

The S, Z, SH and ZH sounds /s/ /z/ /ʃ/ /ʒ/

Printable practice pack · free from onlinetonguetwister.com

The sibilants are the hissing family. /s/ and /z/ are a narrow, focused hiss; /ʃ/ (sh) and /ʒ/ (measure) are broader and further back with rounded lips. They are also where most lisps live.

Who this helps: Anyone with a lisp, speakers who merge /s/ and /ʃ/, and learners tackling English plural and -s endings.

How to make the sound

- 1 For /s/, put the tongue tip just behind the top teeth without touching them, and aim a thin stream of air down the centre groove of the tongue.
- 2 Keep the teeth close together. If the tongue pokes through, you get a lisp (a 'th' sound).
- 3 /z/ is exactly the same shape with the voice switched on.
- 4 For /ʃ/ (sh), pull the tongue slightly back, flatten the groove, and round the lips.
- 5 /ʒ/ (measure, vision) is /ʃ/ with the voice on — it never starts an English word.

Common mistakes

- Frontal lisp: the tongue pushes between the teeth so 'sun' becomes 'thun'.
- Lateral lisp: air escapes sideways, producing a wet, slushy /s/.
- Merging /s/ and /ʃ/, so 'see' and 'she' sound identical.
- Missing the /ʒ/ in words like measure, usual and decision by saying a hard 'z' or 'sh'.

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)

S sound

sun	/sʌn/	SUN
specific	/spə'sɪf.ɪk/	spuh-SIF-ik
statistics	/stə'tɪs.tɪks/	stuh-TIS-tiks
scissors	/'sɪz.əz/	SIZ-urz
necessary	/'nes.ə.sər.i/	NESS-uh-sair-ee
sixth	/sɪksθ/	SIKSTH
asterisk	/'æs.tər.ɪsk/	ASS-tur-isk
suspicious	/sə'spɪʃ.əs/	suh-SPISH-uhs
consists	/kən'sɪsts/	kuhn-SISTS
costs	/kɒ:sts/	KOSTS

Z sound

zoo	/zu:/	ZOO
busy	/'bɪz.i/	BIZ-ee
easy	/'i:.zi/	EE-zee
please	/pli:z/	PLEEZ
cousins	/'kʌz.ənz/	KUZ-uhnz
clothes	/kloʊz/	KLOHZ
resume	/rɪ'zu:m/	rih-ZOOM
exhausted	/ɪg'zɔ:s.tɪd/	ig-ZAWS-tid
boxes	/'bɑ:k.sɪz/	BOK-siz
choose	/tʃu:z/	CHOOZ

SH sound

she	/ʃi:/	SHEE
sure	/ʃʊr/	SHOOR
machine	/mə'ʃi:n/	muh-SHEEN
ocean	/'oʊ.ʃən/	OH-shuhn
special	/'speʃ.əl/	SPESH-uhl
official	/ə'fɪʃ.əl/	uh-FISH-uhl
conscious	/'kɑ:n.ʃəs/	KAHN-shuhs
negotiation	/nɪˌɡoʊ.ʃi'eɪ.ʃən/	nih-goh-shee-AY-sh uhn
anxious	/'æŋk.ʃəs/	ANGK-shuhs

ZH sound /ʒ/

measure	/'meɜ:.ə/	MEZH-ur
vision	/'vɪʒ.ən/	VIZH-uhn
usual	/'ju:.ʒu.əl/	YOO-zhoo-uhl
decision	/dɪ'sɪʒ.ən/	dih-SIZH-uhn
garage	/gə'rɑ:ʒ/	guh-RAHZH
treasure	/'treɜ:.ə/	TREZH-ur
casual	/'kæʒ.u.əl/	KAZH-oo-uhl
leisure	/'li:.ʒə/	LEE-zhur
beige	/beɪʒ/	BAYZH

Minimal pairs

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

A	B	What to listen for
sip	ship	narrow /s/ vs broad /ʃ/
sea	she	the core sibilant contrast
sue	shoe	watch the lip rounding on /ʃ/
sink	think	catches a frontal lisp
peace	peas	unvoiced /s/ vs voiced /z/
Caesar	seizure	/z/ vs /ʒ/

Sentence ladders

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

1	scissors
2	sharp scissors
3	Six sharp scissors sit on Sasha's shelf.

1	measure
2	measure twice
3	The usual measure was a casual decision.

1	specific
2	a specific statistic
3	She cited a specific statistic on the sixth slide.

1	shoes
2	shiny shoes
3	Sure, Sue's shiny shoes seem seriously special.

Twisters for this sound

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

Zany zodiac zones zap Zephyr's zero zests.

MEDIUM · sound focus: z

A zigzag zipper zipped Zora's zesty zinger.

EASY · sound focus: z

Noisy noozles nuzzle near nasal nozzle nez.

HARD · sound focus: z

Silly Sally swiftly shooed seven silly sheep.

MEDIUM · sound focus: s

Hazy daisies daze mazy gazers in lazy valleys.

EASY · sound focus: z

Should Shane share shaved sheep steak so shyly?

HARD · sound focus: sh

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					

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