

Chapter 3

Meeting the IPA: Your New Secret Code

In This Chapter

- ▶ Taking a closer look at the symbols
- ▶ Zipping around the chart
- ▶ Recognizing the sounds
- ▶ Seeing why the IPA is better than spelling

The *International Phonetic Alphabet* (IPA) is a comprehensive symbol set that lets you transcribe the sounds of any language in the world. The *International Phonetic Association*, a group of phoneticians who meet regularly to adjust features and symbols, revises and maintains the IPA, making sure that all world languages are covered. Many IPA symbols come from Latin characters and resemble English (such as, /b/), so you'll probably feel fairly comfortable with them. However, other symbols may seem foreign to you, such as /ʃ/ or /ŋ/. In this chapter, I show you how to write, understand, and pronounce these IPA characters.



Although most alphabets are designed to represent only one language (or a small set of languages), the IPA represents the sounds of any of the languages in the world. An *alphabet* is any set of letters or symbols in which a language is written. When people speak more specifically of the alphabet, they usually refer to today's system of writing (the ABCs) that has been handed down from the ancient Near East. The word "alphabet" comes from the Greek letters *alpha beta*, and from the Hebrew letters *aleph* and *bet*.

The history of the IPA (not a beer or a terrorist organization)

In 1886, a group of language teachers met in Paris to help school children learn to read and to better pronounce foreign languages. The group eventually became known as the Association Phonétique Internationale (or in English, The International

Phonetic Association). The group soon made it its goal to create a universal alphabet to describe the sounds of any language in the world. After 125 years of work and numerous revisions, it came up with today's sophisticated version of the IPA.

Eyeballing the Symbols

When you examine the full IPA chart (see Figure 3-1 or check out www.langsci.ucl.ac.uk/ipa/IPA_chart_%28C%292005.pdf), you can see a few hundred different symbols. However, please don't panic! You only need a fraction of them to transcribe English. In these sections, I introduce them to you first. Like the Periodic Table you may have studied in chemistry class, you can also master the basic principles of the IPA chart without getting hung up in all the details. After you master the basics, you can later focus on any other symbols you need.



Each IPA symbol represents unique *voicing* (whether the vocal folds are active during sound production), *place of articulation* (where in the vocal tract a sound is made), and *manner of articulation* (how a sound is produced) for consonants. For vowels, each IPA symbol represents *height* (tongue vertical positioning), *advancement* (tongue horizontal positioning), and *lip-rounding* specifications (whether the lips are protruded for sound production). Refer to Chapter 6 for more information on English consonant features, and Chapter 7 for English vowel features.

Latin alphabet symbols

See if you can begin by spotting the Latin alphabet symbols. They're among the group of symbols labeled with a No. 1 in Figure 3-1, called *pulmonic consonants*. The Latin alphabet symbols include these lower-case characters (/p/, /b/, /m/, /f/, /v/, /t/, /d/, /n/, /s/, /z/, /l/, /c/, /j/, /k/, /g/, /x/, /q/, and /h/), and upper-case characters (/B/, /R/, /G/, /L/, and /N/).



The IPA isn't spelling. Although some of the IPA lower-case Latin symbols may match up pretty well with sounds represented by English letters (for instance, IPA /p/ and the letter "p" in "pit"), other IPA Latin symbols (/c/, /j/, /x/, /q/, /B/, /R/, /G/, /L/, and /N/) don't. For instance, IPA /q/ has nothing to do with the letter "q" in *quick* or *quiet*. Rather, /q/ is a throat sound not even found in English but present in Arabic and Sephardic Hebrew.

go directly to flash cards and match word sound with IPA symbol. (Refer to the later section “Why the IPA Trumps Spelling” for more information.)

Greek alphabet symbols

The IPA also contains some Greek alphabet symbols. If you’re familiar with Greek campus organizations, you may recognize some of them. For instance, consonant symbols include *phi* / ϕ /, *beta* / β /, *theta* / θ /, and *gamma* / γ /. Of these symbols, you find / θ / in the English words “*thing*,” “*author*,” and “*worth*.” Among the vowels, you can find *upsilon* / υ / and *epsilon* / ϵ /. You find these sounds in the words “*put*” and “*bet*.”

Made-up symbols

The majority of the IPA symbols are made-up characters. They’re symbols that have been flipped upside-down or sideways, or they have had hooks or curlicues stuck on their tops, bottoms, or sides. For example, the velar nasal stop consonant, “*eng*” (IPA character / $\ŋ$ /), consists of a long, curled right arm stuck onto a Latin “*n*.” Don’t you wish you could have been around when some of these characters were created?

