

Vowel Sounds – tongue and lip positions

Vowels and vowel sounds are not the same thing. In the English alphabet, there are 5 vowels: A, E, I, O, U. However there are many more vowel sounds. This document deals with vowel sounds. The International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) maps all the language sounds the human voice makes. In the notational system, some of the symbols look like normal letters, but there are many strange and invented symbols as well, some of which can be seen in the chart below. This particular chart maps the most common vowel sounds on the basis of whether 1) the tongue is moved nearer the front or back of the mouth, 2) whether the tongue is raised closer to the top of the mouth, or lowered, and 3) whether the lips are forward, neutral or back.

1. Front & Back: Vowel sounds on the left of the chart represent a more forward or 'front' position for the tongue, while those on the right of the chart represent a more 'back' position.
2. Close (high) & Open (low): If the tongue is higher, nearer the hard palate ('roof' of the mouth), the symbol is placed higher on the chart, and called a 'close' vowel sound. If the symbol is lower on the chart, the tongue is lower, and the vowel sound is referred to as more 'open'.
3. Rounded (lips forward) & Unrounded: Vowel symbols placed on the right of a pair represent the lips 'rounded' forwards (towards a pout). Symbols placed on the left of a pair represent the lips 'spread' or pulled back ('unrounded').

It is important to understand that the symbols do not indicate sounds, but only standardised lip+tongue positions. The sound is what is produced when particular lip+tongue positions are adopted. I have added 'guide' words (mostly beginning with the letter 'F') for some of the symbols. This will not necessarily help you I'm afraid, as any given word can be pronounced lots of different ways, depending on a person's accent. I have based my choices on how the lip+tongue position would approximately sound if someone was speaking English in what is called 'Received Pronunciation' (RP). There is a useful set of audio samples at

<https://web.uvic.ca/ling/resources/ipa/charts/IPAlab/IPAlab.htm>

