

# Diphthongs in RP

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The vowel sounds covered in units 19–30 were all monophthongs – single sounds. The group of vowel sounds we’re going to look at now are diphthongs – vowels that are made up of two different sounds. To pronounce a diphthong correctly, you must see and feel the articulators move from the first sound to the second sound. The starting position of the sound is different to the final position.

For example, let’s look at the word ‘noon’. The lips and tongue are in the same position for the whole of the /u:/ monophthong: the oo part. Now let’s compare that with the word ‘noun’. There are two distinct vowel sounds in this word, and the articulators move from an open sound to a lip-rounded sound.

Remember: we are not introducing entirely new sounds – we are just combining existing ones. You already know how to make each individual vowel sound (from Units 19–30); all you have to learn now is how to put them together. So refer back to the monophthongs section whenever you need to. The relevant monophthongs are referenced in each unit.

## Combining two sounds

In a diphthong, the first sound is always stronger than the second. Because of this, it can be tempting to shorten the sound by leaving the weaker, second sound out, or by making just one sound that is somewhere between the two. This often feels more fluent to learners but it is important that these vowels *always contain a movement*, however small.

To start, it is often easier to think of them as two separate sounds as this will ensure you make both. But remember, a diphthong is technically considered to be one sound, so each component sound should slide smoothly from one to another. In natural speech, there should be no break between the two.

## Spelling

One of the big problems for learners is that the spelling of diphthongs can be very confusing and there are very few rules to help. Try and memorize a few words with different spellings for each diphthong. As before, we’ve listed the common spellings in each diphthong unit.

## Am I doing something wrong?

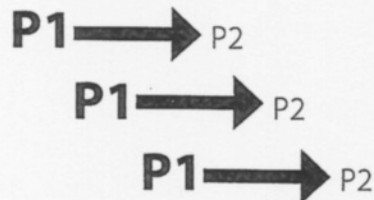
In the diphthong units there are no *Am I doing something wrong?* sections. This is because the mistakes speakers make tend to be the same for all the diphthongs rather than different for each sound. Like the monophthongs, they also do not tend to change depending on your native language.

Instead, we have identified four main errors (A–D) which are general to most learners and have suggested exercises which help with each. You can apply these to any or all of the diphthongs wherever you feel you are struggling. Some of the exercises may seem a little

laborious, especially if you have a high language level, but it is essential to make clear diphthongs if you are to be understood. Think of it as building the foundations of a house – if you don't get the foundations right, even the most beautiful house can fall down!

## Error A

- X** Many speakers turn diphthongs into a single sound (a monophthong).
- ✓**
- 1 Begin by reminding yourself how to make the two sounds of the diphthong (i.e. the two monophthongs).
  - 2 Make sure that you have a mirror and the DVD in front of you.
  - 3 Position your articulators for the first sound. This is Position 1. In the units we call it P1. Be clear and precise.
  - 4 Position your articulators for the second sound, P2. Note the difference in position between the first and second sounds. Does the mouth start closed and finish open? Or vice versa?
  - 5 Put the two sounds together. Start at P1 and move *slowly* to P2. Keep making sound throughout – the sound we make as we move from P1 to P2 is part of the diphthong. Repeat until you are confident you are making both P1 and P2 correctly.
  - 6 The first part of the diphthong is always stronger, and the second part is weaker. Still looking in the mirror, try making the P1 long and loud, P2 quick and quiet.



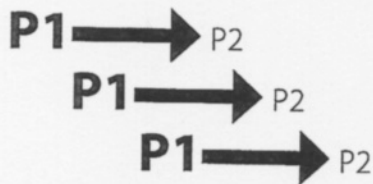
- 7 Finally, add some consonants either side to make sure you are maintaining a clear movement within words. You will naturally speed up when you are speaking full words and sentences, so the movement may feel smaller – but be sure it's still there. If it's not, repeat the steps above.
- 8 Record yourself and compare with the audio tracks in each unit.

## Error B

- X** Creating a dramatic shift between sounds rather than a smooth glide. This mistake is usually created by forgetting the sliding quality of the diphthong, and sharply breaking the vowel into its two component sounds.
- ✓**
- 1 Follow points 1 to 5 in error A (above). Make sure you are being precise with your two sounds.
  - 2 Really focus on step 5 and check that you are making a gentle, gradual slide from the first position to the second.
  - 3 Try saying some words that contain this sound, and check that they are remaining the same as when you practised them on their own. If not, then start again and slowly introduce consonants.

## Error C

- X** Emphasizing the wrong half of the diphthong. This is a rhythmic issue. It may not seem like a big problem, but the importance of rhythm in English is huge and even the smallest rhythmic error can disrupt understanding. Remember, the first sound, P1, is always the strongest.
- ✓**
- 1 Start tapping your fingers in a STRONG-weak rhythm.
  - 2 Repeat the words 'STRONG, weak, STRONG, weak, STRONG, weak', as you tap, to help you vocalize the rhythm.
  - 3 Now change from the words to the sounds of the diphthong you are practising. Keep tapping!



- 4 Check you have the rhythmic balance correct by recording and playing back.
- 5 Add in some consonants to make some words. You can still tap if it helps.
- 6 Habits can be hard to break, so if your balance shifts back, repeat the instructions above but use words with your diphthong all the way through.

## Error D

- X** Using the wrong component sounds to make the diphthong.
- ✓**
- 1 Double check the component sounds of the diphthong by turning back to the relevant pages for each of the components.
  - 2 Check that you are still pronouncing both of the component sounds accurately when you combine them together to make the diphthong.
  - 3 Double check that you are still using the right pronunciation, no matter how the word is spelt.

**Remember** that all or just some of these processes can be useful with all or some of the diphthongs. Refer back to these pages whenever you are having difficulty.