The IPA also has some made-up vowel characters, at least for English speakers. For instance, the IPA mid-front rounded vowel is transcribed / $\ø$ /. This is a (lip) rounded version of the vowel / e /, found in Swedish. It sounds like saying the word “*bait*” while sticking your lips out, causing a lowered sound quality. This symbol resembles an “*o*” with a line slashed through it.

Another famous made-up vowel is the IPA mid-central vowel, / $\ə$ /, *schwa*. This character represents the unstressed sound “*uh*,” as in “*the*” and “*another*.”

Tuning In to the IPA

The IPA is broken down into six different parts, which I refer to as charts. Each chart represents different aspects of speech sound classification. Refer to Figure 3-1 to see the different charts. In the following sections, I take a closer look and describe them in greater detail.

Featuring the consonants

The top two charts of the IPA in Figure 3-1 represent the consonants of the world’s languages. *Consonants* are sounds made by partially or wholly blocking the oral airway during speech. The large chart (section No. 1) shows 59 different symbols listed in columns by place of articulation and in rows by manner of articulation. Wherever applicable, voiceless and voiced pairs of

sounds (such as /f/ and /v/) are listed side by side, with the voiceless symbol on the left and the voiced symbol on the right.

Because every IPA symbol is uniquely defined by its voicing, place, and manner (see Chapters 2 and 5 for more information), you're now ready to have some fun (and of course impress your friends and family!) by reading off the features for each symbol from the chart. Let me start you off. In the top left box, you can see that /p/ is a voiceless, bilabial plosive. Looking down the next column to the right, you see that /v/ is a voiced, labiodental fricative.



Are you confused and not sure how I came up with these descriptions? Just follow these steps to get them:

1. **Look up to the top of the column to get the consonant's place of articulation.**
2. **Look to the left side of the row to get the consonant's manner of articulation.**

If the character is on the left side of the cell, it's voiceless, otherwise it's voiced. If a character is in the middle (by itself), it's voiced.

3. **Put it all together and you have the consonant's voicing, place, and manner of articulation.**



Now it's your turn. Name the voicing, place, and manner of the /h/ symbol in the column at the far right. Yes, /h/ is a voiceless, glottal fricative. Congratulations, you can now cruise to any part of the consonant chart and extract this kind of information. You need this important skill as you work on phonological rules (see Chapters 8 and 9).

Accounting for clicks

The second chart in Figure 3-1 (labeled No. 2) is for sounds produced very differently than in English. When these sounds are produced, air doesn't flow outward from the lungs, as is the case for most language sounds. Instead, air may be briefly moved from the larynx or the mouth. This chart covers the fascinating consonants of Zulu, the sucking-in sounds of Sindhi, and the popping sounds of Quechua, to name a few. Chapter 12 and the multimedia material (located at www.dummies.com/go/phoneticcsfd) give you some more exposure to these sounds.

Going round the vowel chart

The third chart in Figure 3-1 (labeled No. 3) is called a *vowel quadrilateral*, a physical layout of vowels as produced in the mouth (refer to Figure 3-2 for a better idea what this looks like). In this chart, vowels are represented by how close the tongue is held to the top of the mouth, also known as being *high*. In contrast, the vowel may be produced with an open vocal tract, also known as placing

the tongue *low*. In terms of horizontal direction, the tongue can be described as positioned at the *front*, *central*, or *back* part of the mouth. Where the symbols are paired, the rightmost symbol is produced with the lips rounded (or protruded). Lip rounding has the effect of giving the vowel a lowered, rather hollow sound.

Figure 3-2:
Vowel quad-
rilateral
superim-
posed on
a person's
vocal tract.

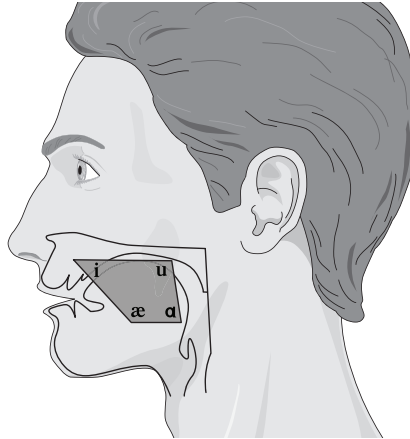


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Marking details with diacritics

The next chart I focus on in Figure 3-1 addresses the diacritics. (I skip over the chart called “Other symbols,” which is a very specialized section.) *Diacritics* (in Chart 4, labeled No. 4) are small helper marks made through or near a phonetic character to critically alter its value. For instance, if you look at the top-left box of this chart, you can see that a small circle, [◌], placed under any IPA character, indicates that the sound is produced with a voiceless quality. In other words, if you need to transcribe a normally voiced sound, such as /n/ or /d/ that was produced as voiceless, you can use the diacritic [◌].

