery.  
We will move on Friday.

Notice after you have that rise in pitch that you have created a platform for stepping down in pitch on each syllable for the rest of your statement. When it is time for you to express your next thought, come up in pitch in the beginning of your next statement. This speaking style needs to become your “new normal.” When the cycle is repeated with each sentence, your speech will have continual melody and better articulation. If you are a monotone or fast speaker, moving your pitch up and down the speech stairs will significantly improve your clarity and control your speed. You will lead meetings and deliver presentations smoothly with better persuasion and leadership. This new approach will require

committed practice for about three weeks for these new pitch changes to feel and sound natural.

### **Guidelines for Making Pitch Changes**

There is no official rule on when to rise in pitch because speech is spontaneous and should sound natural. If you said every sentence the same way, you would be a boring speaker and sound mechanical. If you need a rule it would be to step up the speech stairs early in the statement; then move down in pitch and end your statement on a lower step. For longer statements you would rise in pitch two or three times on the speech stairs (covered later in this unit). The rule is to speak using professional intonation. When to rise in pitch is flexible.

1. Step up on the speech stairs early in your statement around the second, third or fourth word. By stepping up on the speech stairs early you will naturally position yourself to move down the speech stairs syllable by syllable and speak with better intonation. You would not step up on the first word, but the second or third word is fine.
2. Emotion, mood and personality highly influence speech patterns in American culture. Often where you rise in pitch establishes the meaning of the sentence, which may be influenced by emotion or personality. For example, the underlined word in the statements below is where the pitch rise has been established. Say each line and observe how the rise in pitch influences the intent of the message.
  1. I am very hungry and thirsty.
  2. I am very hungry and thirsty.
  3. I am very hungry and thirsty.

Emotion and personality influence how we deliver our thoughts and expressions. In cases where your speech needs to be more professional such as delivering a presentation or leading a meeting, that emotional factor would most likely be objective, and moving the pitch pattern along the staircase with some degree of formality would be appropriate.

### **A Review of What Has Been Learned So Far:**

- To speak along the speech staircase you first begin in your natural tone, step up in pitch and then travel down the speech stairs until done. For longer statements, you will step up and second or even third time and then move down in pitch until you are done with your statement.
- The objective is to step up in pitch early in your statement. After the rise in pitch, move down the speech stairs one syllable at a time.
- Come up only one step in pitch. If you sound unnatural or too high, you probably went up two or three steps and applied too much tension.
- Be mindful of your speech articulators (lips, teeth, tongue and jaw) and execute a full range of motion so you can say every sound with crisp articulation.

- If your speech is too fast or choppy or your volume is too low, stretch the vowel sound longer on each syllable to control speed and increase volume.
- Be aware of having separation between syllables and words to avoid blending words together.
- As you are first learning this new skill, it may be beneficial to move your hand to mimic the movement. Bring our hand up when your pitch goes up. Move your hand down as your speech moves down in pitch. When you can blend your hand and movements with your speech mechanism, it's as if you have created a mind body connection with your thoughts and speech. My clients report that they are able to formulate better thoughts and make fewer speech errors when their thoughts match the speed of their speech.
- Trust the speech stairs completely to give you the structure to say your sounds with better clarity. It is going to feel funny at first, but the benefit to your speech quality will be well worth the change.
- Using your speech notebook daily and practicing from a list of speech triggers will turn these new skills into a natural way of speaking.

### **Stepping Up the Speech Stairs is Critical for Effective Intonation and Overall Clearer Speech**

Be sure that you actually step up the stairs and have a rise in pitch. This step is extremely critical because it positions you to travel your message down the speech stairs syllable by syllable and get that good syllable segmentation or distance between the sounds. Speaking with good intonation is the most important skill if you have the goal of speaking more effectively, increasing your leadership status or reducing a foreign accent.

In the next section as you now advance to full sentences, be mindful of further shaping your skills to speaking with the right amount of length on each syllable you say. This is your new challenge. You understand the concept of moving up and down a speech stair case. Now it's time to change your behavior to holding or stretching your syllables in every word a bit longer. Because of your accent, monotone, mumbling or too fast of a speaking style, your sound segments have been to short which is why your speech is fast, choppy or mumbled. Think of the strategy of either stretching the vowel sound longer, stretching the speech step longer or speaking with a more controlled rate of speed as you speak up and down the speech stairs. Changing this behavior will be critical for speaking with good intonation that is easy for your listener to follow and appreciate your message.

### **Full Sentence Practice**

On your auditory support, the first five sentences are modeled with intonation. The rest are modeled in a monotone style for *you* to determine the pitch rise and practice with intonation. Be me mindful of syllable segmentation.

