

# The Difference between Phonics and Phonetics

English written the way it is  
said makes sense:

**phonetics**



# The Difference between Phonics and Phonetics and Phonetics



It is very important to  
clearly understand the  
difference between them.



### Important

There is only one way to make sure that you can pronounce the sounds of English correctly, check with a qualified teacher.

On-line courses are available [here](#) for checking and learning for teachers and students.

Also, full background information about the use of phonetic text to teach and learn proper pronunciation can be found [here](#).

### What's the difference between Phonics and Phonetics

**Phonics** is a system for teaching English-speaking children how to read and write using conventional spelling. Phonics was the way I learned how to read English when I was a little boy: how, now, brown, cow. I could already speak English.

Nobody needed to teach me how to say the sounds of English. They did not push it too far, English spelling being so irregular. And I soon learnt to recognise the words in books immediately. Looking back on it, learning written English is a bit like



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learning Chinese characters: “look and say” is the only way. It could even be argued that the open-minded intelligent child will soon notice that English spelling is silly and that phonics is a bit of a sham, resulting in viewing teachers with distrust.

**Phonetics** is not the same thing at all. It offers a way of representing the sounds of a language with corresponding special symbols, in a similar manner to that by which music can be represented with a set of notes.

Simplified Standard Sound Symbols (S4) is a set of such symbols just for the sounds of American and British English. It is "phonemic" in that each of its symbols represents a sound that needs to be

distinguished from another one in the set to convey meaning as, for instance, in the case of 'ship' and 'sheep'. It is a complete system that provides the EFL teacher with a reliable and logical framework for teaching students to accurately say and recognise the sounds of English.

This is what Professor John Wells has to say about phonics:

*Learning the sounds?*

*Synthetic phonics, according to a Sunday Times “briefing” on dyslexia (18 Jan., main section, p. 20) is a system in which children are taught the 43 sounds of English and how to blend them.*



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*Oh no it isn't. It is a reading scheme. English-speaking children who are ready to learn to read and write already know the sounds of English. What they need to learn are the letters and the letter combinations that correspond to them in writing.*

*True dyslexia (if it exists) involves the inability to identify letter shapes. If a b looks to you like a d, or you can't reliably tell apart a p and a q, then you do indeed have a special problem in visual perception.*

*Synthetic phonics very sensibly concentrates first on the regular spelling-to-sound correspondences. Rather than the rival whole word schemes ("look and*

*say"), children first learn to spell out C-A-T = cat (which they can already name as a /kæt/). The cat sat on the mat.*

*As explained in Wikipedia,*

*Synthetic phonics emphasises the one-to-one correspondences between phonemes and graphemes. In synthetic phonics programs students say the sounds for the graphemes they see and orally blend them together to produce a spoken word. In the context of phonics, the wordblend takes on a different meaning from its use in linguistics.*

*(In phonics, a blend is a letter combination, such as sh = /ʃ/.)*



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*But English-speaking children learning to read experience a special difficulty: the irregularity and inconsistency of our spelling-to-sound correspondences. Learning to read and write imposes an extra burden on the memory not required of, say, Swedish- or Polish-speaking children. It seems reasonable to conclude that some cases of supposed dyslexia may be due to difficulty in surmounting this extra hurdle.*

*After all, there are very few adults who are entirely confident in their ability to spell every word they need. Most adults make occasional spelling mistakes, and many make lots.*

*Many years ago I was engaged to teach some elementary phonetics to teachers of reading. I was astonished how difficult they, of all people, found it to distinguish between speech (something you can hear) and writing (something you can see).*

*I encountered one teacher who honestly believed that  $\theta$  as in thing consists of a t-sound followed by an h-sound.*

*It looks as if the anonymous Sunday Times reporter may be guilty of the same confusion.*



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### About S4 phonetics

Communicating with language means using standard sounds to designate certain things. Using non-standard sounds means not being easily understood.

Many students of English fail to learn to speak the sounds clearly. There are only 46 sounds and they need to be learnt properly. Also, with some English words, stress needs to be placed in the right places when they are spoken.

Conventional spelling offers no clear guidance to how words should be spoken and is often more misleading than helpful.

The International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) can be used to designate the sounds of English. However, the IPA is designed to provide symbols for all the sounds of every language. This means that it is not optimised for any language in particular, and contains many weird, unintuitive symbols when used for English.

S4 stands for Simplified Standard Sound Symbols, a simplified sub-set of the standard IPA symbols optimised for English. This is English as it ought to have been written: straightforward and obvious.