Stressing and breaking up with suprasegmentals

The fifth chart in Figure 3-1 (labeled No. 5), called *suprasegmentals*, lists the IPA symbols used to describe syllables and words, that is, chunks of speech larger than individual consonants and vowels. This chart includes ways of marking stress, length, intonation, and syllable breaks. For example, the IPA indicates primary stress by placing a small vertical mark in front of the syllable, like this for the word “syllable” /ˈsɪləbəl/. Here, the IPA is different than some books and dictionaries that underline or bold the stressed syllable (like this: **syllable** or syllable). I describe this level of phonetics in more detail in Chapter 10.

What are those other symbols?

The IPA section called “other symbols” is designed to cover sounds that don’t quite fit in elsewhere. Some of the sounds are produced with two simultaneous constrictions in the vocal tract and thus can’t be easily placed in the first section of the IPA. These double-articulations include /w/, /ɬ/, /tʃ/, and /tʂ/. Other sounds have special combinations of manner features that require them being singled out for special designation (/ç/, /ʒ/, and /ʝ/). Three sounds in this group (/ɣ/, /ʁ/, and /ʀ/) are produced at the

lowest section of the vocal tract, the epiglottis. I provide more information on all of these other sounds in Chapter 16.

Beginning phonetics students are sometimes mortified by the fact that the chart has so many diacritics. You don’t have to panic because you only need a small subset to transcribe English. After you begin to see how the diacritic system works, figuring out new characters becomes easier.

Touching on tone languages

The sixth part of Figure 3-1 (labeled No. 6) details special symbols needed for languages known as *tone languages* (such as Vietnamese, Mandarin, Yoruba, or Igbo) in which the *pitch* (high versus low sound) of different syllables and words alter the meaning. This concept may seem odd to monolingual English speakers, because English doesn’t have such a system. For example, saying a word in a high squeaky voice versus saying the same word in a much lower voice doesn’t change the meaning. However, English-speakers are in the minority, because most of the people of the world speak tone languages. The IPA has a uniform system to mark these tones in terms of their height *level* (from extra low to extra high) and their *contour* (rising, falling, rising-falling, and so forth). Chapter 15 describes tone languages in greater detail.

Sounding Out English in the IPA

The best way to familiarize yourself with the IPA is to practice the different sounds. Practicing can help you understand how these sounds differ and why the IPA chart is organized as it is. Speaking and hearing the sounds can also help you remember them. These sections explain how to make the sounds for the different English IPA sounds.

Cruising the English consonants

Consonants are the first place to start when sounding out the English symbols using the IPA. Figure 3-3 shows the consonants of English.

Manner	Voicing		Place of articulation							
	Voiced (+)	Voiceless (-)	Bilabial	Labio-Dental	Dental	Alveolar	Palato-Alveolar	Palatal	Velar	Glottal
Stop (nasal)	+	-	m			n			ŋ	
Stop (oral)		-	p			t			k	
Stop (oral)	+	-	b			d			g	
Fricative		-		f	θ	s	ʃ			h
Fricative	+	-		v	ð	z	ʒ			
Affricate		-					tʃ			
Affricate	+	-					dʒ			
Approximant		-	ɹ						ɻ	
Approximant	+	-	w			ɹ		j	w	
(lateral)	+	-				l			ɭ	

Figure 3-3:
The consonants of English.



To know how to identify one IPA symbol from another, focus on working with a minimal pair. A *minimal pair* is when two words differ by only one meaningful sound. For example, /bæt/ and /bit/ (“bat” and “beet”), or /bæt/ and /bæd/ (“bat” and “bad”). Minimal pairs help people identify *phonemes*, the smallest unit of sound that changes meaning in language. If you become stuck in hearing a particular sound (such as /ŋ/), you may form minimal pair contrasts (such as /sɪn/ and /sɪŋ/ (“sin” and “sing”), to make things clearer.

Here I work through Figure 3-3, column by column. The first column, /m/, /p/, and /b/ are a cinch — they sound like they’re spelled in English, as in “mat,” “pat,” and “bat.” All three of these consonants are *stops* (sounds made by blocking air in the oral cavity), the first being nasal, and the last two being oral. Notice at the bottom of the bilabial column you also find symbols /w/ and /ɹ/ — that are also placed in the velar columns. The sounds /w/ and /ɹ/ (voiced and voiceless) are considered *labiovelar*, that is articulations made simultaneously at the labial and velar places of articulation. Such articulations are called *double articulations* and are relatively complex (notice, for example, that young children acquire /w/ sounds relatively late in acquisition).