1. The chair is squeaking and needs oil.

2. If you ask me, she is not that great at her job.
3. I go to the post office twice a week.
4. I have to check my e-mail messages throughout the day.
5. Munchkin needs to see the veterinarian today.
6. This park has a Bohemian feel to it.
7. I did not like the play very much.

### **Do It Again Using Different Pitch Changes**

Repeat the sentences and select a different word for the rise in pitch to teach you flexibility with this skill. If you can successfully demonstrate flexibility by rising in pitch in a variety of places, you are becoming successful with this skill. Often it does not matter where the pitch rise is. What matters is having a rise in pitch.

**Note:** Remember, this new skill will feel awkward at first. Practice the exercises several times until you become comfortable with the skill. Working daily with your speech notebook and speech triggers is pivotal to success for speaking with this new melody pattern.

### **Turning Skills into Habits**

- Place visuals of the speech stairs in a few locations as a reminder such as on your phone, wall or computer. Change them each week so your trigger will be a fresh reminder for your brain.
- Change your phone greeting daily. Your outbound message will sound more professional, be current and provide you with a solid daily practice. Your greeting can be simple such as “Hello, today is \_\_\_\_\_. You have reached \_\_\_\_\_. I will be in meetings this morning and returning calls this afternoon. Enjoy your day.” People appreciate a current message, particularly in business. This is an outstanding daily practice.
- Record your side of a phone conversation. Listen to a small sample and evaluate your skills. This is easy to do with all of the technology available.
- Use a sticky note to reinforce the fact that you are learning the new skill of intonation. When you recognize that you are using it, give yourself a tick mark. By the end of the day, you will notice that you are using this new skill more than you realize. If you don’t have many tick marks, this will be a helpful way to increase your awareness.
- Track a behavior you want to eliminate on a sticky note, such as sounding monotone or ending your statement with upspeak. Track every time a verbal virus is used such as “umm,” “uhh,” “so” or “like.” Write the skill on the sticky note and track it for one to three weeks. You will see the behavior go away with this monitoring. This works because your awareness is being heightened. These behaviors are addressed later in this unit.
- During your practice, the rehearsal does not need to be perfect. Ask yourself whether you are within the goal of using intonation and eliminating unwanted speech habits. If the answer is yes, that’s excellent.

The practice does not need to be perfect. It needs to be consistent. Everything will improve with repetition and in time.

### **Benefits of Speaking with the Speech Stairs Strategy**

- The melody will sound interesting to your listeners, and you will capture their attention due to the changes in the pitch and flow of your message. Studies demonstrate that listeners tune out monotone speech after a few seconds. However, when there are frequent pitch changes, the brain listens more actively. Speaking along the speech stairs is ideal intonation for professional situations.
- By coming down in pitch on each syllable in every word, you are more likely to say your ending sounds at the end of statements, making your articulation much more crisp and clear. Deleting sounds at the end of statements is one of the most common speech errors. This habit negatively affects professional communication. Two examples are saying “That’s righ-” instead of “right” and “nee” instead of “need.” Moving down the stairs will better control your speech articulators for accurate pronunciation.
- You will experience improved voice skills as an added benefit. Since you are coming down in pitch, you are moving your sound waves toward your lower throat. When you speak from your lower throat, you are in your optimal pitch range, giving your vocal tones a stronger and more vibrant sound with naturally improved projection.
- When the speech stairs are used for heavy, hard-to-understand accents, they make speech more understandable and clearer quickly.
- Speaking along the speech stairs will often reduce facial and throat tension or hard and choppy speech and immediately make it smoother and more understandable.
- The speech stairs will help to eliminate glides on vowel sounds and keep your speech “flat on the step” as you travel down them. American speech does not have any sounds where there is an obvious slide or up tone on the vowel sound.
- This approach immediately brings in clarity, better projection and improved articulation which will enhance your leadership
- image.

The word “guideline” was purposefully chosen. This approach is a guideline, not a rule. Speech is spontaneous and influenced by mood and emotion. When and where you want to rise in pitch will not always be the same. The speech stairs method provides an effective framework for learning a new skill. This will create good intonation immediately and position you to possibly have a second or third pitch rise in your statement. In business situations, where the goal is to be objective, the speech stairs method is very effective and smart sounding.

