Long and Short English Vowels

The English vowels are A, E, I, O, & U. (Sometimes Y is a vowel, pronounced as if it were I, and sometimes W substitutes for U.) Each can be pronounced in several ways. This page explains when each sound is commonly used.

Short Vowels

The most common sound for each vowel is its “short” sound:

- ā, pronounced /æ/ as in apple, pan, or mat,
- ĕ, pronounced /ɛ/ as in elephant, pen, or met,
- ĭ, pronounced /ɪ/ as in insect, pin, or mitt,
- o, pronounced /ɒ/ as in ostrich, upon, or motto,
- and ŭ, pronounced /ʌ/ as in umbrella, pun, or mutt.

(The International Phonetic Alphabet symbol for each sound is inside the backslashes://)

When syllables end in a vowel and then consonant (as in the examples above), the vowel is usually short. If there is more than one consonant, the vowel is almost always short.

This becomes important as a way to keep the same vowel sound when adding -ed to put a verb into the past tense. We often double an ending consonant to keep a short vowel short. For example, the past tense of ‘stop’ is ‘stopped.’ Otherwise the silent 'e' rule below (which also applies when followed by 'd') would give it a long 'o' sound like soap or hope. See www.englishhints.com/simple-past-tense.html for an explanation of spelling changes.

Long Vowels

The alphabet sounds (when the vowel “says its name”) are called “long vowels.”

We call them ‘long’ because we hold them longer than the short sounds, but they are completely different sounds-- not a longer version of the same sound.

- Long A (ā), pronounced /ei/ as in ate or mate,
• Long E (ē), pronounced /iː/ as in eat or meat (or meet or mete-- all pronounced the same),

• Long I (ī), pronounced /ai/ in mite or might,

• Long O (ō), pronounced /oo/ as in oats, mote or moat, and

• Long U (ū), pronounced /juː/ in mute.

**Silent ‘E’ Rule**: When a vowel and consonant are followed by an ‘e’, the ‘e’ is almost always silent, but it causes the preceding vowel to be long. (Examples: ate, plane, Pete, bite, nine, rope, note, cube, flute.)

**Other Long Vowels**: A vowel at the end of a syllable is almost always long. Examples: I, we, he, she, go, try, potato and tomato. (Some English speakers use a short ‘a’ in the 2nd syllable, while others use a long ‘a,’ but both ‘o’s are long for everyone.)

- Igh and -ight are usually long I (and silent GH): bright, fight, high, light, might, night, right, sigh, sight, tight.

Often the first letter of the vowel combinations, especially ‘ai’, ‘ay’, ‘ea’ (sometimes-- see Digraphs, below), ‘ee’, & ‘oa,’ will be long & the second will be silent. (An old rhyme for children says “when 2 vowels go walking, the first does the talking.”) So ‘plain’ sounds just like ‘plane,’ ‘meat’ and ‘meet’ like ‘mete,’ etc.

However, there are many exceptions. (See the link to English Vowel Digraphs, at the bottom of this page, for the most common ones.)

**Common Examples Of Short And Long Vowels**

These contrasts demonstrate the rules (in each column, first short, then long):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>back</td>
<td>bake</td>
<td>can</td>
<td>cane</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>snack</td>
<td>snake</td>
<td>plan</td>
<td>plain/plane</td>
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<tr>
<td>fad</td>
<td>fade</td>
<td>tap</td>
<td>tape</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mad</td>
<td>made/maid</td>
<td>at</td>
<td>ate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sam</td>
<td>same</td>
<td>cat</td>
<td>Kate</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
**Other English Vowel Sounds**

Besides the long and short sounds, there are other vowel sounds.

Any vowel in an unaccented syllable has a neutral or “schwa” /ə/ sound: Examples: the ‘a’ in above, or approve, the ‘e’ in accident, camera or mathematics, the ‘i’ in family or officer, the ‘o’ in freedom or purpose, or the ‘u’ in industry or succeed.
Also, if a vowel is followed by R, it changes in quality, and is neither long nor short. (ER, IR, and UR are often -- though not always--the same sound.)

**Vowel + R-- Examples with phonetic symbols:**

- or: arm, car, charge, dark, farm, start
- ɛər: air, bare/bear, hair, there
- iər: beer, ear, hear/here, near
- ɜr: bird, fur, herd, earth, service, sir, turn, urgent
- ar: baker, doctor, letter, summer
- ɔr: for, important, north

Sometimes in English a vowel is pronounced with a sound that usually goes with a different letter. For example, in my California dialect, the ‘a’ in ‘father’ or ‘want’ is pronounced very much like the ‘au’ in ‘audio’ or the short ‘o’ in ‘pot’ or ‘hot.’ That’s not true for all English speakers, however. Also, some common words use ‘o’ for a short ‘u’ sound: of, love, money, other, some, son.

(For the exact pronunciation of any word, consult a good dictionary. Most list the sound symbols they use on one of the front pages.)

See [www.englishhints.com/vowel-digraphs.html](http://www.englishhints.com/vowel-digraphs.html) for help recognizing and pronouncing two-letter vowel combinations. See [www.englishhints.com/esl-phonics.html](http://www.englishhints.com/esl-phonics.html) for examples of the most common pronunciations of consonants and consonant digraphs, as well as vowels, including 'Y' used as either a vowel or a consonant.

Because English has adopted words (and often some of their sounds), from so many other languages, none of these rules is always true. However, these English vowel rules will help you guess at the pronunciation of words you read. For that reason they may also help you guess their meaning, if you have heard them but not read them before. They should also help make English spelling a little easier.