



Australian English pronunciation

Pronunciation can only be improved by using it – so the most important advice is to talk, talk and talk:

- get involved in tutorial discussions
- make friends with your neighbours
- join a club or society that you're interested in
- speak with other students (both local and international)
- read aloud from books, newspapers, etc. for practice

Many international students think their pronunciation is bad and embarrassing – and are nearly always wrong. Remember, speaking's much more relaxed than writing and you're among friends.

Pronunciation has three levels:

- (a) individual sounds
- (b) joining sounds into words
- (c) joining words into complete expressions

This is a short explanation/advice for each level. More detailed versions are on ALS's Blackboard site.

Sounds

You make each sound using your mouth, so the challenge is always *which* part of your mouth you use and *how* you use it. Most sounds are **consonants** – that is, made by moving parts of your mouth. The consonant “b”, for example, is made by pressing your lips together then breaking them open with air. Some common consonant difficulties are

- **a sound not in your first language.** Several sounds cause problems; the most common is “th” (e.g. “with” and “then”). Those are actually slightly different sounds. To make the first, bite the tip of your tongue, hold it between your teeth, and breathe out. To make the second, do the same thing (a bit harder) but pull your tongue free as you make the sound.
- **mixing up sounds.** Two common mix-ups are “v”/“w” (especially for German speakers) and “n”/“l” (especially for Mandarin speakers). To make a “v” sound, press your two top teeth hard into your lower lip, then pull them back across your lip as you make the sound. To make a “w” sound, press your lips in tight as if you're about to kiss someone, and pull your mouth open as you make the sound. To make a “n” sound, press your tongue against the top of your mouth (so it stops air moving through your mouth) then breathe out through your nose as you make the sound. And to make a “l” sound, press the tip of your tongue against the top of your mouth but pull the edges in, so air can move as you breathe out. You can feel the difference between all those sounds.
- **running sounds together.** In some languages, consonants can't go together (e.g. “McDonalds” is difficult for Hindi or Japanese speakers, because “mcd” and “lds” are impossible in those languages). If your first language is like that, try making the sounds between the consonants as short and soft as you can. Alternatively, remember that consonants are just movements in the mouth, so try shifting immediately from one movement to the other. For instance, “m” is made by pressing your lips together and “k” by pulling your tongue backward, so start moving your tongue while your lips are still together. It's like gymnastics – and becomes easier over time.

The other type of sound, **vowels**, are made by holding your tongue in a position ((top, middle or bottom) + (front, middle or back)), and holding your lips in a particular shape. Don't move them; just let the air come out and make the sound.

Consonants are easier, because you know exactly which lips or teeth or throat to use. Vowels are a bit more difficult, because your lips and tongue make a *slightly* different shape each time. Practice saying these words to yourself, a recorder, or a friend who can tell you whether the sounds are OK.

Consonants

Sound	Example
b	boy
bl-	blue
br-	brie
d	do
dr-	dry
f	fear
fl-	fly
fr-	free
-ft	after
g	go
gl-	glue
gr-	grow
h	he
dzh	jaw
k	key
kl-	clay
kr-	cry
-kt	act
l	lie
-ld	old
-lt	alter

Sound	Example
m	me
-mp	amp
n	no
-nd	and
-ng	sing
-nk	ink
-nt	ant
-nz	wins
p	pay
pl-	play
pr-	pray
-pt	apt
kw-	queer
r	row
s	say
sk-	sky
skr-	screw
skw-	squire
sl-	slow
sm-	smear
sn-	snow

Sound	Example
sp-	spear
st-	steer
str-	straw
sw-	sway
-st	east
sh	she
shr-	shrug
t	tea
tsh-	chew
tr-	tree
th-	bath
Heavy th-	the
thr-	throw
v	vie
w	way
ks	axe
-kst	texta
-kstr-	extra
y	you
z	easy
zh-	Asia

Vowels

Sound	Example
Short a	back
Short e	head
Short i	pick
Short o	bob
Short u	run
Long e	seat
Long u (Amer)	food
Short oo	good
ore	saw
ah	part

Sound	Example
er	her
neutral vowel	the
Long a	day
Long i	tie
Long o	slow
Long u (Brit)	new
ow	how
oi	coin
ear	here
air	care

Words

When you're comfortable with sounds, you can run them together into blocks, called syllables. A syllable is a group of sounds with only one vowel (one vowel *sound*! – spelling doesn't matter), like "at" or "pick". Sometimes a single syllable can be a word, like those two examples). More often, you can join several syllables to create longer words, like "attitude" or "pictorial". In those examples, "attitude" has three syllables (at / ti / tude) and "pictorial" has four syllables (pic / tor / ri / al). It helps to think of the words like song lyrics, with the syllables in a regular rhythm.