## Decreasing Muscular Tension for Foreign Speakers of English

Just as all cultures have their own style of speaking using melody patterns, the same is true with the degree of tension required for communication, especially when English is not your first language. The amount of muscular force required for speech sounds is also cultural. Many accented individuals speak with too much tension in their face, lips, tongue, face and throat. American English is spoken with very little muscular tension compared to many other languages. This is the opposite of many languages such as Spanish, Hindi and Asian and European languages, which require speaking with tighter musculature in the back of the throat, lips, tongue or facial muscles. Part of what makes American speech seem so accented when it is spoken by nonnative speakers is that it is spoken with too much muscular tension. When American English is spoken with too much force, the result is speech that has unnecessary pauses, choppiness and too much speed.

Speaking with tension across cultural groups creates a variety of accented behaviors. Some cultures will speak with too much facial tension in the lips, bringing them too far forward. The result is speech that sounds hard or lacks clarity, as in some Spanish and Asian languages. Some cultures keep their tongue too low in their mouth cavity, making it difficult to follow through on ending sounds or establish the /er/ sound, which is notable in Asian cultures. Another nonnative English habit is being too far forward with the tip of the tongue, creating hard or choppy speech or a rolled /r/ as in Russian, Spanish, Italian and many other European languages. Americans can also apply too much tension, which produces a regional accent as heard in people from states such as Maine, New York and Massachusetts, to name a few. When muscular tension is used outside of the standard American model, accent is affected.

As you practice your speech be aware that American English is produced with little tension in the throat, lips, tongue and face. This may be very different from how you speak your first language. Think of keeping your speech forward in your mouth to avoid tension in the back of your mouth cavity. When rehearsing your words and sentences, it is a good idea to record yourself so you can listen to the sound quality. If your speech sounds choppy or forceful you are probably speaking with too much tension and need to relax your musculature.

If you are bringing more tension to your American English than what is required, practice with the following drills, which have been designed to increase your awareness of tension.

### Drills for Enhancing Awareness with Muscular Tension

- Keeping your throat and mouth soft and loose, count to twenty. Let your tongue (not the lips) say the sounds and do all of the work. You will not be

communicating like this; the overexaggerated approach is to allow you to feel what loose musculature is like.

- With relaxed musculature, return to the phrases and short sentences, and say them loosely, without any tension in the intonation unit.
- Observe how a relaxed tongue feels in your mouth. Relax the tongue and say “ah-ah-ah-ah-ah” 10 times. During this exercise, if you feel that you launched the sound from or transferred it to your throat, you spoke with too much muscular tension.
- With a relaxed tongue, return to the phrases and short sentences and repeat the lines.

You may need to devote time to specifically focus on your muscular tension and how to decrease it. The purpose of these drills is to heighten your awareness to the degree of tension being used on your speech mechanism. If you are speaking your American English with too much tension, your accuracy will be affected. It may be helpful to do the drills for a couple of weeks so you are acutely aware of when you are placing tension.

After you have good awareness of the amount of muscular force you use while talking, select strategies below to assist you with speaking with less tension. Learning how to speak from a diaphragm breath will help minimize tension. If tension is an issue that is affecting the quality of your American English, addressing intonation, speech rate, tension in the throat and mouth as well as breathing will be important for achieving the goal of speaking your American English closer to the American cultural style. Begin with these areas before focusing on specific sounds.

## Strategy Training

### 1. Mastering American Intonation: The Speech Stairs Method

You have learned that speaking along the speech stairs is the American cultural style of speaking. It is done with minimal tension. If you master the speech stairs as intended, you should be moving into your syllable segments with minimal force. Having more range of motion with your speech articulators is one of the best strategies for minimizing facial tension and having smoother-sounding speech.

### 2. Feel Your Articulators Touch *Lightly*

Feel your articulators (mouth, lips, tongue and face) touch while talking but do it *lightly*. You can control the tension in your speech by having *light* contact with your articulators. Heavy or tense contact will build up pressure, creating choppy or hard-sounding speech. The thought of keeping your speech forward in your mouth will help maintain light contact between your speech articulators and decrease the oral and laryngeal tension as well as better position you to have an easy onset with your sounds.

### 3. Learn to Speak Using a Full Breath

Learn how to breathe from a diaphragm breath at the conversational level. Often people who speak with significant tension are shallow chest breathers. Learning how to speak with a full breath is a good strategy for managing speech that has too much tension. Breathing is addressed in the next unit.

# American Consonant Sounds

## Introduction to American Consonant Sounds

American speech has 21 consonant sounds. (Consonant sounds are the sounds in the alphabet that are not vowels. Examples of consonant sounds are /th, g or p/. Vowel are defined as /A, E, I, O and U/). Many of the American consonant sounds already exist from your first language. The accented issue is that you may be producing them in a slightly different manner or speaking with too much tension. There are probably only a few consonant sounds that will be completely new to you such as the /th/ sound. Accented speakers can be very correct with mastering the consonant sounds correctly at the conversational level provided they are speaking with good American intonation.

