

Decoding the letter A

In Received Pronunciation and in General American the **letter A** (lowercase **a**, pronounced /eɪ/), as most vowel letters in English, has four main pronunciations:

æ	eɪ	ɑː	eə
trap /træp/	face /feɪs/	start /stɑːrt/	care /keə/

- So-called “short a”, IPA phoneme /æ/, as in *trap, bat, batting, rapid, ask, ^{AmE} bath ^{AmE} or marry.*
- Short a spelling, IPA phoneme /ɑː/^{BrE} (broad a) as in *ask^{BrE} or bath.^{BrE}*
- So-called “long a”, IPA phoneme /eɪ/, as in *face, facing or famous*
- Long "ar" monophthong (short vowel spelling), IPA phoneme /ɑː/, as in *start, bar or barred*
- Long "ar" diphthong (long vowel spelling), IPA phoneme /eə/, as in *square, care, caring or parent*

It also can be pronounced /ɑː/^{BrE AmE} as in *father* and /ɔː/ as in *all* — plus other, less common pronunciations, sometimes in combination with other letters, and, of course, it can be used as schwa. In Spelling patterns for the letter A there are some helpful rules (to be taken with the habitual pinch of salt).

Distinctions by dialect

Teaching the letter A is very much one of those cases in which teachers, whichever their preferences might be, need to point out the differences between RP (/ɑː/) and American (/æ/) pronunciations regarding words like *bath* and *ask*, while pointing out, of course, that most native British English speakers do, in fact, pronounce them /æ/. When teaching American English pronunciation the Mary-marry-merry merger can be explained.

Dialect	trap	bath	palm	start	marry	Mary
Received Pronunciation	/æ/	/ɑː/	/ɑː/	/ɑː/	/æ/	/eə/
General American	/æ/	/æ/	/ɑː/	/ɑː/	/æ/	/e/
Most American dialects (Mary-marry merger)	/æ/	/æ/	/ɑː/	/ɑː/	/e/	/e/

As /æ/

See main article *IPA phoneme /æ/*.
See also *So-called “short a” and Decoding and spelling exercises: /æ/ vs /eɪ/*.

- before final consonants: **am** - **and** - **at** - **back** - **bad** - **bag** - **bat** - **cat** - **fan** - **ham** - **hand** - **land** - **man** - **map** - **sand** - **stand**
- before double consonant or "ck": **attack** - **battle** - **carry** - **cattle** - **channel** - **gallery** - **grammar** - **happen** - **happy** - **jacket** - **passenger** - **traffic**
- before single consonant: **average** - **balance** - **damage** - **family** - **have** - **January** - **manage** - **national** - **natural** - **value**
- other: **absolutely** - **actually** - **angry** - **aspect** - **capture** - **contract** - **factor** - **handle** - **transport**

As /ɑː/

See main article *Phoneme /ɑː/ in Received Pronunciation*.

Most words in this section are pronounced with /æ/ in General American, unless they are followed by "r".

- before *f, s* and *th*
before final consonants: **ask** - **bath** - **half** - **last** - **past** - **path** - **staff** - **task**
before double consonant: **giraffe** - **staffer**
other: **basket** - **pastor** - **rather**
- before *n*: **answer** - **can't** - **France** - **implant**

Pronounced /ɑː/ also in General American

IPA vowels		
æ	ɑː	
trap	father - start	
e	eɪ	eə
dress	face	square
ɪ	iː	ɪə
kit	fleece	near
ɒ	əʊ	ɔː
lot	goat	taught
ʊ	uː	ʊə
foot	goose	mature
	juː	jʊə
	cute	cure
ʌ	ə	ɜː
strut	comma	nurse
aɪ	aʊ	ɔɪ
price	mouth	choice

IPA consonants

Normal sound: /b, d, f, g, h, k, l, m, n, p, r, s, t, v, w, z/		
ʃ	tʃ	ŋ
show	church	sing
ʒ	dʒ	j
usual	judge	you
θ	ð	s
think	that	see

IPA	Stress
ˈ	Primary stress hotel /həʊtəl/
ˌ	Secondary stress understand /ˌʌndərˈstænd/

- calm - facade - father - koala - lama - llama - nuance - palm - spa
- before r: are - art - car - card - carpet - dark - far - garden - large - market - park - part - scar - scarf - start

IPA	Syllabification
	nitrate
	/'naɪ.treɪt/,
	night-rate
	/'naɪt.reɪt/

As /eɪ/

See main article *IPA phoneme /eɪ/*.

See also So-called "long a" and *Decoding and spelling exercises: /æ/ vs /eɪ/*.

- with magic e: ache - age - bake - blame - brake - cake - date - escape - fake - game - gate - hake - lake - late - male - make - name - pale - plate - sale - same - sane - shake - snake - stale - state - take - trade - wake - whale
- before single consonant: behavior^{AmE} - behaviour^{BrE} - education - information - label - nature - paper - patient
- Other: able - ancient - arrange - change - fragrance - range - strange - table

As /ɔ:/

See main article *IPA phoneme /ɔ:/*

See also *Decoding exercises: "al"*

- before final "ll": all - ball - call - fall - hall - small - tall
- before /l/: already - also - almost - always - alter - salt
- after "w": walk - wall - war - ward - water
- other: chalk - talk

As /ɒ/

See main article *IPA phoneme /ɒ/*.

- as /ɒ/: quality - restaurant, wander, was,^{BrE} wasp, watch
- as /ɒ/,^{BrE} /ɔ:/^{AmE}: wallet, want, warrant, warranty, wash

As /ə/

See main article *IPA phoneme /ə/*.

