

# The vowel sounds

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Vowels are open sounds. That means there is no contact between your articulators while you make the sound; your tongue and lips don't touch each other or anything else. This is different from the consonant sounds where there is always an obstruction to the airflow, by the lips or by the tongue. You should be able to create the shape of a vowel and sustain it for as long as you want. You change from one vowel to another by moving your lips and tongue.

Because vowel sounds have no contact points in the mouth it can be harder to feel how your articulators make the sounds. But you do need to learn this in order to create the vowels accurately and consistently. Start by working in front of a mirror so that you can be confident that you are shaping the sounds accurately. You may be surprised to find that what you are actually doing is not the same as what you think you are doing.

## Monophthongs and diphthongs

There are two different kinds of vowel: *Monophthongs* (see pages 54–77) and *Diphthongs* (see pages 81–88).

A monophthong is only one sound (*mono* means one) so your lips and tongue do not move at all during the sound and it is the same sound from the beginning to the end. For example, in the word 'sheep', the /i:/ made by the *ee* is a monophthong.

There are two types of monophthong: those with long sounds and those with shorter sounds. Each unit will tell you if the sound is long or short. But, in general, there will always be a mix of long and short sounds in anything you say, and your speech will be filled with contrasts between the two.

The prefix *di* means two so the *diphthongs* contain two different sounds. They require your lips and tongue to move from one sound into the other. This is explained in a lot more detail in *An introduction to diphthongs* (pages 78–80).

## Shaping the vowel sounds

Look at the diagram on the next page. You can use it to help shape your vowel sounds.

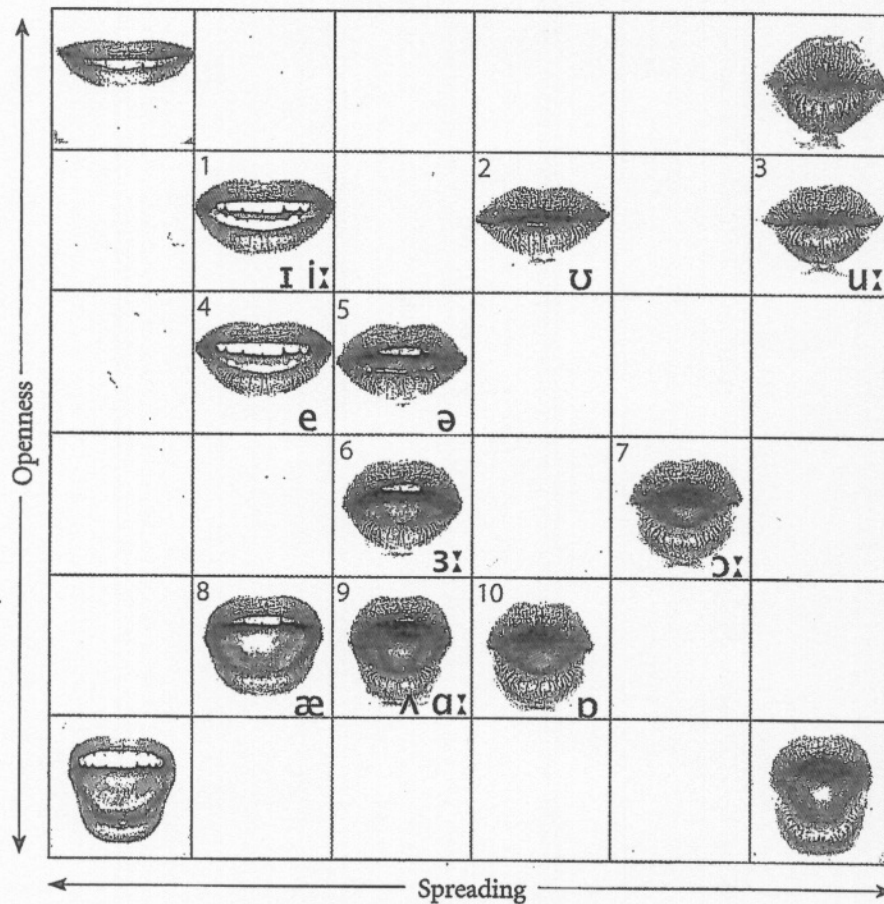
On the left-hand side of the grid are the sounds with very widely spread lips, and on the right are the sounds with very strongly rounded lips.

At the top of the grid are sounds with the least space above your tongue, and at the bottom are sounds with the most space above your tongue.

The shapes in the four corners of the grid are the most extreme shapes possible and none of these are used to make RP vowel sounds. This grid will help you to understand how the mouth shapes for all the sounds relate to each other.

In the *Make the sound* section of each unit, you will see a 'grid reference' – this number shows you where on the chart that vowel goes. It will help you to learn exactly how your mouth should look, in relation to the other vowels around it, in order to get the mouth position exactly right.

### Vowel positioning diagram



### More tips for using the vowels section

Vowels are strongly affected by the sounds around them as they glide from one to another so the shape of a vowel may alter slightly depending on what comes before or after. First practise the sounds on their own, and then build up to words and sentences.

Vowels can be particularly confusing to non-native speakers of English because the spellings can be varied and often misleading. When you are working through these units, try to aim for consistency with each sound, regardless of the spelling.

*Ashson & Shepherd 2012: 53*