

ti:m hæv fi:ldmæ  
z tʌtʃ daʊn bæʊθ  
ild eg fə brekfəst  
ə gɑ:dən speid

ENGLISH  
TRANSCRIPTION  
COURSE

M. LUISA GARCIA LECUMBERRI  
&  
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# English Transcription Course

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# Introduction

This book is designed to help you develop and improve your skills in transcribing English phonetically. Anyone who is interested in the way modern English sounds can benefit from working through the lessons in this book, each of which deals in detail with a particular aspect of the pronunciation of English, provides an overview of the theoretical background and backs this up with a number of exercises of different kinds. Model answers to all the exercises in the book may be found in the Appendix. There is also a glossary where you can find definitions of all the technical terms and abbreviations used in the lessons.

Phonetic transcription is a useful learning technique for two different kinds of people. For native speakers of English who wish to know more about English pronunciation, transcription is one way of reinforcing the idea that the spoken and written representations of language are completely different things. Transcription helps you to realise what you *actually* say, rather than what you *think* you say. Anyone who does phonetic transcription regularly is likely to be surprised fairly often at the discovery of some new phenomenon that they had not been aware of before. We certainly found this when preparing the transcribed texts for the book. For learners of English as a foreign or second language, transcribing texts helps to make one aware of the target one should be aiming for and of the pronunciation (or range of pronunciations) one can expect to hear from native speakers. The spelling system of English (its **orthography**) is notoriously unhelpful when it comes to learning the pronunciation of the language.

For both types of user, phonetic transcription can make you realise that the pronunciation of a word can differ, sometimes quite radically, depending on the sort of environment in which the word is said. A couple of simple examples should help to make this clear.

If anyone were to ask a native speaker of English how the word *from* is pronounced, the most probable answer would be /fɹɒm/. This is the form of the word which is used when the word is said in isolation and not part of a longer utterance. This form is called the word's **citation form**. The same form can also be heard as part of a longer utterance (a piece of **connected speech**), for example in the question, *Where do you come from?*

However, in the answer to this question it is very likely that the word will not be pronounced /frɒm/, but /frəm/, for example in *I come from Manchester*. Another, slightly more complicated, example concerns words such as *couldn't* and *shouldn't*. Some of the possible variations of the pronunciation of the first of these are set out below:

- Orthographic form:       *couldn't*  
Citation forms:            /kʊdənt/ or /kʊdnt/  
Connected speech forms: /kʊdənt/ or /kʊdnt/ or /kʊdŋ/ or /kʊdəŋ/  
Example: *I couldn't answer that question.*
- /kʊbrŋp/ or /kʊdəmp/ or /kʊbrŋ/ or /kʊdəm/  
Example: *I couldn't make up my mind*
- /kʊgŋk/ or /kʊdəŋk/ or /kʊgŋ/ or /kʊdəŋ/  
Example: *I couldn't go.*

Fortunately, these types of variation in phonetic form are not random or arbitrary. They are, for most part, common to all languages and are the result of a universal tendency for speakers to economise on the amount of effort they put into the movements necessary to produce speech. Although there are differences in detail between one language and another, the speech of speakers of all languages displays this type of feature which can be explained by reference to a small number of **connected speech processes**. Many of the lessons in this book are designed to make you familiar with the common connected speech processes of English and to give you practice in including them in your transcriptions. A transcription of a piece of English text of more than a few words which did not include an example of the operation of at least one connected speech process would probably be an inaccurate and unrealistic representation of how that text would be spoken by an English native speaker. To put this another way: if you wish to produce a transcription of a piece of English which is accurate and realistic, it is no use simply looking each word up in a pronouncing dictionary, where typically what is recorded is the citation form, and then stringing these pronunciations together. English people simply do not speak that way. Neither do speakers of any other language.

A transcription of a piece of text in English may differ greatly depending on the **accent** being transcribed and the **style** of speech which is represented.

The way English is pronounced is, of course, different in different areas. Someone who comes from Scotland will very probably not sound the same as someone from Australia, so transcriptions representing the speech of the two speakers should not look the same. In this book we concentrate exclusively on an accent of British English known as **Received Pronunciation (RP)** or **Southern British Standard (SBS)**. This accent has a number of advantages. First, it is very well described in the literature on the pronunciation of English. Second, it is very widely used for the purposes of teaching English as a foreign or second language. Third, there are a number of pronouncing dictionaries available which use **RP** as their model and most general-purpose dictionaries, in Great Britain at least, use **RP** as the basis for the pronunciations they give.