- weak forms: a - am - can - shall - than
- at beginning

verbs: acquire - admire - afford - agree - allow - appeal - appear - approach - arise - arrive

nouns: accord - account - amount - appeal - approach

other: about - above - across - again - against - ago - alone - among - another - around - available - away

- at end: Africa - African - America - American - camera - China - data - extra - human - idea - India - Indonesia - legal - local- organ - several - woman
- as part of suffix -able: capable - comfortable - likable^{AmE BrE} - likeable^{BrE} probable - suitable - variable
- as part of suffix -ate /ə/ or /ɪ/: chocolate - climate - fortunate - immediate - private
- other: Canada - company - organise - relative

As /ɪ/

See main article *IPA phoneme /ɪ/*

- furnace - octave - orange - spinach
- ending in -age: advantage - average - beverage - image - language - manage - percentage - village

As /ɪ/ or /ə/

The words in this section appear with /ɪ/ in some dictionaries and with /ə/ in others.

- accessible^{[1][2]} - character^{[3][4]} - chocolate^{[5][6]} - extravagant^{[7][8]} - indiscriminate - massacre - obstacle - receptacle

Silent "a"

- automatically, basically, dramatically, logically, romantically, specifically, typically
- varisyllabic words: Barbara, boundary, library,^{BrE} Margaret, separate
- only in British English: military, ordinary, secondary, secretary, voluntary

Spelling anomalies

- as /e/: any - many - Thames
- as /i:/: Israel
- as /ʌ/: was^{AmE}
- So-called long sound with short sound spelling, as /eɪ/: bass (*music*)

Variant pronunciations

- data /ˈdeɪtə, ˈdɑ:tə,^{BrE} ˈdætə^{AmE}/
- what /wɒt, wʌt^{AmE}/

Combinations

"ai"

Main article: Decoding exercises: "ai"

- as /eɪ/: Adelaide, afraid, aid, aim, available, brain, campaign, chain, claim, complain, contain, daily, detail, entertain, explain, fail, faith, gain, hail, Haiti, jail, mail, main, Maine, maintain, paid, pain, paint, rail, rain, raise, remain, retail, snail, Spain, stain, straight, train, trait, wait
- as /e/: again (also /əˈgeɪn/) - said

"air"

- as /eə/: air - affair - chair - fair - hair - pair

"ay"

Main article: Decoding exercises: "ay"

- as /eɪ/: day - pay - play - May - say - stay - tray
- as /e/: says

"au"

See main article Decoding exercises: "au"

- as /ɔ:/: auction - August - author - autumn - caught - cause - daughter - taught;
- as /ɒ/: Aussie - austerity - Australia - Austria;
- as /ɑ:/: aunt - draught - laugh

"aw"

- as /ɔ:/: draw - law - raw - saw
- "awy" as /ɔ:j/ or /ɔɪ/: lawyer /ˈb:ljər, ˈbɪər/
- In separate syllables
 - aware - award

"ae"

Main article: Decoding exercises: "ae"

- as /i:/ or /e/: aesthetic
- as /i:/: Caesar - paediatrician^{BrE}
- as /ə/: gynaecologist^{BrE}
- as /eɪ/ or /i:/: sundae
- as /eə/: aerobic - aeroplane^{BrE}

"ar"

Main article: Decoding exercises: "ar"

- /eə/
 - with magic e: aware - bare - care - compare - dare - Delaware - fare - hare - rare - scare - share - spare - square
 - other: area - careful - Mary - parent - rarely - Sarah - vary
- see As /ɑː/ above.
- /ɔː/: quarter - war
- /æ/: apparent - character - charity - comparison - paragraph - parallel
- /ə/: arise - around - career - cigarette - preparation

"arr"

Main article: Decoding exercises: "arr"

- /æ/: barrier - carry - embarrass - marriage - marry - narrative - narrow
- /ɔː/^{BrE} /ɔː/^{AmE}: warrant - warranty
- /ə/: arrange - arrest - arrive

Homophones

- As /eɪ/: brake - break; grate - great; male - mail; place - plaice; plane - plain; rain - reign; sale - sail; stake - steak; tale - tail; Wales - whales; waste - waist; weigh - way; weight - wait; weighed - wade;
- As /eə/: bare - bear; hair - hare; pair - pear; stairs - stares;
- As /æ/: ad - add; band - banned; cash - cache;
- As /ɑː/^{BrE}, /æ/^{AmE}/: passed - past;

Only in non-rhotic accents:

- As /ɑː/: aren't - aunt

Trademarks

- Waze - ways

Different pronunciations in the same word

- Africa/African - America/American - Australia/Australian - Austria/Austrian - average - character - language

Anticipated pronunciation difficulties depending on L1

Preconceived ideas and other interferences from L1 obviously interfere in many cases with how students perceive - and pronounce - sounds/words in English. The following sections aims to point out some of the most typical difficulties teachers and students may encounter regarding pronunciation.

Spanish

Many Spanish speakers will try, instinctively, to pronounce it either as /eɪ/ or as /ʌ/ (which is quite similar, but often not quite enough, to the letter a in Spanish). This is particularly problematic for words such as *want*, *what* or *water* or for the schwa.

References

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See also

- Pronunciation exercises: /ʌ/ vs /æ/
- Decoding exercises: "aI"
- Decoding exercises: "ao"
- Decoding exercises: "ar"
- Decoding exercises: "arV" and "arrV"
- Decoding exercises: "arr"
- Decoding exercises: "ea"
- Decoding exercises: "oa"
- Decoding exercises: "wa"
- Vowel

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