**Note:** You will appreciate the speech stairs strategy for American intonation when learning new consonant sounds. The melody style makes sense for American English sounds. American English requires more mouth movements compared to most languages. This new behavior of mouth movement will feel funny to most people. As you are moving up and down in pitch tones using the speech stairs strategy, be certain there is adequate range of motion with your mouth.

### Consonant Sounds: Voiceless and Voiced and How They Are Paired

It is easy to compare how the American consonants are alike and different from one another. Consonants are either voiced or voiceless, and they usually come in pairs. For example, compare the pair of sounds /p/ and /b/. The two sounds are made the same way. The mouth, lips and tongue are in the same position, which is why they are a pair. The only difference is that the /b/ sound requires voicing and the /p/ is silent (no voice). Pairing similar consonants together makes it easier to understand them. A chart has been provided for you that groups the consonant sounds according to their pairs, with a brief note on how they are produced. To thoroughly understand American consonants and how they are paired, and to reduce your accent successfully, review the consonant chart before addressing individual sounds.

### Sound Pairs at the End of Words

A common accented habit is to omit sounds at the end of words or turn a voiced sound into a voiceless one. For example, saying “clup” instead of “club” or “dok”

instead of “dog”. This unit has lessons on ending sounds. Many accented speakers have difficulty fully executing the last sound in a word. The error is that the voiceless sound pair is said instead of the voiced sound /dɒk for dog/. When it comes to instruction, you don’t need to learn how to say sounds like /p, b, t, d, k and g/. You already know how to say those sounds. The issue is applying the sound correctly at the end of words and in connected speech which is covered in detail in this program. To be successful with your accent reduction program, spend time understanding the relationship between the sound pairs and ending sounds.

### Consonant Sounds and Their Behaviors

In American speech there are five ways consonant sounds are produced. It is necessary to understand the sound behaviors because many cultural groups do not pronounce these sounds the American way, which contributes to their accent.

- **Plosives.** Sounds that stop, or are finished after they are produced, such as /t/ and /d/. As soon as the sound is produced, it is done. Some foreign speakers use too much muscular force with these sounds, making English sound forceful or choppy.
- **Fricatives.** Sounds with continual flow, such as /θ/. Many accented speakers do not give sounds in American English flow due to the style of their first language. When speakers come from a monotone, forceful-speaking language, they often avoid giving sounds flow because they have never been required to do so in their first language. Instead they substitute another sound that is typically a plosive such as “wit” for “with.” This behavior creates hard, choppy and accented sounding speech. The most common error made in English when it comes to consonant sounds is to substitute the /t/ and /d/ sound for the /θ/ sound. Speaking with good American intonation will allow you to successfully execute these sounds with more natural flow.
- **Affricatives.** Sounds combined with a stop and flow, such as /tʃ/. Some accented speakers give the /tʃ/ flow, creating more of an /ʃ/ sound.
- **Nasals.** Vibrating voiced sounds that resonate in the nasal cavity, such as /m/, /n/ and /ŋ/. Some accented speakers do not resonate the /ŋ/ sound fully in the nasal cavity, creating an error due to the sound being incomplete or using an /n/ substitution such as in the word “runnin” for “running”.
- **Semivowels.** Sounds made with a gliding movement that provides shape to the word similar to a vowel, such as /w/, /r/ or /l/. Many accented speakers need to spend time with these sounds.

## American Consonant Sound Chart and Behaviors How they are Paired

### Voiceless

/p/ pat, apple, slip

/t/ toy, Italy, fat

/k/ or “c” cow, pocket, back

### Plosives/Stops

Sounds that “stop”

### Voiced

/b/ boy, rubble, cub

/d/ dog, middle, bad

/g/ goat, aggressive, flag

### Fricatives

Sounds that have “continual flow”

/f/ fast, afraid, reef

/th/ thick, author, birth

/s/ soap, asleep, cups

/sh/ shop, bushes, lash

/h/ happy, behave (*no final*)

/wh/ what (*no middle, no final*)

/v/ vein, avenue, brave

/th/ the, rather, breathe

/z/ zebra, razor, as

/zh/ (*no initial*) measure, beige

No mate

No mate

### Affricatives

Sounds that combine a “stop” and “flow”: plosive + fricative

/ch/ chime, matches, watch

/j/ jazz, angel, age

### Nasals

Vibrating voiced, flowing sounds created in the nasal cavity

/m/ money, camera, some

/ng/ (*no initial*) singer, swing

/n/ nice, candle, man

### Semivowels

Voiced sounds made with gliding movement that provides “shape” similar to a vowel

/w/ walk, highway (*no final*)

/y/ yellow, mule (*no final*)

/r/ and /l/ are semivowels and addressed in Unit V.