People sound different on different occasions. In a formal situation, such as an interview, most people tend to speak more precisely and to avoid some of the connected speech processes which change or delete sounds. The same may be true when people are speaking to someone whom they do not know well. When people are in a relaxed,

casual situation and are speaking to people they know well and feel at ease with, they tend to produce speech where the citation forms of words are changed or reduced. These differences are differences of speech style. The style aimed at throughout this book is a relaxed, informal one. In some of the earlier lessons, where some of the connected speech processes have not yet been introduced, a reading of the transcriptions given might sound rather more formal.

The structure of each lesson in this book is as follows. The topic of the lesson is introduced and explained with plenty of examples. The topic is then illustrated in a transcribed passage which contains a number of occurrences of the relevant phenomenon. These occurrences are highlighted in the transcription. Then there are a number of exercises of various types to help you make sure you have understood the topic and can produce transcriptions containing the feature concerned. For instance, you may be asked to look at a passage in orthography and to identify places in the passage where the phenomenon might occur. Or you might be given a transcribed passage where the phenomenon is not included and your task is to edit the transcription to show it at appropriate points. The final exercises in each lesson are always a number of passages for you to transcribe. Again, you can be sure that the relevant phenomenon occurs quite a few times in these passages.

The book consists of eight lessons. Each lesson introduces a new topic (or in some cases a number of related topics) and explains the theoretical background with a lot of examples. There are exercises for you to do in each lesson and the answers to all the exercises can be found in the Appendix. Although you can, of course, do the lessons in any order you wish, it would perhaps be wiser to follow the order given, since the exercises are cumulative, in the sense that features introduced in earlier lessons are included in later exercises without any further explanation. The last section of the book consists of a number of passages for you to transcribe as further practice.

Since this book is primarily about transcribing, the theory has been kept as short and simple as possible. You can find out more about the theoretical issues mentioned in textbooks such as *Gimson's Introduction to the Pronunciation of English* (Cruttenden, 1994), *English Phonetics and Phonology* (Roach, 1991), *Speech Sounds* (Ashby, 1995) or one of the other texts on English phonetics and phonology which you can find in the Bibliography. If you are interested in transcribing or learning about the sounds of American English, we can recommend two very accessible books: *Applied Phonetics: The Sounds of American English* (Edwards, 1992) and *Applied Phonetics Workbook* (Edwards and Gregg, 1997)

It is impossible to learn to transcribe without getting involved with some technical terminology. We have tried to keep this to a minimum and have given explanations of the terms used. There is a glossary with brief definitions of technical terms at the end of the book. Terms included in the glossary are printed in **bold type** on their first appearance in the text.

If your native language is not English, phonetic transcription is one way of improving your pronunciation of English. However, this course cannot solve *all* your problems. The spelling system of English is so complex and full of exceptions and special cases that the only foolproof way of finding out how an unknown word is pronounced is to look the word up in a good pronouncing dictionary. A good example is provided by the word *acorn*. The vast majority of words which begin with the letters *ac* are pronounced either /əʔk/ if the first syllable is **unstressed** (such as *across*, *accept*) or /æʔk/ if

the first syllable is **stressed** (such as *accident*, *acrid*). But *acorn* begins with /eɪ/. There is no way of predicting this and, apart from the verb *ache* and related forms, such as *aching*, *achy*, this is the only common word beginning with *ac* which is pronounced like this. One suggestion for a pronouncing dictionary is the *Longman Pronunciation Dictionary* (Wells, 1990).

Transcribing phonetically is a skill which needs regular practice. It is much better to do a little transcription fairly often rather than a lot all at once. Some of the passages in this book are fairly long, but that does not mean that you need to transcribe the whole passage in one sitting. We advise transcribing sections of 100 words or so and then checking on your progress with the help of the answers in the Appendix.

If you are working without a teacher, but you know someone else who is also learning to transcribe, it is a good idea to swap transcriptions and try to spot each other's errors (and good points!), before looking at the answer provided. Another useful activity is to work on a transcription in a group, where you can learn from one other.