Trials with students have shown that they readily adapt to S4, and can quickly improve their pronunciation by using them.



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It is planned to produce a whole range of material in S4 to cover all aspects of learning English as a foreign language.

The symbol  is a registered trademark guaranteeing that the publication contains true S4 phonetic content.

## About you

We would be glad to have your impressions and ideas about this publication and S4 phonetics in general. To email, click [here](#).

## The sounds of English

English speech consists of a succession of standard sounds.

These are combined to form syllables.

Syllables consist of two types of sounds:

- vowels, that can be said alone (and syllabic consonants),
- consonants that can be put before and after vowels.

Every syllable contains at least one vowel or syllabic consonant.

Syllables, alone and in groups (words), are standard labels for ideas and hence



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convey meaning between people that know them.

Every speaker has an image in its mind of what the proper sounds should be and tries to make them well enough to be understood. The closer the speaker can get to the standard, the better the speaker can be understood.

### Using phonetic symbols to represent sounds

Every student of English needs to learn to speak the sounds of English clearly.

Unfortunately, conventional spelling gives no clear indication of how written text should actually be pronounced, in fact it is positively misleading.

However, the sounds of English (or any other language) can be represented with special symbols, and these can be put together to form phonetic text that accurately indicates pronunciation.

Academics long ago determined what the standard sounds of English are.



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These are often represented by International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) symbols. IPA symbols are intended to be available for all the sounds used in every language. The system was first designed to cover the sounds used in English and French. To quote [Wikipedia](#) “In 1886, a group of French and British language teachers, led by the French linguist Paul Passy, formed what would come to be known from 1897 onwards as the International Phonetic Association (in French, l’Association phonétique internationale).”

Unfortunately, IPA symbols are not that well suited to learning the sounds of English for a number of reasons.

For instance:

- as the available letters had to be shared between English and French, common letters such as “a”, “o” and “y” could not be used for English so weird ones were used instead,
- “ə” corresponds to a different sound in French,
- in the transcription of English sounds into IPA symbols, there is considerable diversity: for example, “little” is commonly written litəl (with a schwa, although that sound cannot be heard in “little”) and sometimes litl̩ (where the final letter is a [syllabic-L](#), which is more accurate),
- it is not clear whether IPA symbols are descriptive or prescriptive, for instance the symbol /i/ can be pronounced in two different ways, as the user wishes.



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In short, IPA symbols were not designed for teaching the sounds of English and are not optimised for that purpose.

For this reason, the phonetic text in this document is written in Simplified Standard Sound Symbols (S4) which are a subset of the IPA symbols specifically designed for teaching English pronunciation.

More information on S4 can be found [here](#).

### S4 phonetic text

S4 phonetic text is always in blue.

In the phonetic text, the gaps between the words do not correspond to pauses. They simply show the breaks between words in conventional spelling so as to make it easier to identify them.

Actual pauses in speaking are indicated by double spaces or an indent on a new line.

The sounds that the symbols stand for can be found [here](#). This connects to a free iBook clearly showing how to make all the sounds of English.



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Other publications featuring S4 phonetics can be found [here](#).

However, there is no substitute for a capable teacher.

### Breaking the cultural barrier

Every language uses its own set of sounds. And when someone starts learning a new language, it tends to use the sounds of its native language instead of those of the new language, which are generally somewhat different.

For instance, during a French lesson, as a student, I could not understand what was wrong with my pronunciation of Paris in French. Then Winnie Poon, from Hong Kong, who was sitting next to me, lent over and said its **parii not pærii kaa'nt yuu hii·ə ðə difr'ns saim'n** and I felt really silly.



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Language is more than a means of communication, it also embodies a culture.

To successfully learn a language, one has to accept this. And it means seeking to pronounce the language accurately, and also surrendering to its logic.

### What is proper English?

Some say that there is no such thing as proper English. There is only a universally-despised imaginary thing called Received Pronunciation that nobody speaks anymore. It held to be not only anti-diversity but also non-existent and problematic: a model to be rejected.

The name Received Pronunciation now being an unpopular one, and one that begs many questions, I prefer to use the term General British as proposed by Jack Windsor Lewis, the eminent phonetician.

So what is General British pronunciation and where is it heard? It is how the educated and successful people in the



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upper echelons of British society speak. And I suggest that, if you want people to take you seriously, this is what you should aim for.

You can hear this spoken in the average audio book with a British narrator. It is what politicians use in the UK. Every British-English speaker recognises it immediately.

