

Tricky English vowel pairs **i:** · **ɪ** · **æ** · **ɛ** · **ʊ** · **u:**

Printable practice pack · free from onlinetonguetwister.com

English has more vowels than most languages, and the differences are small. Long and short, tense and lax — get these six pairs right and your speech becomes dramatically easier to follow.

Who this helps: ESL learners at every level, especially speakers of Spanish, Italian, Japanese, Arabic and Slavic languages.

How to make the sound

- 1 /i:/ (sheep) is long and tense — smile hard, tongue high and forward, hold it.
- 2 /ɪ/ (ship) is short and relaxed — jaw slightly lower, no smile, cut it short.
- 3 /æ/ (bad) drops the jaw wide; /ɛ/ (bed) keeps it half open.
- 4 /ʌ/ (cup) is central and relaxed; /ɑ:/ (car) is open and back.
- 5 /ʊ/ (full) is short with loose lips; /u:/ (fool) is long with tight rounding.

Common mistakes

- Using one vowel for both members of a pair, so 'ship' and 'sheep' sound the same.
- Making short vowels too long — length alone will not fix the quality difference.
- Adding a glide to /e/ and /o/ where English wants a pure or diphthongal sound.
- Over-pronouncing unstressed vowels instead of reducing them to schwa /ə/.

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)

/i:/ long — sheep		
sheep	/ʃi:p/	SHEEP
beach	/bi:tʃ/	BEECH
seat	/si:t/	SEET
leave	/li:v/	LEEV
feel	/fi:l/	FEEL
piece	/pi:s/	PEES

/ɪ/ short — ship		
ship	/ʃɪp/	SHIP
bit	/bɪt/	BIT
sit	/sɪt/	SIT
live	/lɪv/	LIV
fill	/fɪl/	FIL
business	/'bɪz.nəs/	BIZ-nuhs

/æ/ vs /ɛ/ — bad and bed		
bad	/bæd/	BAD
bed	/bed/	BED
man	/mæn/	MAN
men	/men/	MEN
sand	/sænd/	SAND
send	/send/	SEND
axe	/æks/	AKS
expect	/ɪk'spekt/	ik-SPEKT

/ʊ/ vs /u:/ and /ʌ/ vs /ɑ:/		
full	/fʊl/	FUUL
fool	/fu:l/	FOOL
pull	/pʊl/	PUUL
pool	/pu:l/	POOL
could	/kʊd/	KUUD
cooed	/ku:d/	KOOD
cup	/kʌp/	KUP
carp	/kɑ:rp/	KARP
color	/'kʌl.ə/	KUL-ur
collar	/'kɑ:.lə/	KAH-lur

Minimal pairs

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

A	B	What to listen for
ship	sheep	short and relaxed vs long and smiling
bit	beat	same contrast, final /t/
bed	bad	half-open vs wide-open jaw
full	fool	loose lips vs tight rounding
cot	caught	merged in many accents — pick one and be consistent
walk	work	back vowel vs r-coloured vowel

Sentence ladders

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

- 1 sheep
- 2 three sheep
- 3 **Three sheep slipped off the ship's steep steps.**

- 1 bad
- 2 a bad bed
- 3 **Ten men said the bed was bad and the sand was damp.**

- 1 fool
- 2 a full pool
- 3 **The pool was full, so a fool pulled the pull-cord.**

- 1 beat
- 2 a steady beat
- 3 **It is a bit of a beat, and I live to leave it.**

Twisters for this sound

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

Only oily olive omelets offered Otto odd odors.

MEDIUM · sound focus: o

Hugh handled honey hassle ham high helping hands.

MEDIUM · sound focus: h

An octopus in an orchard eats oranges over oceans.

MEDIUM · sound focus: o

Hattie's hot honey ham hash hit high heat hastily.

MEDIUM · sound focus: h

Olive often over-oiled Oliver's only onion omelet.

MEDIUM · sound focus: o

Young Yolanda yielded yummy yellow yams yesterday.

EASY · sound focus: y

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/vowel-pairs