

## Pronunciation Focus Lesson: Introduction

### Sample Exercises to Master English Pronunciation

*The following pages are an introduction to the kinds of activities you will be doing in the Pronunciation Focus PDF lessons. You will receive these lessons in a weekly email from me until you have finished the course.*

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Each video lesson in the course presents a pair of target sounds. The pairs of sounds have been chosen because it is useful to compare and contrast these two sounds when you listen and when you speak.

The **target sound** is the sound we are aiming to notice and identify when we listen; it is also the sound we are aiming to make when we speak.

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#### A. Listening: Notice and identify a target sound

##### **Explanation**

Think of what you do when you recognise some thing as a particular kind of thing. For example, you recognise a dog as a German shepherd, you recognise a tree as an oak tree, you recognise a car as a Volkswagen, etc. Now imagine you have in front of you a bowl filled with different fruits: apples, pears, peaches, etc. And imagine that your task is to go through the fruits in the bowl and pick out all of the pears. Pears then would be your target fruit—what you are aiming to *notice and identify*. This is what we want to do with the sounds of English.

## 1. Standard spelling

The English language as we speak it today is the result of a long history, during which it has mixed with other languages such as Greek, Latin, French and German. This is reflected in the fact that the spelling of English words is very irregular: one and the same sound may be spelled in several different ways. For example, the ee sound in *sheep* can also be spelt in several other ways:

sheep	ee
beat	ea
receive	ei
grief	ie
legal	e
unique	i
victory	y

Linguists and other people who study language have developed a special alphabet called the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA), which they use to notice, identify and talk about the sounds of human languages. In this course, we are *not* teaching you how to use this alphabet. But with each lesson we do give you the IPA symbol for the target sounds. You can then notice this symbol in the dictionary you use. For this course, we recommend that you use the Cambridge Online Dictionary. It gives you the IPA symbols for the word, breaks the word into syllables, and also provides spoken recorded examples of British and American pronunciation. Of course, it also gives you a definition of the word and some examples that show how the word gets used in sentences.

The IPA symbols are very helpful, but also quite difficult to learn and use (it can take years!). To make things easier, we will choose a *standard spelling* for every sound we want to identify. We can then use this standard spelling to rewrite words in a way that helps us to recognise the sounds we have heard. We can also then use rewritten sentences as a script for reading aloud.

**EXERCISE ONE:** using the standard spelling *ee* for the sound in *sheep*, *notice* and identify all of the places where this target sound occurs in the following sentence. You may for example underline where the *ee* sound is located.

She even believes leaves feel grief when they fall from the trees.

(answer on the next page)

ANSWER:

She even believes leaves feel grief when they fall from the trees.

As a second example of noticing sounds, the standard spelling of ee for the phoneme has been used to re-write all the words in which the target sound occurs.

Shee eeven beleeves leeves feel greef when they fall from the trees.

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## 2. Stress and Rhythm

Spoken English has a musical or dance-like quality because some words, or parts of words, are stressed or emphasised, and other sounds are relatively un-stressed. You might think of the stressed sounds as strong—or, thinking of music and dance, as downbeats. By comparison, the un-stressed sounds are relatively weak and might be thought of as upbeats.

Say the following sentence out loud. Give the larger **boom** beats the stronger stress, like the beating of a drum:

Da **boom** da **boom** da-da **boom** da **boom** da-da **boom**.

**EXERCISE TWO:** Notice now that the following sentence has the same rhythm as above—the same pattern of upbeats and downbeats, unstressed and stressed sounds. Say it out loud, giving extra emphasis to the large syllables.

My **wife** is **not** very **nice** to **me** when she's **mad**.

In this example and in many other cases, the more important or more interesting words (or parts of words) get the extra stress or emphasis.

**EXERCISE THREE:** When you listen to the Sheep Ship Pronunciation Training Video Lesson, and when you say it out loud, in the following sentence mark in some way (by circling or underlining, or writing out with big letters) the stressed sounds—or in other words, the strong drum beats that get the most emphasis:

For similar siblings, intimacy is something unique and familiar.

**ANSWER:** The example below shows where the stresses in the sentence are placed:

For **s**imilar **s**iblings, **i**ntimacy is **s**omething **u**nique and **f**amiliar.