Finally, a word about the transcriptions we have provided as answers. These must be viewed as specimen answers only. We have provided notes to point out some alternatives to the pronunciation chosen. However, it would make this book enormously long and difficult to read if we attempted to mention every possible alternative. If your transcription does not agree with ours on a particular point then that does not *necessarily* mean that your version is wrong. What you *can* be sure of, though, is that our version is acceptable.

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# Lesson 1

## Symbols and terminology

In this lesson we shall introduce the symbols that will be used throughout the book. There are various sets of symbols used for the transcription of English. In this book we shall use the symbols in the *Longman Pronunciation Dictionary* (Wells, 1990). The basic terminology used to describe speech sounds will also be introduced in this lesson.

### Consonant symbols

There are 24 consonant sounds in RP English. They may be classified according to their place and manner of articulation and voicing, as set out in Table 1.1 below. In the table, the first of a pair of symbols represents a **voiceless** sound and the second a **voiced** sound. Each of the above consonants is illustrated by a *keyword* in Table 1.2 which follows. The consonant is usually found at the beginning of the keyword, but for some sounds which cannot occur initially in a word the consonant is in **bold type**.

**Voicing:** A voiced consonant is one which is accompanied by vibration of the vocal folds. If you pronounce a long /z/ sound, as if imitating the buzzing of a bee, and at the

**Table 1.1** Consonant symbols

	bilabial		alveolar		velar				
<b>plosives</b>	p	b	t	d	k	g			
<b>nasals</b>	m		n		ŋ				
<b>fricatives</b>	labiodental f v		dental θ ð		alveolar s z		post-alveolar ʃ ʒ		glottal h
<b>affricates</b>					post-alveolar tʃ dʒ				
<b>approximants</b>	labial-velar w		alveolar lateral l		post-alveolar r		palatal j		

**Table 1.2** Consonant keywords and their transcriptions

consonant	keyword	transcription	consonant	keyword	transcription
p	pie	/paɪ/	ʃ	shy	/ʃaɪ/
b	buy	/baɪ/	ʒ	measure	/meʒə/
t	tie	/taɪ/	tʃ	chore	/tʃɔ:/
d	die	/daɪ/	dʒ	jaw	/dʒɔ:/
k	cow	/kaʊ/	h	high	/haɪ/
g	guy	/gaɪ/	m	my	/maɪ/
f	fee	/fi:/	n	nigh	/naɪ/
v	vie	/vaɪ/	ŋ	sing	/sɪŋ/
θ	thigh	/θaɪ/	w	why	/waɪ/
ð	thy	/ðaɪ/	l	lie	/laɪ/
s	sigh	/saɪ/	r	rye	/raɪ/
z	zoo	/zu:/	j	you	/ju:/

same time place your thumb and finger on your throat, you should be able to feel the vibrations. For some voiced sounds, specifically voiced plosives, the vibration of the vocal folds does not always continue throughout the sound, but starts immediately after the end of the sound. Voiceless sounds have no vocal fold vibration. Try a long /s/ sound, imitating the hissing of a snake. You should not feel any vibrations in your throat.

The voiceless consonants of RP English are:

p t k f θ s ʃ tʃ h

The voiced consonants of RP English are:

b d g v ð z ʒ dʒ m n ŋ w l r j

**Exercise 1.1** Look at the following short passage and try to identify all the voiceless consonants in it.

*I haven't got a car at the moment. My car was stolen last Friday. I left it at the station all day and when I got back in the evening it had vanished. I hope the insurance company will send me a cheque soon, so that I can go and buy another one.*

**Exercise 1.2** Which of the following words contain only voiced consonant sounds?

much, moody, number, yellow, roses, knees, youth, loses, doses, dozens, wishing, leisure, those, under, jeans, this, his, wins, garage, universal.

**Place of articulation:** All speech sounds are made with a stream of air moving through the vocal tract. For all the sounds of English, most of the time, the airstream is set in motion by the lungs and travels up the windpipe (also called the trachea), through the voice-box (the **larynx**) where the vocal folds are situated, through the pharynx and then through the oral cavity or the nasal cavity (or both). Speech sounds are made by interfering with this stream of air, usually at some point within the oral cavity. The exact point of such interference is known as the **place of articulation (poa)** of the sound. RP English makes use of the following places (Table 1.3).

