

The R sound /r/

Printable practice pack · free from onlinetonguetwister.com

English /r/ is the sound learners struggle with most. It is not tapped, not rolled, and not made with the lips alone — the tongue bunches or curls without ever touching the roof of the mouth.

Who this helps: Speakers of Spanish, Japanese, Korean, Mandarin, Hindi, Arabic and French, plus children working on rhotacism.

How to make the sound

- 1 Pull the tongue back so the tip points up but touches nothing.
- 2 Bunch the middle of the tongue up toward the hard palate, or curl the tip back — both work.
- 3 Press the sides of the tongue against the upper back teeth. That side contact is what makes it sound American.
- 4 Round the lips slightly, as if starting a small 'w'.
- 5 Turn the voice on and hold: rrrrr. There should be no tap and no vibration at the tip.

Common mistakes

- Tapping the tongue on the ridge behind the teeth — that gives a Spanish 'r' (pero, not 'perro').
- Trilling the tongue, which turns 'red' into a rolled 'rrred'.
- Substituting /l/ or /w/ — 'rice' becomes 'lice' or 'wice'.
- Dropping /r/ after a vowel: 'car' becoming 'cah'. In American English the /r/ colours the vowel and must be heard.

A ten-minute daily routine

- 1 **Warm up (1 min).** Hum, then stretch the jaw and lips. Cold mouths slur.
- 2 **Isolate (2 min).** Make the target sound on its own, held long, ten times.
- 3 **Words (3 min).** Work one block of the word list on page 2, slowly, from the respelling.
- 4 **Contrast (2 min).** Run the minimal pairs on page 3 and listen for the difference.
- 5 **Speed (2 min).** Finish with a twister from page 4 — slow first, then fast.

Tip: record yourself on a phone before and after a week of practice. People rarely hear their own errors live, but almost always hear them in a recording. The microphone practice mode at onlinetonguetwister.com transcribes what you actually said and scores it against the target.

Word list

Word · IPA · say it (CAPITALS = stressed syllable)

R at the start of a word

red	/rɛd/	RED
right	/raɪt/	RITE
rural	/ˈrʊr.əl/	ROOR-uhl
really	/ˈri:.ə.li/	REE-uh-lee
rhythm	/ˈrɪð.əm/	RITH-uhm
robbery	/ˈrɑ:.bə.ri/	RAH-buh-ree
reservoir	/ˈrez.ə.vwɑ:r/	REZ-ur-vwar
ridiculous	/rɪˈdɪk.jə.ləs/	rih-DIK-yuh-luhs
recipe	/ˈres.ə.pi/	RESS-uh-pee
refrigerator	/rɪˈfrɪdʒ.ə.reɪ.tə/	rih-FRIJ-uh-ray-tur

R in the middle

February	/ˈfeb.ju.ɛr.i/	FEB-yoo-air-ee
library	/ˈlaɪ.brɛr.i/	LY-brair-ee
mirror	/ˈmɪr.ə/	MEER-ur
horrible	/ˈhɔ:r.ə.bəl/	HOR-uh-buhl
temporary	/ˈtɛm.pə.rɛr.i/	TEM-puh-rair-ee
particularly	/pəˈtɪk.jə.lə.li/	pur-TIK-yuh-lur-lee
deteriorate	/dɪˈtɪr.i.ə.reɪt/	dih-TEER-ee-uh-rat e
hierarchy	/ˈhaɪ.ə.rɑ:r.ki/	HY-uh-rar-kee
brewery	/ˈbru:.ə.ri/	BROO-uh-ree
secretary	/ˈsek.rə.tɛr.i/	SEK-ruh-tair-ee

R after a vowel (r-coloured)

world	/wɜ:rlɔ/	WURLD
were	/wɜ:r/	WUR
girl	/gɜ:rl/	GURL
first	/fɜ:rst/	FURST
water	/ˈwɑ:.tə/	WAH-tur
computer	/kəmˈpjʊ:.tə/	kuhm-PYOO-tur
northern	/ˈnɔ:r.ðən/	NOR-thurn
murmur	/ˈmɜ:r.mə/	MUR-mur
further	/ˈfɜ:r.ðə/	FUR-thur
surprise	/səˈpraɪz/	sur-PRIZE

R in a cluster

street	/stri:t/	STREET
through	/θru:/	THROO
thrown	/θroʊn/	THRONE
scream	/skri:m/	SKREEM
strength	/streŋkθ/	STRENGKTH
groceries	/ˈgroʊ.sə.rɪz/	GROH-suh-reez
prescription	/prɪˈskrɪp.ʃən/	prih-SKRIP-shuhn
crisps	/krɪspz/	KRISPS
drawer	/drɔ:r/	DROR
squirrel	/ˈskwɜ:r.əl/	SKWUR-uhl

Minimal pairs

Say each pair aloud. If they sound identical, slow down and exaggerate.

A	B	What to listen for
right	light	/r/ tongue floats free · /l/ tip touches the ridge
rice	lice	the classic /r/-/l/ swap
red	led	listen for the tap that should not be there
correct	collect	mid-word contrast
rake	wake	/r/ has tongue bunching, /w/ is lips only
grass	glass	cluster contrast

Sentence ladders

Build up: single word, then phrase, then full sentence. Three times each.

1	rural
2	the rural road
3	The rural road runs right by the river.

1	library
2	a library card
3	Rebecca borrowed a rare library book on February the third.

1	world
2	around the world
3	World-weary travellers wandered around the whole wide world.

1	squirrel
2	a grey squirrel
3	A grey squirrel scurried across the surprisingly narrow street.

Twisters for this sound

Slow and clear first. Speed is the last step, never the first.

Roughly rub raw red rhubarb rather rapidly.

HARD · sound focus: r

A rarely real rural rule ruled the royal realm.

HARD · sound focus: r/l

Red lorry, yellow lorry, red lorry, yellow lorry.

HARD · sound focus: l/r

Rolling red wagons run rapidly round rugged rocks.

MEDIUM · sound focus: r

The wry walrus wore a white wig while wading west.

MEDIUM · sound focus: w/r/l

Warped walnut wood works worse when wet and weary.

MEDIUM · sound focus: w/r/l

Five-day tracker

Practice task	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5
Read the word list aloud					
Minimal pairs, 3× each					
Sentence ladders					
Twisters, slow					
Twisters, fast					
Record yourself and listen back					

Free to print, copy and share for classroom, therapy and personal use. Practise with a microphone and instant accuracy scoring at onlinetonguetwister.com/pronunciation/r-sound