Note that we have increased the size of some sounds more than others. The bigger the size, the greater the stress or emphasis. In the word **intimacy**, the first syllable **in** gets the main stress, and the last syllable **cy** gets a secondary stress. The middle syllables **ti** and **ma** are relatively weak or unstressed. We might write out the rhythm of the word as follows:

In-ti-ma-cy	→	Boom da-da Bee
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### 3. Combine standard spelling and rhythm

Finally, we may combine the noticing skills we learned above. For example, notice the target sound *ee* as in *sheep* in the following sentence, and also notice when this target sound is stressed in contrast to when it is unstressed. Mark the sound and stresses in the sentence below:

Alice's unique qualities guarantee her a clean victory.

**Example answers:****Re-writing, using the standard spelling ee:**

Alice's uneeque qualitees guarantee her a cleen victoree.

**Underlining the stronger stressed sounds:**

Alice's uneeque qualitees guarantee her a cleen victoree.

**Comparing ee when stressed with ee when unstressed:**

uneeque    ee stressed

qualitee    ee unstressed

## B. Speaking: Making or producing a target sound

### **Explanation**

Imagine aiming to hit a target with a dart, an arrow or a bullet. You take aim and then shoot the arrow or throw the dart. Next you look at the target to see how close you came to hitting the centre of the target. Then you practise, try to improve your technique, and you try again and again. This is what you will do when you practise making the sounds of English.

### **General strategy for practising speech (recommended)**

Aim for the target: imagine the target sound—or in other words, say it silently in your mind and listen for it with your inner ear.

- Make the sound and record it on your phone, computer or other recording device.
- Play back the recording and listen to your own performance. Compare your performance to the performance in the Video Lessons.
- Evaluate your performance. How close did you come to hitting the target you were aiming for? What do you like about your performance? What do you dislike? What would you like to do better?
- Try and try again!

## 1. Break it down

Whatever you are practising, whether it's a poem, a sentence, or a word, it can be very helpful to break it down into smaller parts. So you break a poem into lines and sentences; you break a sentence into words, and you break a word into syllables and the sounds that make up those syllables.

This is especially helpful when you meet a phrase or word that you find difficult to pronounce. Linguists and dictionaries have different ways of breaking a word into its component syllables. For the purposes of this course, you do not have to worry about breaking a word into syllables in some “correct” way. Just do it in a way that makes sense to you, in a way that you find helpful. Of course, you may also look the word up in a dictionary to see how that dictionary breaks down the word.

**Sample exercise.** Break these words up into syllables—into sounds that you can pronounce separately.

**Theology =**

the o lo gy

OR: the ol o gy

**intelligibility =**

in tell i gi bi li ty

OR: in tel li gi bil i ty

Now practise saying the parts of the word separately, with plenty of silent space between the parts. Next, say the parts separately, but with less silent space between the parts. Finally, say all the parts smoothly connected together as one word.

## 2. Back it up

Sometimes it is helpful to practise pronunciation by starting with the last part first. Think of the last sound as the finish line in a race, or the target you're aiming to hit with an arrow. Once you have made your goal clear (the last sound), you work your way back to the beginning. Now when you start again, you can be more confident that you will reach your goal successfully.

**Sample exercise.** First break this phrase into parts:

He judges the juiciest peaches =

He judg es the ju ci est pea ches.

Now practice speaking as follows by breaking the sentence up into smaller sounds. Read aloud the small sounds in the box to the right. →

ches

pea

pea ches

peaches

est

ci

ci est                      ciest

ju ciest

juiciest

peaches

ciest peaches

ju ciest peaches

juiciest peaches

the juiciest peaches

ju dges the juiciest peaches

He judges the juiciest peaches.

You might also check to see if you've got the rhythm right:

He **ju** dges the **ju**i ci est **pea** ches

Da **boom**-pah da **boom** da-da boom-pah

Finally, say this phrase slowly, then faster, even faster, and then as fast as you can. Now slow it down to a normal speed. After practising it very fast, the normal speed will feel comfortable and easy.

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*You have now finished the Pronunciation Focus Lesson: Introduction lesson.  
You will receive your next Pronunciation Focus Lesson next week via email.*