

The Vowel Inventory of English

The Distinctive Vowels

- the vowel inventory of E: 20 vowels
- 12 monophthongs, 8 diphthongs

Contrasts in Vowels Established by Commutation

/i:/	heed	feel	bead	pea	
/ɪ/	hid	fill	bid		except
/e/	head	fell	bed		
/æ/	had		bad		
/ɑ:/	hard		bard	par	
/ɒ/	hod				
/ɔ:/	hoard	fall	board	paw	
/ʊ/	hood	full			
/u:/	who'd	fool	booed		
/ʌ/			bud		
/ɜ:/	heard	furl	bird	purr	
/ə/					accept
/eɪ/		fail	bayed	pay	
/aɪ/	hide	file	bide	pie	
/ɔɪ/		foil			
/əʊ/		foal	bode		
/aʊ/		foul	bowed		
/ɪə/			beard	peer	
/eə/			bared	pair	
/ʊə/				poor	

Relatively Pure Vowels

/i:/ ('bead')

- description: high front unrounded, near to Cardinal Vowel 1 [i]
- variants: diphthongization in final positions, RP glides from a position near to [ɪ] > [ɪi], CockE glides from the central position [ə] > [əi]

/ɪ/ ('bid')

- description: mid-high front unrounded
- variants: RP trend twd /ə/ in non-final unaccented syllables ('quality')
- NortE: substitutes RP /ɪ/ for [i] in all positions

/e/ ('bed')

- description: mid-low front unrounded, btw Cardinal Vowel 2 [e] and Cardinal Vowel 3 [ɛ]
- CockE: glides twd [ɪ] ('bed' [beɪd])
- NortE: substitutes RP /e/ for C[ɛ] in all positions

/æ/ ('bad')

- description: low front rounded
- GA and NortE: substitutes RP /ɑ:/ for /æ/ before a voiceless fricative ('past')
- SE: loss of distinction btw /æ/ x /a:/ ('cam' x 'calm')

/ʌ/ ('bud')

- description: low front unrounded, Cardinal Vowel 14
- NortE: loss of distinction btw /ʊ/ x /ʌ/ ('put' x 'putt')

/ɑ:/ ('bard')

- description: low front unrounded, near to Cardinal Vowel 5 [ɑ]
- rhotic dialects: substitute RP /ɑ:/ for /æ/ + /r/ ('car, card, large')
- SE: loss of contrast btw /ɑ:/ x /æ/ ('palm' x 'Pam'; 'calm' x 'cam')

/ɒ/ ('cod')

- description: mid-high back rounded, quality of an open lip-rounded Cardinal Vowel 5 [ɑ]

- GA: substitutes RP /ɒ/ for /ɑ/ (loss of contrast btw 'bomb' x 'balm')
- /ɔ:/ ('cord')
- description: mid-high back rounded, btw Cardinal Vowel 6 [ɔ] and Cardinal Vowel 7 [o]
- rhotic dialects: substitute RP /ɔ:/ for /ɒ/ + /r/ ('horse, cord, war')
- GA and SE: substitute RP /ɔ:/ for /ɒ/ (loss of distinction btw 'cot' x 'caught')
- /ʊ/ ('good')
- description: mid-high back rounded
- SE: loss of opposition btw /ʊ/ x /u:/ ('pull' x 'pool')
- NortE: substitutes RP /ʌ/ for /ʊ/
- /u:/ ('food')
- description: high back rounded, near to Cardinal Vowel 8 [u]
- CockE: diphthongization [əu]
- /ɜ:/
- description: mid central unrounded; quality often coincides with that of /ə/ > /ɜ:/ in accented syllables x /ə/ in unaccented syllables ('foreword' x 'forward')
- variants: the only accented vowel in the central area => many individual realisational variation
- SE: substitution of RP /ɜ:/ for vowel + /r/ in the words spelled with vowel letter + <r>
- GA: substitution of RP /ɜ:/ for r-coloured vowel [ɝ] in the words spelled with vowel letter + <r>
- /ə/
- description: mid central unrounded
- variants: no qualitative opposition in the central area => many individual variation
- SE: substitutes RP /ə/ for short full vowel + /r/ in the words spelled with vowel letter + <r>
- GA: substitutes RP /ə/ for r-coloured vowel [ə̃] in the words spelled with vowel letter + <r>

Diphthongal Vowel Glides

- = sequence of vocalic elements forming a glide within one syllable
- 1st element, the starting point > 2nd element, the point in the direction of the glide
- RP diphthongs: 1st element in the region of [ɪ, e, a, ə, u] > 2nd in [ɪ, ʊ, ə]
- **falling** diphthongs = most length of the glide concentrated on the 1st element
- rising diphthongs = most length of the glide concentrated on the 2nd element /ɪə, ʊə/
- **closing** diphthongs = gliding from a more open to a closer position /eɪ, aɪ, ɔɪ, əʊ, aʊ/
- particularly susceptible to variation in different regional and social dialects
- /eɪ/ ('fail')
- CockE: substitutes RP /eɪ/ for [æɪ] ('fate'); substitutes RP /aɪ/ for [ɑɪ] ('fight')
- SE, GA and NortE: substitute RP /eɪ/ for the monophthong [e:]
- ('late, make, lady')
- /aɪ/ ('file')
- variants: differences in starting point
- ('time, die, cry')
- /ɔɪ/ ('foil')
- description: the only glide of this type with a back starting point => asymmetrical in the RP diphthongal system
- CockE and SE: a closer starting point
- ('boil, boy, toy')
- /əʊ/ ('foal')
- CockE: substitutes RP /əʊ/ for [æʊ]
- ('both, toe, know')
- /aʊ/ ('foul')
- CockE: substitutes the 1st element for [ɛ] or [æ], or substitutes the RP diphthong /aʊ/ for the monophthong [a:]
- ('house, council, allow')

Centering Diphthongs /ɪə, eə, ʊə/ ('peer, pair, poor')

- rhotic dialects: substitute the 2nd element of the RP diphthongs for /r/ in the words spelled with vowel letter + <r>

- CockE and NortE: substitute the RP diphthong /ʊə/ for the monophthong /ɔ:/
- ('here, dear, weird; rare, pair, bear; poor, tour, endure')