

How to Make the /th/ Sound

This can be a complex sound to produce and a new sound for most accented speakers. American speech has two /th/ sounds. One is voiceless and the other is voiced. Accented 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. For some speakers, a /z/ sound will be substituted.

This sound can feel awkward because the tip of the tongue *must* exit from the mouth. When /th/ is produced correctly, it is a quick movement and not noticed by others. I tell my clients that this is the most important sound to learn because /th/ is the most frequently used sound in American English. 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 *exit your mouth and pass your upper teeth*. This movement feels unusual to most people since no other sound in the world requires your tongue to move outside of your mouth. **Note:** It is not necessary to stick your tongue out far, just the tip of the tongue.
- 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 your 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.
- 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.
- Both the voiceless and voiced /th/ sound will not be pronounced as fully in the middle of sentences because the speech is connected to other sounds and is forward moving.

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*. Follow through on all parts to produce this sound correctly. Again, your tongue moves quickly and does not need to stick out too far.

Voiceless /th/ at the Beginning of Words

Thank you Theory Thanksgiving Thoughtful

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.

Voiceless /th/ at the End of Words

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Both Faith Commonwealth Moth

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.

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.

Power /th/ Words

The following voiced /th/ words are said frequently in American English:

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!

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.

/th/ Sound in the Middle of Words

Note: Be sure to give the sound full flow and do not substitute your accented behavior.

Voiceless

Something Author Dorothy Enthusiastic

1. There is nothing wrong with eating healthy.
2. The bathroom needs cleaning.
3. The university is sympathetic about their fears of an earthquake.

Voiced

Although Clothing Loathing Soothing

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.
- A feather pillow is nice, but can be unpleasant for allergies.

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Training opportunities we offer include:

1. Work with a speech coach privately or online
2. Accent Reduction 4 Week Class in Denver or online
3. Self Study
 - a. Book and choice of auditory support
 - b. Book, auditory support and watch our recorded-live Accent Reduction Seminar
- 3.