## Consonant Sound /th/

This is a new sound for most accented speakers. It is worth mastering because /th/ is the most frequently used sound in American English. With dedicated practice, my clients have mastered this sound to the conversational level.

American speech has two /th/ sounds. One is voiceless and the other is voiced as seen on the consonant sound chart. The accented behavior is that speakers usually substitute the voiceless /t/ for voiceless /th/ and voiced /d/ for voiced /th/ because they are the closest approximation to their existing sounds. Some speakers will substitute the voiced /z/ sound for voiced /th/. Your speech will be greatly improved after learning intonation and then the /th/ sound.

### How to Produce the /th/ Sound

- When making the voiceless /th/ sound, the tip of your tongue must *pass your upper teeth but not your lips*. This movement feels unusual to most people since no other sound in the world requires your tongue to pass your teeth.
- Note:** It is not necessary to stick your tongue out far, just the tip of the tongue passes your upper teeth only. It does not pass your lips.
- When your tongue passes your upper teeth, there should be space for air to travel *between your tongue and upper teeth*. The air that passes between your tongue and upper teeth is what makes the /th/ sound.
  - Your tongue *barely* has contact with your upper teeth. The contact is very light. Do not use too much force and explode the air.
  - The voiceless /th/ is soft without much sound to it. Be sure to give the sound flow because it is a fricative and flow is required for accurate pronunciation.
  - If your tongue touches the bottom of your upper teeth or too much forced air is used, the sound will appear “thick” and be excessively loud. Your pronunciation will be considered incorrect to your listener. *Keep your tongue slightly below your upper teeth to allow room for air to pass between your upper teeth and tongue to correctly produce the sound.*
  - Once the sound has been made, your tongue quickly moves back into your mouth to move into position for the next sound in the word. Sometimes my clients report that they feel like they are talking with their tongue outside of their mouth and that it is a strange thing to do. Know that it is a quick movement and will not be noticed by others. It feels very strange now because it is a new behavior. It will feel natural after dedicated practice. When you speak with Americans, do you see their tongue sticking outside of their mouth?
  - When /th/ is voiced, the tongue position is the same. The only difference here is that you use your voice to create the sound. For the voiced /th/ your tongue does have light contact against your upper teeth to help create sound. More tongue tension is required for the voiced /th/ sound.

This sound also has some duration to it. Give the sound flow for good articulation. Again, the tongue tip must pass your upper teeth but not your lips for the sound to be correct.

**Note:** There is no flexibility with the steps to this sound. You must have your tongue tip pass your upper teeth to shape the sound correctly. If your tongue stays behind your teeth you will produce the /t,d, or z/ sound instead of /th/.

### Common Error

A common error with voiced /th/ is that the speaker will *place his or her tongue in the correct position but fail to send the airstream across the tongue*. When this error occurs, the sound has no flow and will sound mispronounced even though you did everything correctly with your tongue placement. For full pronunciation accuracy, it is necessary to place the tip of your tongue past your upper teeth and *give the sound duration and flow*. Again, your tongue moves quickly and does not need to stick out too far passed your lips.

### Voiceless /th/ at the Beginning of Words

Thank you	Theory	Thanksgiving	Thoughtful
Thing	Theater	Theology	Thief

### Sentence Practice

Sentence-level work may feel hard at first. Be sure to practice frequently so this sound will feel natural in spontaneous speech. Find voiceless /th/ in your speech notebook lines. Speak with good intonation and remember that with co-articulation the /th/ sound will not be fully produced in the middle of sentences.

1. Thank you for the flowers; it was a thoughtful thing to do.
2. I think the ice on the lake is thin.
3. Let's meet on the third Thursday of the month.
4. The thief took only one thing of value.
5. The theater is on the corner of Thirty-Third Street.

### Voiceless /th/ at the End of Words

With	North	South	Growth
Chicken broth	Thirty-seventh	Math	Wealth

### Sentence Practice

1. How many people do you think will celebrate Earth Day this year?
2. Both students can pass their math class if they write a paper on the history of math.
3. The story of the South Shore River is only a myth.
4. Have faith that the party will be fine with a few extra people.

5. The commonwealth was established in the city of Boston.

### Voiced /th/ at the Beginning of Words

#### Common Error

Accented speakers tend to place their tongues in the correct position but not launch their voices and create the vibratory flow of air. This is important particularly for sharp and professional articulation when these words are at the beginning of a sentence. Remember, these are sounds with flow.