**Table 1.3** Places of articulation

<b>bilabial</b>	the two lips approach one another to interfere with the airstream; RP English bilabial sounds are /p b m/
<b>labiodental</b>	the lower lip approaches the upper front teeth; RP labiodental sounds are /f v/
<b>dental</b>	the tip of the tongue approaches the back of the upper front teeth; RP dental sounds are /θ ð/
<b>alveolar</b>	the tip of the tongue approaches the area just behind the upper front teeth; this area is known as the <b>alveolar ridge</b> ; RP alveolar sounds are /t d n s z l/
<b>post-alveolar</b>	the tip or the blade of the tongue approaches the rear part of the alveolar ridge; RP post-alveolar sounds are /ʃ ʒ tʃ dʒ r/
<b>palatal</b>	the middle part of the tongue approaches the roof of the oral cavity; the only palatal sound in RP English is /j/
<b>velar</b>	the back part of the tongue approaches the soft part at the back the roof of the oral cavity; this is known as the soft palate or <b>velum</b> ; RP English velar sounds are /k g ŋ/
<b>glottal</b>	the two vocal folds in the larynx approach each other to interfere with the airstream; the only glottal consonant in RP English is /h/; however, there is another glottal sound with you will become familiar in a later lesson; this is known as a glottal stop [ʔ]
<b>labial-velar</b>	this is a complex place of articulation; the back of the tongue approaches the velum as for velar sounds, but at the same time the lips are rounded and protruded; the only labial-velar sound in RP English is /w/.

**Exercise 1.3** Look at the following passage and try to identify the place of articulation of the first consonant of each word (if it begins with a consonant).

*Last Tuesday my brother came to see me. He wanted to borrow my videorecorder because his is not very reliable. My nephew's birthday is next Thursday. They are going to have a party for some friends and they want to show some films.*

**Manner of articulation:** At each place of articulation it is possible to interfere with the airstream in a number of different ways. This aspect of sound production is known as **manner of articulation (moa)**. See Table 1.4 for the manners for consonant sounds which RP English uses.

**Exercise 1.4** Sort the following words into five classes on the basis of the manner of articulation of their initial consonant sound.

sixty, five, generous, lesson, doubt, give, quite, xylophone, usual, thrown, then, monster, hope, chemist, knot, cherry, physics, yacht, wrong, rubber

**Sonorant, obstruent and stop:** Two other very useful terms when dealing with consonants are **sonorant** and **obstruent**. These refer to large classes of manners of articulation. Sonorant consonants are the following: nasals and approximants (both median and lateral). Vowels are also sonorant. Obstruent consonants are the following: plosives, affricates and fricatives. The term **stop** also refers to manner of articulation. Stops are those sounds which have a complete closure in the oral cavity: plosives, affricates and nasals.

**Table 1.4** Manners of articulation

<b>plosive</b>	the airstream is completely blocked for a short time and the blockage is released rapidly, causing the compressed air to burst out of the vocal tract; RP English plosive consonants are /p b t d k g/
<b>fricative</b>	the vocal tract is narrowed so that the airstream becomes turbulent and produces friction noise; RP fricatives are /f v θ ð s z ʒ ʒ h/
<b>affricate</b>	as for plosives, the airstream is blocked, but the blockage is released much more slowly and a short period of friction is heard; RP affricates are /tʃ dʒ/
<b>approximant</b>	the vocal tract is narrowed, but not enough to cause air turbulence; there is therefore no friction noise; RP approximants are of two kinds: <b>median approximants</b> where the air escapes over the centre of the tongue and <b>lateral approximants</b> where there is a blockage in the centre but the sides of the tongue are lowered so that air can escape laterally; the median approximants of RP are /w r j/ and the only lateral approximant in RP is /l/
<b>nasal</b>	as for plosives and affricates, nasals are produced with a complete blockage in the oral cavity; however, air is allowed to escape continuously through the nasal cavity; RP nasals are /m n ŋ/

**Exercise 1.5** Sort the following words into three sets depending on whether they begin with an obstruent, a sonorant or a stop. Notice that some words will appear in more than one set.

choose, soap, metal, ripe, coast, white, told, youth, lorry, friend, thought, boast, purple, gate, violet, nasty, quiet

## Vowels

RP English vowels are of two different sorts called **monophthongs** and **diphthongs**. A monophthong or simple vowel is a vowel sound which has a constant quality. A diphthong, on the other hand, changes its quality. It has a starting quality which is different from its ending quality. The monophthongs of RP are laid out in Table 1.5 and the diphthongs in Table 1.6.