When a word has more than one syllable, some syllables become stronger and heavier (called "stress"). For instance, in "attitude" the first syllable is stressed ("ATtitude") and in "pictorial" the second syllable is stressed ("picTORial"). This is important, because in unstressed syllables the vowel sound often turns into a different sound, called the neutral vowel¹. To be easily understood, make sure you change the right vowels to neutral. For example, the second syllable in "attitude" has a neutral vowel. This makes the word sound like "AT ter tyood". Say each syllable alone, then all of them together. That's a good way to become comfortable with new, long or difficult words. Stressing the right syllable is very important – stressing the wrong syllable, like "er TAI tude", is almost impossible to understand.

If don't know which syllable to stress, check your dictionary. Entries usually include a phonetic (sound-based) spelling of the word, marking the stressed syllable with an apostrophe ('). For example, the entry for "pictorial" includes "pɪk'to:riəl" to show the stress is on "tor". A good idea is to analyse – then practice – necessary words you find difficult, especially jargon in your courses.

Complete speech

Usually, you'll run words together when you speak. When you do that, shorter words (like "the" and "of") will automatically organise the stress so it makes a general sort of pattern. That should happen naturally and doesn't need to be practiced. Another change, which does take practice, is that words run their sounds together, to close the gap between them. To take an example, it sounds strange to say

Australians all let us rejoice

as five separate words. Native speakers are much more likely to say

Au-stray lian-zor leh-dus red-joyce.

That is, when you speak, you should separate your sentences into syllables, *not* words. Then, let the syllables run together if it feels more comfortable. In this example, "Australiansall" moves from a consonant to a vowel. That's easier to say if the two sounds are together, so the "z" sound leaves "Australians" and becomes part of "all". The same thing happens between the other words. Running words together so they're easier to say can feel weird, but it sounds more natural and native. Of course, you can judge whether that's more important than being perfectly clear. In a conversation with friends, naturalness matters more. In an academic presentation, clarity matters more – it's all about the situation.

¹ To make a neutral vowel, just let your tongue sit in the middle of your mouth (not top or bottom or front or back) and let the noise come out. The "er" at the end of "carpenter" or "computer" is a good example.

Another useful trick is intonation – your voice going up (like Mariah Carey) or down (like Louis Armstrong). Generally, keep your voice even with no movement up or down except before a pause (i.e. before a fullstop, question mark, comma, brackets, etc.). Then, your voice goes down on the last syllable. The only time your voice goes up on the last syllable is when you're asking a Yes/No type of question. So your voice goes down on "free" in the first example but up in the second one.

There's a parking space <u>free</u> .	↓
Is there a parking space <u>free</u> ?	↑

Interestingly, the intonation can mean more than the words. If you try it the other way around

There's a parking space <u>free</u> ?	↑
Is there a parking space <u>free</u> ?	↓

the first one becomes a question (even though the grammar says it's a sentence) and the second one becomes a rhetorical question – that is, it doesn't want an answer, only confirmation, and works like a sentence.

The last thing to consider is your tone of voice. One big problem for many people is shyness or nervousness, which can make a person speak too fast and too high. If you feel nervous, speaking a little lower and a little more slowly can help you sound more confident. By contrast, speaking fast and loudly can make you sound excited, while just speaking loudly can make you sound angry. If you want to sound like a good communicator, speaking fast or slow doesn't matter but you should try to keep an even, regular speed without sudden stops and starts. A low voice often suggests authority, and slow speaking often suggests you're thinking carefully and you want your listeners to do the same. That's only a few examples, but you see the point: speed, volume and pitch all affect the way you communicate. Even though clarity and accuracy are more important, think about what you want other people to regard you, and adapt your speaking style to that.

To finish where I started, talk as much as possible – the more you speak, the more comfortable you'll be with these patterns and systems. Some people like to record their own voice so they can listen back to it. Always remember communication should be interesting and enjoyable; you've got good ideas, and pronunciation helps people concentrate more on your argument itself. Think about what you want to use your speaking skills for; that will help you direct your style and practice to achieve it.