That	There	Them	Then
These	Those	Therefore	The

#### Power /th/ Function Words

The following voiced /th/ words are said frequently in American English and are known as the function words:

#### **This, That, Them, There, Then, Those and The**

Say these words as often as possible to master the voiced /th/ sound. Practice them stopped at a red light, picking up around the house or wherever!

#### Sentence Practice

Practice slowly at first to produce the sound. Then gradually move toward speaking at an appropriate speed. When voiced /th/ is the beginning of a sentence, use your voice and give the sound flow for more professional-sounding speech. The voiced /th/ sound is frequently at the beginning of sentences. Giving it flow will have you sounding sharp.

1. That was the best that I have ever seen.
2. There was a swarm of bees in the tree.
3. I like them and will invite them to the party.
4. Are these the ones that you have?

#### /th/ Sound in the Middle of Words

**Note:** Be sure to have good separation on the speech stairs for every syllable and to produce the /th/ sound with flow.

#### Voiceless

Something	Author	Dorothy	Enthusiastic
Nothing	Bathroom	Anything	Wealthy

### **Sentence Practice**

Good intonation is required for correctly saying the /th/ sound in the middle position of words in sentences.

1. There is nothing wrong with eating healthy.
2. The bathroom needs cleaning.
3. The university is sympathetic about their fears of an earthquake.
4. Holy Cross is a Lutheran church.
5. I think a birthday should be celebrated all month long.

### **Voiced**

Although	Clothing	Loathing	Soothing
Another	Weather	Feather	Leather

### **Sentence Practice**

Good intonation is required for correctly saying the /th/ sound in the middle position of words in sentences.

1. He is a good professor, although some find him odd.
2. Let's pack up the old clothing and give it to a charity.
3. I would rather do this than that.
4. It looks as though we will have another day of bad weather.
5. You will always see him wearing a leather coat.

## **F, V, and W**

### **A note about /f, v and w/**

These three sounds are typically accented due to lack of lip movement to correctly shape the sound. These sounds require lip movement for a correct pronunciation. A common error for /f and v/ is to have no or too little contact between the lips and teeth. The accented issue for /w/ is not bringing the lips close together enough, causing a weaker sound.

When you come from a language that is forceful and or monotone, you are not used to moving your mouth and lips much for talking. The sounds /f, v and w/ are not hard to learn, but there is a lot of movement between the lips and teeth and it may be hard to get used to those movements at first. It is important to learn the behavior of moving your mouth for better accuracy and clarity. Mastering American intonation with good range of motion with the speech articulators will help you to master these consonant sounds.

## **Fricative /f/**

### **How to Produce /f/**

Place your upper teeth slightly on the back side of your lower lip and add air flow. The position of the upper teeth on the lower lip is what shapes the sound correctly.

**Note:** Do not bring your teeth complexly over your lower lip almost covering it. That is not the position. Lightly have your lower lip touch your upper teeth and give the sound flow.

Fabulous	Family	Fight	Follow
Foreign	Feast	Famous	Funny

### **Sentence Practice**

Use good follow-through with the flow during connected speech.

1. She has a fabulous and fun sense of humor.
2. Frank is working toward becoming a federal marshal.
3. The figurine is made of fragile material.
4. Many foreign speakers will benefit from accent reduction.
5. Ferrets are cute and fat but unfortunately illegal in many states.

### **Fricative /v/**

#### **How to Produce /v/**

Common substitutions for this sound are /w/ or /b/. The sound is made the same way as the /f/, with your upper teeth lightly touching the inside of your lower lip. The difference is that you give the sound voice and airflow that uses forced air. This sound will not be as accurate if you do not give it voice or have your lips make contact your upper teeth. When done correctly, you should feel a mild tickle in your lower lip.

#### **/v/ at the Beginning of Words**

Variety	Virus	Vision	Void
Victory	Valley	Vain	Vermont

### **Sentence Practice**

Be aware of using flow with the sound in connected speech. Speaking along the speech stairs will give you the timing to follow through on the sound.

1. The vice squad celebrated its fourth victory this month.
2. The valley is hot with volumes of smog during the summer.
3. I am calling to verify that the bike race is in Vermont this year.
4. The jury is on the verge of agreeing on a verdict.
5. Vampires try to avoid sunlight virtually all the time.

### **Semivowel /w/**

#### **How to Produce /w/**

A common substitution for this sound is /v/. This is a relaxed, gliding sound. Both lips move toward each other, but they do not touch. To be correct with this sound, you must get used to the new behavior of brining more movement to your lips.

### Common Error

Not bringing the lips close together for an accurate sound. American English requires more movement with the lips that what is required from your first language.