**Table 1.5** RP Monophthongs

vowel symbol	keyword	transcription
i:	leek	/li:k/
ɪ	lick	/lɪk/
e	leg	/leg/
æ	lack	/læk/
ʌ	luck	/lʌk/
ɑ:	lark	/lɑ:k/
ɒ	lock	/lɒk/
ɔ:	lord	/lɔ:d/
ʊ	look	/lʊk/
u:	Luke	/lu:k/
ɜ:	lurk	/lɜ:k/
ə	butter	/bʌtə/

Table 1.6 RP Diphthongs

vowel symbol	keyword	transcription
aɪ	tie	/taɪ/
eɪ	day	/deɪ/
ɔɪ	toy	/tɔɪ/
aʊ	now	/naʊ/
əʊ	no	/nəʊ/
ɪə	dear	/dɪə/
eə	dare	/deə/
ʊə	tour	/tʊə/

**Vowel length:** RP English vowels are either long or short. The long vowels are all the diphthongs plus the five monophthongs /i: ɑ: ɔ: u: ɜ:/. All the other vowels are short.

**Vowel features:** The monophthongs of RP English may be classified in three different ways according to (1) their **lip posture**, (2) their **location** and (3) their **height**.

Lip posture has two values in RP English:

- **rounded:** for the vowels /ɔ: ɒ ʊ u: /
- **unrounded:** for the vowels /i: ɪ e ə æ ɑ: ʌ ɜ: ə /

Location has three values in RP English:

- **front:** when the highest point of the tongue lies below the hard palate – this is true for the vowels /i: ɪ e ə æ /
- **back:** when the highest point of the tongue lies below the soft palate, as for the vowels /ɑ: ɔ: ɒ ʊ u: /
- **central:** when the highest point of the tongue lies in an intermediate position at the junction of the hard and soft palates – this is so for the vowels /ʌ ɜ: ə /

Height has three values in RP English:

- **close or high:** when the highest point of the tongue is close to the roof of the mouth, as for the vowels /i: u: /
- **open or low:** when there is a considerable distance between the highest point of the tongue and the roof of the mouth, as for the vowels /ɑ: ɒ /
- **mid:** when the highest point of the tongue is midway between close and open, as for the vowels /ɪ e ə æ ʌ ɜ: ɒ ɔ: /; the mid-vowels of RP English can be further subdivided into **close-mid** or **mid-high:** /ɪ ʊ /, **open-mid** or **mid-low:** /æ ʌ ɔ: / and just mid /e ɜ: ə /

For the purposes of this book the most important distinction which rests on vowel features is between high/mid-high and the rest.

**Exercise 1.6** In the following passage identify all the high and mid-high monophthongs.

*There are three reasons I should give if anyone asked why it is a good idea to learn English transcription. First, it helps you to realise what you say as opposed to what you think you say. Second, it teaches you that written language is not the same as spoken language. Third, it can be quite a lot of fun.*

**Exercise 1.7** Transcribe the following simple words.

band	hall	jump	weep	love	quit
ask	top	miss	juice	out	time
bless	cliff	drop	hoop	bead	turn
trap	dive	fear	grow	load	fair
boil	work	want	lose	close	boot
cook	pull	dome	why	cross	chair

# Lesson 2

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## Transcription hints

In Lesson 1 we introduced the basic symbols to be used in the phonetic transcription of English and some of the basic terminology needed to describe speech sounds. Here, we will look at some refinements to the symbol set and give some hints on how to avoid common errors when transcribing.

