

## HOW TO PRONOUNCE THE PHONEMES IN ISOLATION

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Most readers of this manual have taken a foreign language in high school or college. Using your background with a foreign language, identify these words by sounding them out:

*cuhahhtuh, tuhuhguh, guhehtuh.*

Can you recognize those words? Did you take Spanish? French? German? Well, none of those languages will help here. Aren't these obvious? They're English. The words are *cat*, *tug*, and *get*, respectively. Did you have a hard time identifying them? Yet this is how we often present letter sounds to kids: /c/ /a/ /t/ as *cuh* – *ah* – *tuh*. However, *c* does not say *cuh*. The letter *t* does not say *tuh*. So we must not tell kids that these are the sounds of those letters! Do not add a vowel sound (usually a short /u/ sound) to consonants when you model the letter sounds in isolation. Adding vowel sounds to consonants in isolation disrupts the process of oral blending when students sound out words. Just like you had a hard time sounding out *cat*, *tug*, and *get* because of those extra sounds, children also struggle when they sound out words if they think *t* says *tuh* and *b* says *buh*.

### How to Pronounce Letter Sounds in Isolation

When teaching children the letter sounds, we must learn to *correctly* pronounce the sounds in isolation. For most letters, this is easy. However, there are a few that are very difficult. Below is a guide to assist you in this process. In addition to the teacher using the correct pronunciations, students should learn these as well. Not only is accurate pronunciation of sounds in isolation needed for sounding out words, but students and teachers need precise pronunciations during phoneme awareness activities and assessments.

**Vowels.** The vowels are the easiest to say in isolation. Vowels include both the short and long forms of *a*, *e*, *i*, *o*, and *u*.<sup>1</sup> They also include the various vowel combinations (*ou*, *oo*, *ee*, *ea*, *ey*, etc.), and the letters *y* and *w* when they appear in the middle or the end of syllables. Vowels represent the flow of air through the vocal cords and out the mouth.

**Easy consonants and digraphs.**<sup>2</sup> The easiest consonants to pronounce in isolation are the ones that you can “drag out” indefinitely. For example, there is no excuse for saying that *m* says *muh* because it is very easy to make the /m/ sound in isolation and drag it out: *mmmmmm*. Several letters are easy to stretch out like this and therefore are easy to produce in isolation. These include the following: soft *c*, *f*, *l*, *m*, *n*, *ph*, *s*, *sh*, *th* (voiced), *th* (unvoiced), *v*, *z*. There is absolutely no reason /m/ should be presented as *muh*, because /m/, and the other consonants presented here, are easy to say and even hold (e.g., *mmmmmm . . .*) without an *-uh* at the end.

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<sup>1</sup>The short vowels are like those in *pat*, *pet*, *pit*, *pot*, and *putt*.

<sup>2</sup>I'm including the consonant digraphs (*ch*, *ph*, *sh*, *th*) in this breakdown because they should be taught right along with the letters of the alphabet. Like the letters, they produce a single sound. In contrast to digraphs, blends retain the sounds of both letters (e.g., *st*, *pl*, *br*). See Appendix E for more on blends.

By “soft *c*” I am referring to when the letter *c* makes the /s/ sound (e.g., *cent*, *space*). It is important to notice that there are two different pronunciations of *th*. One is the *th* as in *the*, *they*, *this*, and *though*. The second is the *th* as in *think*, *thin*, *thank*, *thistle*. Can you notice why these are different? Speech pathologists and linguists refer to the difference as *voiced* vs. *unvoiced*. Put your fingers on your throat and say *think*. Then say *these*. Notice how your vocal cords vibrate when you said the *th* in *these* but not when you said the *th* in *think*. However, your mouth, tongue and lips were in nearly the same position for both versions of *th*. The only difference was the use of the vocal cords. When the vocal cords are used (e.g., *this*, *the*), it is called a “voiced” *th*. When the vocal cords are not used (*think*, *thank*), it is called an “unvoiced” *th*. Either version of *th* can be easily pronounced in isolation. Children should be taught both of the sounds for the *th*. Have them do the demonstration with the vocal cords. That will make the two sounds more memorable for them.<sup>3</sup>

Even though the consonants in this section are the easy ones, you should practice pronouncing them in isolation until they are automatic to you. Appendix E has more help with letter sounds.