#### **/w/ at the Beginning of Words**

Wonderful	Wash	Warming	Winter
Window	Water	Weekend	Weird

### Sentence Practice

Be aware of lip-rounding during your sentence practice. Good intonation will give you control with the speech sounds.

1. Let's walk over to the waterfall after dinner.
2. The state of Washington has a warrant out for William's arrest.
3. I want to have good weather every weekend.
4. The "Welcome to Westfield" sign is looking a little worn.
5. The Beef Wellington was tender and wonderful.

# American Vowel Sounds

## Introduction to American Vowel Sounds

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. Vowel sounds are important because they give a word shape and specific meaning.

Words will take on a different meaning when a different vowel sound was used accidentally. If one vowel sound is mispronounced the entire word is affected, which is a big part of speaking with an accent. Learning the vowel sounds for accent modification is a very different process compared to learning American intonation and consonant sounds.

For understanding how to modify your accent, this introduction to vowel sounds will be important and is worth your time to understand the key points on these few pages. My clients enjoy the auditory support to teach them intonation and missing consonant sounds. To be successful with vowels, spend time with the book, read the rules, see the letter arrangement in print and have a good understanding of the cultural traits you bring to your English that is creating your accent. When in doubt on how a vowel sound is pronounced, use a online dictionary. There are many with an auditory button.

## How Vowels Are Classified

A vowel chart has been created for you. It is categorized by where the vowel sound is placed in your mouth (i.e., resonates). American vowel sounds are produced in the front, center or back part of your mouth.

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.

Speaking with good oral resonance with less muscular force will be necessary to sound more American. When vowel sounds are spoken with an up-tone or up-speak, too much muscular force is being applied to the throat causing the tone to travel up and resonate more in the nasal cavity. When thinking of American intonation and the speech stairs method, keep the sound flat on the step as you apply less pressure to the throat to avoid the up-tones on the vowel sound.

## Diphthongs

A diphthong is a blend of two vowel sounds said together as one sound. It is as if they almost have two parts to the sound. Diphthongs exist in many languages around the globe.

### Long and Short Vowels: The American Classification

When foreigners and even American children learn English, vowel sounds are categorized into long and short vowel sounds. This classification is the foundation for American vowel sounds. Below are how vowel sounds are classified.

#### Long Vowels

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

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

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

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

/U/ as in use and nu (*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 o and so (*Back*)

/u/ as in book and shook

#### Other Vowels

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

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

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

/ow/ or /au/ as in out 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 in connected speech. How vowel sounds are spoken happens naturally from American intonation

The specific sound that comes after the vowel is what really influences the length of that particular vowel sound. The spoken length of a vowel sound is influenced by whether the next consonant is a voiced or voiceless sound, not on how vowel sounds are classified. A voiceless sound requires less power to pronounce; therefore, vowels will not be held as long. When the next sound after a vowel is voiced, more power will be needed to launch the voicing for the next sound, so the vowel will naturally be prolonged to have the power to move into the voiced sound. When English is spoken with American intonation, the duration of the vowels happens automatically. The classification of a long or short vowel does not really matter for spoken English. For example, in the words "lap" and "lab," the short vowel sound /a/ is pronounced slightly longer in the word "lab" to have the power for the voiced /b/ sound even though short /a/ is classified as a short vowel sound. The word "lap" does not have as long a duration for the vowel sound because less power is needed to pronounce the /p/ sound. The same is also true for the words "rice" and "rise" containing the long /I/ sound. More power and therefore more duration are required for the long /I/ sound to have the power for the final voiced /z/ sound to produce the word "rise."

It is a subtle difference in the pronunciation. Do not get too caught up in the rules of long and short vowel sound pronunciation because when it comes to the spoken language, it does not make that much difference. The best improvement you can make to your speech to modify your accent is to speak with good American intonation (i.e., the speech stairs method), and those sound differences will work themselves out naturally because that is how American English is spoken in the cultural style.

### **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. This concept is discussed in detail in Unit III, and this skill is important for more accurate vowel pronunciation especially for speakers who form sounds from their throat or speak with too much nasal resonance. To refresh your memory, 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.

Certain characteristics of English are easier to learn than others. Using American intonation immediately reduces accent and brings clarity to speech. Learning consonant sounds is an achievable goal and will make a noticeable improvement in your speech. Learning the vowel sounds will require great understanding and skill with intonation, muscular force and oral resonance.

### American Vowel Sound Chart Based on Where Sounds Are Placed in the Mouth

Front, center and back vowel sounds refer to the location in the mouth where the sound is being placed or resonated. Begin with the front and progress to the back vowel sounds.