This book features General British. There is also General American, of much the same pedigree.

The purpose of language is communication and a standard must exist for it to function (like Morse code). Non-standard pronunciation is detrimental to understanding, and vice versa. I contend that, in the UK and in Europe, General British is the standard best suited.



### Register

The tone of English speech can range from pompous to rude. This is called “register”.

If you speak English, you have to choose a register. I recommend that, if you are a student of English and want to appear polite and well-educated, you should aim for 4/5 on a register scale ranging from 5/5 for most formal to 1/5 for the least.

The examples in this book are therefore set at 4/5.

This scale is illustrated in the next column.

As you can see, one of the features of low-register speech is consonant-dropping:

- **wot** becomes **wo**
- **yes** becomes **ye**
- **rait** becomes **rai**

and so on.

It is best avoided.



## Examples of register

The phrase “Is it not?” can be said in the following different ways:

iz it not

5/5 on the register scale: “pompous” or “ceremonial”.

iz'nt it

4/5 on the register scale:  
“polite” or “neutral”.

A pause is marked between the two words (double space) to show that the first t belongs to the first word.



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iz'nt it

3/5 on the register scale: “familiar” or “friendly”.

There is no pause between the two words, so the t at the end of the first word sounds as if it is the beginning of the second word.

i'n it

2/5 on the register scale:  
“casual” or “offhand”.

The first t is dropped.

i'n i

1/5 on the register scale: “vulgar” or “rude”.

The second t is dropped too.



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### Liaison in phonetic text

When reading phonetic text, don't pause between words!

As previously mentioned, in phonetic text the gaps between the words do not correspond to pauses in speech. And as shown in the register example, the end of one word may sound like the beginning of the next one: *isn't it* is generally pronounced *isn tit*. In the examples, “children” would be written **tʃiˈldrən** if it were not followed by “are”, which begins with a vowel.

This is called liaison.

Also, sometimes, when a word ends in a vowel and the following one begins with one, a consonant is added between them to make the speech flow more fluid, especially in registers of 3/5 and below.

For instance, in:

ðiiy edʒə**kei**fən əv ðee **tʃi**ˈldrən iz teikˈn  
verii **si**rii·əslii

Note the **y** added to the end of the first word. This makes the delivery smoother.



### Stress in phonetic text

In S4 phonetic text, stressed symbols are in **bold** type.

Stress is used in spoken English to modify meaning.

For instance, “They take a long time to walk to school” can have somewhat different meanings depending on where the stress is placed, as follows:

ðei teik ə lɒŋ tai'm tə wook tə sguu'l  
(*they* do, others don't)

ðei teik ə lɒŋ **tai'm** tə wook tə sguu'l  
(a *very* long time)

ðei teik ə lɒŋ tai'm tə **wook** tə sguu'l  
(but they can get there quite quickly on the bus)

ðei teik ə lɒŋ tai'm tə wook tə **sguu'l**  
(but they don't take long to walk to the *shops*)

In the examples in this book, stress placement is just a reasonable suggestion.

In fact, use of stress is somewhat more complicated than shown in here, but that is not something that the average student of English needs to worry about.



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## When dots are used

Dots are used in phonetic text:

- to indicate how groups of vowels should be divided, whenever needed to dispel ambiguity,
- to show how long words break up into syllables (sometimes).

## Dispelling ambiguity

Example:

ðii y edʒəkeɪfən əv ðee tʃiˈldrən ɪz teɪkˈn  
veriɪ **siɪrii**·əsliɪ

Here there is a dot between the the second and third syllables of “seriously” to show where they divide, as the second ends with a vowel and the third begins with one.

## Showing syllable breaks

In a few cases, long words have been written with dots between the syllables to make it easier for the casual reader to pronounce them, for example **stii**·ə·rii·ou·taɪp (stereotype).



### When you read phonetic text aloud

Remember that the breaks between the words are just for show and do not correspond to pauses in speech.

Just continue reading continuously, letting the end of one word merge with the start of the next one until you reach a double space or a double carriage return.

For instance:

- k'ngrætʃə**lei**f'nz **maati**'n
- k'n·græ·tʃə·**lei**·f'nz **maati**'n
- k'n·græ·tʃə·**lei**·f'nz·**maa**·ti'n
- k'ngrætʃə**lei**f'nz**maati**'n

are all pronounced exactly the same.



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Simon Vickers asserts the right  
to be recognized as the author of this book  
and as the originator of the novel ideas presented in it.