***Moderately difficult consonants.*** There are consonants that require more thought and practice to properly sound them out in isolation. They are hard *c* (the /k/ sound), soft *g* (the /j/ sound), hard *g*, *h*, *j*, *k*, *q*, *r*, *w*, *x*, and *y*. With these, you will be more tempted to put an *-uh* after the consonant sound. Below are suggestions to keep you from doing this.

Hard *c* and *k* make the same sound (/k/). With effort and concentration, you can get your mouth in position to make this sound, but send air through your mouth restricting the flow somewhat. If you hold that sound, it should sound like a quiet version of the static you hear when your car radio is tuned between stations. There is no reason to say *kuh*.

The soft *g* and *j* both make the /j/ sound. While this is pronounceable in isolation, it takes a little concentration. Say the word *just*. Now start to say it but hold the /j/ sound before you get to the /u/. With practice you will be able to pronounce the /j/ without any vowel sound. The /j/ sound is voiced, meaning you should hear your vocal cords vibrate. If you take away the voicing, you will find yourself making something closer to the /ch/ sound.

Hard *g*, as in *go* or *get*, is difficult, but pronounceable. If done correctly, you’ll be making a scraping noise or it may sound a bit like the radio static, much like the /k/ mentioned above, but you are adding a little bit of voicing (i.e., using your vocal cords). Say *go* very slowly but stop short of shifting from the /g/ to the /o/ sound. The hard /g/ should sound halfway between radio static and an electric vibrating/humming sound. Simply make the radio static sound (which is unvoiced) and vibrate the vocal cords to provide voicing to get the hard /g/.

The *h* is rather easy but I included it here because it requires comment. The /h/ is actually a breathing sound that can be held. If you were to breathe on your glasses to fog them up to clean them, you’d be making the /h/ sound in isolation.

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<sup>3</sup>The distinction between “voiced” and “unvoiced” is a concrete concept that kindergarteners and first graders can understand. Do the demonstration with the fingers on the throat and point out that they use their voice with one and not the other. There are other examples of voiced and unvoiced letters (*v/f*; *j/ch*, *b/p*, *d/t*). Having children think about these letters and sounds in this way adds one other layer to the multisensory presentation of letters and phonemes. The more ways information is “plugged in,” the greater likelihood it will be remembered.

In English words, *q* does not appear without the letter *u* immediately following.<sup>4</sup> We should not teach *q* in isolation. It should be taught as *qu*. We pronounce *qu* as /kw/ and sounds very close to *coo* like in *coo-coo clock*.<sup>5</sup> *Qu* does not say *kwuh*, i.e., with an /uh/ sound.

The *r* is tricky. Some claim that you have to choose between saying either *er* or *ruh*. However, if you can produce the sound of a fire engine, you can produce the /r/ in isolation. Start to say *ruh*, but hold the /r/ sound and don't say the *uh* in *ruh*. Hold that /r/ and you will sound like a child playing with a toy fire engine. Make that sound very briefly and you've pronounced the /r/ in isolation.

The *x* is fairly easy but takes practice. It is really two phonemes combined: /k/ and /s/.<sup>6</sup> Think of a word like *socks*, and focus on the last two sounds /k/ and /s/. That's how you produce the /x/ sound in isolation.

The *w* sound is made by making a small, tight circle with your lips and making an *oo* sound as in *food*, except that your lips are almost closed while in that circular position.<sup>7</sup> Normally when making the *oo* sound you leave a slightly larger circular opening in your lips than when you are trying to make the /w/ sound.

The *y* requires a bit of thought. Start to say *yes* but hold that initial sound before getting to the vowel sound. With a little practice, you can do it in isolation, with no vowel sound.