### Neutralisation symbols

In modern RP English a number of changes have taken place which affect vowel qualities. Fifty years or more ago a word like *city* was pronounced /sɪtɪ/. Nowadays it often gets pronounced /sɪti:/, although the earlier pronunciation is still heard. What is more troublesome is that many speakers use a vowel which is intermediate between /i:/ and /ɪ/. This means that in some circumstances the difference between the two vowels is becoming blurred or **neutralised**. In order to cope with this situation an extra symbol needs to be employed. Our transcription of words like *city* uses the symbol /i/ (without the length mark) for the second vowel: /sɪti/. This can be interpreted as meaning: for the second vowel of the word some speakers use /i:/, some speakers use /ɪ/ and some speakers use a vowel which is neither /i:/ nor /ɪ/, but somewhere in between. The same situation is true for the two vowels /u:/ and /ʊ/. In a phrase such as *to a party*, the first word may be /tu:/ or /tʊ/ or the vowel may be somewhere between /u:/ and /ʊ/. In cases like this we shall use the neutralisation symbol /u/ and write /tu ə pɑ:ti/. (Notice that the second vowel in *party* is also written with a neutralisation symbol.) You must be careful to realise that these neutralisation symbols are not appropriate in all situations. There is no doubt that native speakers of RP English use /i:/ and never /ɪ/ in a word like *bean*, so it would be wrong to write /bɪn/ when transcribing this word. Similarly, the word *bin* is always /bɪn/, never /bi:n/ or /bɪn/. Neutralisation of /i:/-/ɪ/ and /u:/-/ʊ/ is always found in unstressed<sup>1</sup> syllables. It is most common at the ends of words or morphemes. If there is a following consonant,

<sup>1</sup>If you are not sure about stress, please be patient. This is one of the topics dealt with in Lesson 3.

it must belong to a different morpheme (that is to say, the neutralised high vowel may be found word-finally even though sometimes it appears followed by other sounds if a morpheme is added).

One further point concerns words such as *before* and *remember*. If you look these up in a pronouncing dictionary you will probably find that the recommended pronunciation has /ɪ/ in the first syllable. However, many younger speakers these days use /i:/ in words like this. In the transcriptions in this book we have used the neutralisation symbol wherever we think there is a likelihood of hearing some native speakers of RP English using /ɪ/ and others using /i:/ or of speakers using a vowel which is difficult to identify as either /ɪ/ or /i:/. So we transcribe the above words /bɪfə:/ and /rɪmembə/.

## Vowel monophthonging

Traditionally, words such as *poor*, *sure*, *tour* were pronounced with the diphthong /ʊə/. This diphthong is slowly disappearing in modern RP and is being replaced by the long, back, rounded monophthong /ɔ:/. This means that some pairs of words which used to be distinct now sound identical. For example, *more* and *moor* used to be /mɔ:/ and /mʊə/. Now many people pronounce them both /mɔ:/. In this book we shall use the monophthongal pronunciation wherever possible. The only words which consistently use the /ʊə/ diphthong are those spelt with the letter combination *ewer*: words such as *brewer*, *sewer*, *ewer*, *fewer*. These can never be pronounced with /ɔ:/. The other situation where /ʊə/ is retained is when a word ending in /u:/ and is spelled with *ue* has the ending *r* attached to it, as in *truer* and *bluer*. These words retain the diphthongal pronunciation. Actually, for many speakers, the vowel quality at the beginning of the diphthong may be /u:/ rather than /ʊ/, so it is better to use the neutralisation symbol /u/. So, the above words would be transcribed /bruə suə juə fjuə truə bluə/.

## Plurals, possessives and past tenses

One very frequent type of error that occurs when people are beginning to transcribe English arises from a failure to realise that identical spellings can have different pronunciations. This is true of the plural form of nouns in English. Most nouns add an orthographic *s* to make their plural form: *book*–*books*, *dog*–*dogs* and so on. However, the pronunciation of the **plural morpheme** varies according the noun to which it is added. The general rule is that the plural morpheme must agree in voicing with the last *sound* of the noun. So, nouns which end in a voiced consonant or a vowel add /z/ and those that end with a voiceless consonant add /s/.

Examples:

<i>robes</i>	/rəʊbz/
<i>ropes</i>	/rəʊps/
<i>doors</i>	/dɔ:z/
<i>wells</i>	/welz/
<i>homes</i>	/həʊmz/
<i>troughs</i>	/traʊfs/