

- **Free Lesson: Consonant Sound /th/**

### **Consonant Sound /th/**

- **File 4, Track 6 /th/ Introduction 8:40**

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

American speech has two /th/ sounds. One is voiceless and the other is voiced as seen on the American Consonant Sounds Chart above. The accented behavior is that speakers usually substitute the voiceless /t/ sound for the voiceless /th/ and the voiced /d/ or /z/ sound for the voiced /th/ because those sounds are the closest approximation from their first language. Your conversational speech will be greatly improved after mastering intonation and then applying the /th/ sound correctly.

### **How to Produce the /th/ Sound**

#### **Voiceless**

- 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. It does not pass your lips and leave your mouth.

- 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 you use too much forced air, 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, but it will feel natural after dedicated practice. When you speak with Americans, do you see their tongue sticking outside of their mouth?

## Voiced

- 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 with your upper teeth to help create the sound. More tongue tension is required for the voiced /th/ sound, and it has some duration to it. Give the sound flow for good articulation. Again, your tongue tip must pass your upper teeth but not your lips for the sound to be correct.
- A common error with the voiced /th/ is that the speaker will *place their 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 past your lips.

**Note:** For both the voiceless and voiced /th/, 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 voiceless /t/ instead of the voiceless /th/ and voiced /d/ or /z/ sound instead of the voiced /th/. That substituted sound will “pop” and sound incorrect to your listeners.

- Remember that both the voiceless and voiced /th/ sound will not be pronounced as fully in the middle of sentences, as previously discussed, but the /th/ is fully produced when it is the first sound in a statement. Give it nice flow for crisp articulation. In connected speech, the flow is not as pronounced because the articulators are in full motion, moving into other sounds, which is known as coarticulation.

## Try Some Words!

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

As a reminder, the tongue tip passes the upper teeth, and there is a flow of air. When this sound is done correctly, there really is no sound to it other than the flow of air. It is a silent sound. When the sound is done incorrectly, such as keeping your tongue behind your teeth, as in substituting the /t/ sound, the sound

will pop or sound very “thick.” If this sound is hard to produce, you are probably applying too much force and tension, creating a very hard, loud sound. A good practice tip may be to stretch out the /th/ sound before moving into the word, as in “thhhhhhhh-ank you.”

**Thank you   Theory   Thanksgiving   Thoughtful   Thing   Theater**

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

This sound is voiced with all function words. These words reflect something specific. Function words are “this,” “that,” “there,” “their,” “then,” “they,” “they’re,” “them,” “these,” “those,” “they,” and “the.”

#### **Common Errors**

- Accented speakers tend to place their tongues in the correct position but not launch their voices or 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 that these are sounds with flow.
- Another error is to substitute the sound /d/ or /z/ for /th/.

**That   There   Them   Then   These   Those   Therefore   The**