**Difficult consonants.** There are four consonants that *cannot* be pronounced in isolation, so all we can do is make as close of an approximation as possible. These approximations are designed to minimize the likelihood of extra sounds being added (which makes blending difficult). The difficult consonants are *b*, *d*, *p*, and *t*. These consonants stop the flow of air entirely, so you must put a vowel sound before or after them to pronounce them. The problem can be seen if you listen carefully as you say one of these consonants at the beginning of a word and then the end of a word. For example, say *bat*. The /b/ represents a full restriction of airflow out of your mouth until the airflow begins as you start producing the /a/ sound while your mouth is already in the /b/ position. You can't really pull the /b/ apart from the /a/ that follows. Now try the /b/ at the end of the word *cab*. This time, the /b/ represents the way you completely stop the airflow after making the /a/. So to get the proper sound of the /b/ you seem forced to put a vowel either before it or after it. This is also the case with *d*, *p*, and *t*. How, then, do we produce these in isolation? Simple. We cheat! Rather than follow these sounds with a full-fledged vowel sound, we train ourselves (with practice) to let a whisper or hiss of air come out of our mouth after trying to produce the sound in isolation.

To pull off this difficult feat, we must first notice that all vowels, whether long or short, are *voiced* (put your fingers on your throat and try each vowel sound). However, whispers and

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<sup>4</sup>The exceptions to this are proper names: *Iraq* and *Shaq*. The latter is short for Shaquille (O'Neal).

<sup>5</sup>If this does not sound right to you, listen to what you are saying as you begin to say *quick*, *queen*, and *quiet*. So, for example, *quick* is like saying *coo* followed by *wick*. The /w/ sound in *quick* results as air continues from your mouth while you shift between the /oo/ and the /i/.

<sup>6</sup>That is why the baseball teams, the Chicago White Sox and Boston Red Sox can get away with their unusual spellings. *Sox* and *socks* are pronounced identically.

<sup>7</sup>Here's a little trick to see what I mean. Start to say the word *food*. As you say the /foo/, before getting to the /d/, change mid-stream and say *wish*. Notice how the /oo/ in *food* glides right into the /w/ in *wish*. All you are doing here is ever so slightly closing the circle your mouth a little tighter before producing the /w/ sound.

hisses are *unvoiced*. They don't use our vocal chords.<sup>8</sup> In order to produce a stop consonant (*b*, *d*, *p*, *t*) in isolation, we replace an unwanted voiced vowel sound (i.e., /uh/) with an unvoiced whisper or hiss. This will avoid confusion when it comes time to blend sounds into words. It will also assist in producing sounds in isolation for phonemic awareness tasks, where precise pronunciation of sounds in isolation is important.

Getting this whisper effect from the /t/ and /p/ is not too hard, with a little concentration and practice. Start to say a *t* and let out a short hiss of air, like the sound when you let air out of a car tire.<sup>9</sup> Make sure the opening of your lips forms a small circle. It's like you are about to say the word *too*, but just before you start to say the /oo/ you stop short and use a blast of air instead. With the *p*, you're letting out an unvoiced puff of air. The *p* and *t* are unvoiced, so this is fairly easy. The *b* and *d* are more difficult because they require at least some voicing to produce. The /b/ almost requires a slight amount of a short u sound (the schwa). With practice, you can make it extremely short and almost unnoticeable, so it won't interfere with blending. The /d/ almost requires a very shortened version of the short *i* sound (/i/), but keep it very short. Practice these. Concentrate on eliminating as much as possible of any trace of a vowel sound, and you can rid yourself of *buh*, *duh*, *puh* and *tuh* forever!

It's important to teach children how to produce sounds in isolation. This will assist them in both sounding out new words as well as participating in phonemic awareness exercises. In addition, it is a form of phonemic awareness itself. Having kids learn and practice the correct pronunciations of letter sounds in isolation helps them focus on the sound structure of our spoken language, the very nature of phonemic awareness.

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<sup>8</sup>That is why when people are sick and "lose their voice," they can still whisper.

<sup>9</sup>It is more like a release of air pressure starting with an explosive /t/. For those familiar with drums, it's a bit like imitating with your mouth the sound of hitting a *closed* high-hat on a drum set.