

# English Vowels

## 1. Definition

Phonetically, vowels are the sounds with the greatest sonority (energy/loudness), produced with the least constriction of the vocal tract. In the production of vowels, the airstream mechanism is always “pulmonic egressive”. In other words, there is no obstruction to the flow of air when it passes from the lungs to the lips. All vowels are voiced and oral, i.e. produced with the vibration of the vocal cords.

Phonologically, vowels occupy the “heart” of syllables; consonants sound with vowels, at the edges of syllables.

## 2. Vowels Length (Vowels Quantity)

In English, based on the vowels length, there are short and long vowels. To refer to long vowels, we use a colon /:/

**a) Long Vowels:** There are 5 long vowels in English

/i:/ /ɜ:/ /u:/ /ɔ:/ /ɑ:/

**b) Short Vowels:** There are 7 short vowels in English

/ɪ/ /e/ /æ/ /ə/ /ʌ/ /ʊ/ /ɒ/

## 3. Vowels Categories

In English language, vowels have three categories (groups)

a) Monophthongs = Pure vowels

b) Diphthongs = A glide from one vowel to another

c) Triphthongs = A glide from one vowel to another and then to a third one

## 4. Classification and Description of Vowels

Vowels are classified based on the following elements:

- Position of the tongue
- Position of the lips
- Openness of the mouth

### a) Position of the tongue

According to the **horizontal** position of the tongue, we have:

- 1. Front Vowels:** The front of the tongue is raised (/ɪ/ /i:/ /e/ /æ/)
- 2. Central Vowels:** The centre of the tongue is raised ( /ɜ:/ /ə/ /ʌ/ )
- 3. Back Vowels:** The back of the tongue is raised (/u:/ /ɔ:/ /ɑ:/ /ɒ/ /ʊ/ )

According to the **vertical** position of the tongue, we have:

- 1. High Vowels:** The tongue position is high in the mouth.
- 2. Mid Vowels:** The tongue position is mid (between high and low) in the mouth.
- 3. Low Vowels:** The tongue position is low in the mouth.

### b) Position of the Lips

English vowels are classified according to the shape of the lips into:

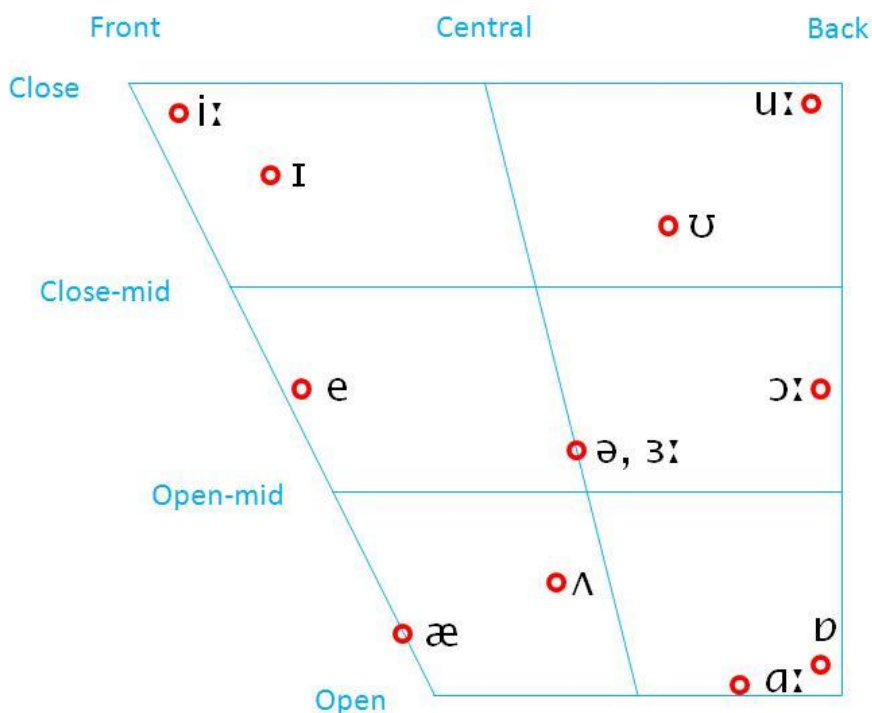
1. **Rounded Vowels:** All the **back vowels**, except / **ɑ:**/ i.e. /**u:**/ /**ʊ**/ /**ɔ:**/ /**ɒ**/
2. **Unrounded Vowels:** All the front and central vowels + / **ɑ:**/