		<i>Initial</i>	<i>Middle</i>	<i>Final</i>
<b>Front</b>	*Long /A/	<u>a</u> corn	sh <u>a</u> me	holid <u>a</u> y
	Long /E/	<u>e</u> at	se <u>e</u> t	thr <u>e</u> e
	*Long /I/	<u>i</u> sland	<u>f</u> ine	pie
	Short /i/	<u>i</u> s	s <u>i</u> t	<i>no final</i>
	Short /e/	<u>e</u> lephant	m <u>e</u> t	<i>no final</i>
	Short /a/	<u>a</u> pple	ca <u>t</u>	<i>no final</i>
<b>Center</b>	/er/	<u>u</u> rban	wonder <u>u</u> ful	work <u>e</u> r
<b>The Schwa</b>	/uh/	<u>u</u> pon	cu <u>t</u>	banan <u>a</u>
<b>Back</b>	*Long O	<u>o</u> pen	go <u>o</u> t	th <u>o</u> w
	Short o	<u>a</u> wful	co <u>o</u> ffee	saw
	*Long U	<i>no initial</i>	cho <u>o</u> se	<u>u</u> oo
	Short u	<i>no initial</i>	fo <u>o</u> t	<i>no final</i>
	*/ow/	<u>o</u> uch,	hou <u>o</u> se	<i>no final</i>
	*/oi/	<u>o</u> il	bo <u>o</u> il	<i>no final</i>
	*y (iu)	<u>y</u> ou	m <u>u</u> e	<i>no final</i>
<b>Semi Vowel /I/</b>		<u>l</u> augh	l <u>o</u> llipop	fa <u>l</u>
<b>Semi Vowel /r/</b>		ra <u>b</u> it	<i>no middle</i>	<i>no final</i>

\*Diphthongs (7 in American English)

## Front Vowel Sounds Boot Camp

Front Vowel Sounds Boot Camp has been provided for you to compare, feel and hear the differences among different front vowel sounds. The pronunciation should be distinctly different between the two words you compare. Front vowel sounds resonate in the front part of the mouth cavity and requires more mouth movement to shape the sound correctly than what you are used to doing from your first language. The target sound has been underlined for you in the phrases. Recording yourself and using a mirror for feedback would be very beneficial to assess your accuracy.

### Comparing short /i/ as in “pig” to short /e/ as in “pet”

Both sounds have a neutral mouth placement.

Lit	Let
Wit	Wet
Mitt	Met

He lit a candle.  
Let him in.

He has a sharp wit.  
The dog is wet.

This is the baseball player’s mitt.  
We met at the game.

### Comparing long /E/ as in “beet” to short /e/ as in “met”

Long /E/ requires lip spread, whereas short /e/ has a neutral mouth position.

Beat	Bet
Read	Red
Beast	Best

I can beat him  
I bet I will win.

Please read this.  
I like red.

The “Beast” is a good story.  
She wants the best player.

### Comparing long /E/ as in “eat” to short /i/ as in “pig”

Long /E/ has lip spread and is commonly substituted for the short /i/ sound.

Eat	It
Seen	Sin
Least	List

Let's eat soon.  
It is getting late.

Have you seen the movie?  
It is a sin to steal.

At least I'm not late.  
Hide the list.

### Comparing short /e/ as in "met" to short /a/ as in "apple"

Short /e/ has a neutral mouth position, whereas short /a/ has a bigger jaw drop and wider mouth position.

Met	Mat
Bet	Bat
Dead	Dad

We met last week.  
Stand on the mat.

The bet is five dollars.  
The team needs a bat.

The spider is dead.  
Let's buy Dad a tie.

## Back Vowel Sounds Boot Camp

The main back vowels are presented together so you can compare the subtleties and differences among them. When you compare each back vowel sound, consider the amount of muscular force you are applying. The back vowel sounds are produced in the back of your mouth cavity, not in your throat. Be aware of the amount of jaw drop and lip spread required for accuracy. The target word has been underlined in the phrases. If it is your habit to use too much muscular force or have an upward pitch glide, this activity will increase your awareness and improve your accuracy.

### Comparing Long /O/, Short /o/, Long /U/ and Short /u/

So	Sock	Soup	Soot
Show	Shot	Shoot	Shook
Foe	Faun	Fool	Foot

### Practice Sentences

Move into each phrase quickly.

I like soup for lunch.  
There is soot on the wall.  
So, can find your sock?

I cannot shoot a ball.  
I shook the ball and then shot it in the basket.  
Show me the ball.

He is a fool.  
He is not a friend but a foe.  
The baby fawn has a little foot.

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