c) **The Openness of the Mouth**

According to the degree of openness of the mouth, we have:

1. **Close vowels:** /**i:**/ /**ɪ**/ /**u:**/ /**ʊ**/
2. **Half close/ half open vowels:** /**e**/ /**ɜ:**/ /**ə**/ /**ɔ:**/
3. **Open vowels:** /**æ**/ /**ʌ**/ /**ɒ**/ /**ɑ:**/

5. **Vowel Chart**



**Some Examples**

/i:/ see, mean, feel

/ɪ/ big, fill, minute

/e/ men, let, set

/æ/ cat, hand, fast

/ə/ about, famous, alone

/ɜ:/ bird, serve, girl

/ʌ/ come, upper, sun

/u:/ food, move, June

/ʊ/ book, put, would

/ɔ:/ sport, fork, door

/ɒ/ dot, spot, not

/ɑ:/ half, palm, car

# Diphthongs

## 1. Definition :

Diphthongs are sounds which are produced as a result of a movement or glide from one vowel to another within one syllable. In other words, diphthong is a sound made of two elements or vowels. The first element (the starting point) is the vowel with which we start. The second element is the point in the direction of which the glide ends. It is important to mention that though a diphthong is a vowel glide or a sequence of two vowel segments; it functions as a single phoneme.

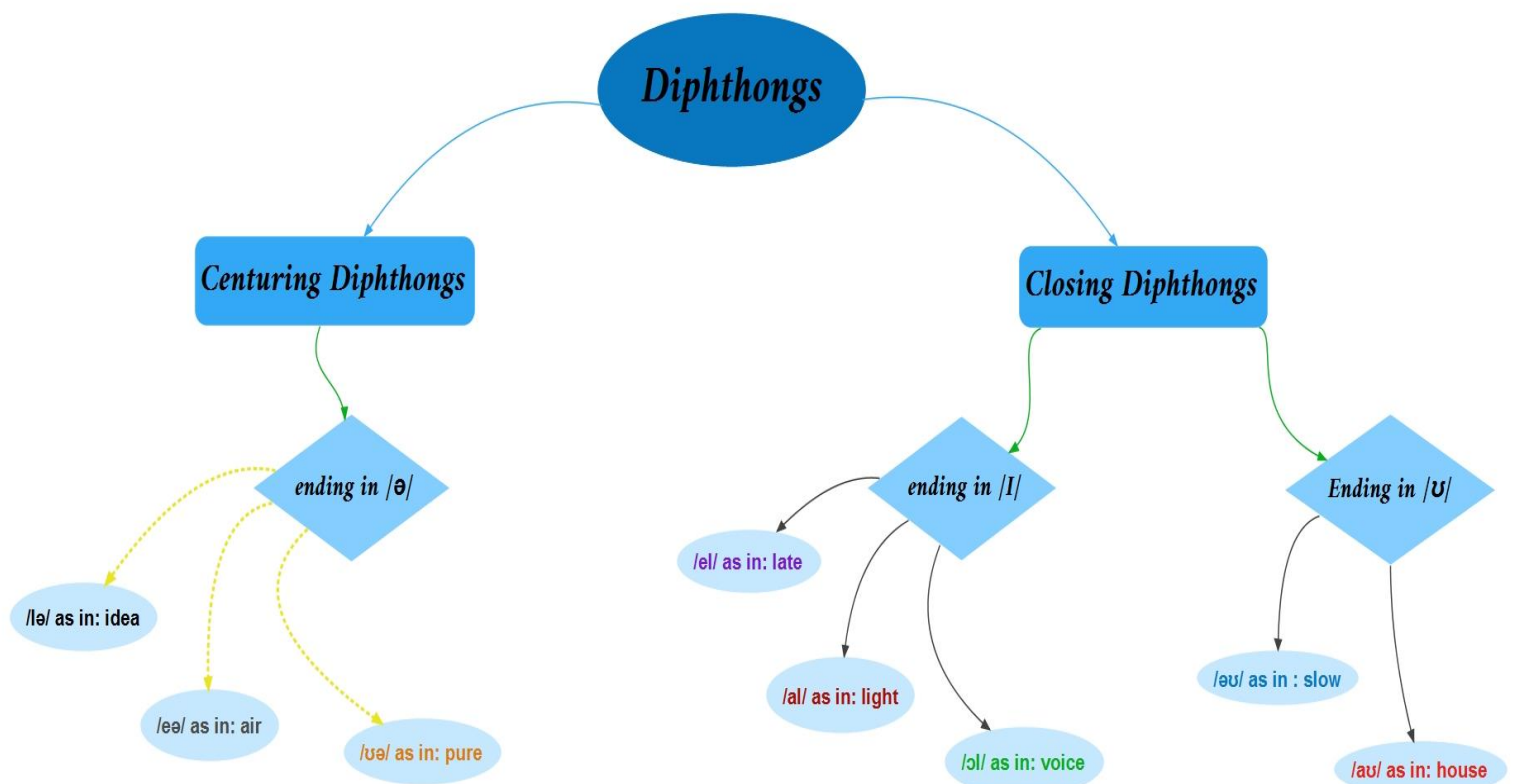
## 2. Description of diphthongs

The most important thing to remember about diphthongs is that:

- They are equivalent in length to pure vowels.
- Most of the length and stress associated with diphthongs is concentrated in the first element while the second element is lightly sounded or produced. In other words, the first part is much longer and stronger than the second one.

## 3. Categories of diphthongs:

In R.P, there are eight diphthongs that can be categorized as in the following diagram.



## The Strong and Weak Forms of English Sounds

Many words can be pronounced in two or more different ways according to whether they are accented or unaccented. These words have two forms: a strong form and a weak form. For example, the word "and" has a strong /ænd/, and several weak forms /ənd, ən, nd, n/. There are about fifty such words in English. Almost all words which have two forms, strong and weak belong to a category of words which are called "Functional words"; they are also called Grammatical or Structural words( articles, pronouns, auxiliaries, prepositions, conjunctions,ect). They are opposed to 'content words' ( nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs).

| The word | Strong Form | Weak Form |
|----------|-------------|-----------|
| A        | /eɪ/        | /ə/       |
| An       | /æn/        | /ən/      |
| The      | /ði:/       | /ðə/      |
| Some     | /sʌm/       | /səm/     |
| At       | /æt/        | /ət       |
| For      | /fɔ:/       | fə        |
| From     | /frɒm/      | /frəm     |
| Of       | /ɒf/        | /əf/      |
| As       | /æz/        | /əz/      |
| Or       | /ɔ:/        | /ə/       |
| Than     | /ðæn/       | /ðən/     |
| That     | /ðæt/       | /ðət/     |
| Can      | /kæn/       | /kən/     |
| should   | /ʃʊd/       | /ʃəd/     |
| Do       | /du:/       | /də/      |

|      |       |             |
|------|-------|-------------|
| Have | /hæv/ | /həv        |
| Me   | /mi:/ | /mɪ/        |
| Him  | /hɪm/ | /ɪm/        |
| Them | /ðem/ | /ðəm/or/ðm/ |

**Note:** the strong form of the above words and others is used only when:

- a. at the end of a sentence if the word occurs( except objective pronouns: him, her, us, them)
- b. For the sake of emphasis, we use the strong form.