You make the /w/ sounds with your lips puckered and the tongue held toward the back of your mouth, as in “wet” or “William.” To get a better sense, try to say “wet” without letting your lips go forward — or while holding your tongue tip against your teeth to keep your tongue forward in your mouth. (Doing so is darn near impossible.) Because these double articulated sounds are awkward to fit into the consonant place of articulation chart, they’re more typically listed in the Other Sounds section of the IPA. (Refer to Chapter 16 for more information.)



The sound /ɹ/ is like a /w/, but without voicing. Instead of “witch,” sounds with /ɹ/ rather sound like “hwitch.” In fact, at one point the IPA used the symbol “hw” instead of /ɹ/. (I still don’t know why they switched!) Some speakers of American English alternate between /w/ and /ɹ/ in expressions such as “Which witch is which?” (with the middle “witch” being voiced and the others not). If these examples work for you, super! If not, listen to the examples listed in the bonus multimedia material at www.dummies.com/go/phoneticsfd.

Moving to the next column, the labiodentals /f/ and /v/ should also be easy to transcribe. You can find the voiceless consonant /f/ in words such as “free,” “fire,” “phone,” and “enough.” You can find the voiced labiodentals fricative in “vibe,” “river,” and “Dave.”

Students often mix up the dental fricatives /θ/ and /ð/. You can find the voiceless /θ/ in words, such as “thigh,” “thick,” “method,” and “bath.” Meanwhile, you can find the voiced fricative /ð/ in words, such as “those,” “this,” “lather,” “brother,” “lathe,” and “breathe.” You can always sneak your hand up over your larynx (to the Adam’s apple), and if you feel a buzz, it’s the voiced /ð/.



When you’re discovering and mastering new IPA sounds and symbols, I suggest you try them out in all *contexts* (positions in a word) — that is, the beginning, middle, and end. These positions are called word *initial*, *medial*, and *final*. Here are a couple examples:

<i>IPA Symbol</i>	<i>Initial</i>	<i>Medial</i>	<i>Final</i>
/p/	pat	appear	rip
/f/	fin	afraid	sheaf

Some sounds can’t appear in all three positions. For example, the velar nasal consonant /ŋ/ can’t begin a word in English. Also, /t/ and /d/ sometimes become a tap in medial position. A *tap* is a very rapid stop sound made by touching one articulator against another, such as the very short “t” sound in “Betty.” Refer to Chapter 9 for more information on these rules.

Acing the alveolar symbols

Many consonant sounds are made at that handy-dandy bump at the roof of your mouth, the *alveolar ridge*. These sounds include /t/, /d/, /n/, /s/, /z/, /l/, and /l/. I describe these sounds in the following list.

- ✓ **/t/ and /d/:** The case of /t/ and /d/ is interesting. These sounds are pretty straightforward in most positions of American English. Thus, you can find /t/ in “tick,” “steel,” and “pit,” and you can find /d/ in words, such as “dome,” “cad,” “drip,” and “loved.” However, in *medial* position (the middle of a word), American English has a tendency to change a regular /t/ or /d/ into something called a *tap* or *flap*, which means an articulator rapidly moves against another under the force of the airstream, without enough time to build up any kind of burst, such that it sounds like a fully formed stop consonant. For example, notice that the /t/ in “Betty” isn’t the same /t/ as in “bet” — it sounds something like a cross between a /t/ and a /d/ — a short, voiced event. Chapter 9 discusses in great depth the cases when this sound happens.
- ✓ **/n/:** Some sounds, such as /n/, are easy for beginning transcribers to work with because their sounds are easy to spot. You find /n/ in the words “nice,” “pan,” and “honor.”

- ✓ /s/ and /z/: The fricatives are also relatively straightforward, as in /s/ found in “sail,” “rice,” “receipt,” and “fits,” and /z/ found in “zipper,” “fizz,” and “runs.” But did you notice you can be fooled by spelling, as in “runs” which is spelled with an “s” but actually has a /z/ sound?
- ✓ /ɹ/ and /ɻ/: These are two additional consonants made at the alveolar place of articulation. *Approximants* are sounds made by bringing the articulators together close enough to shape airflow but not so close that air is stopped or that friction is caused (check out Chapter 6). You can find the consonant /ɹ/ in the words “rice,” “careen,” and “croak.” Notice that this IPA symbol is like the letter “r,” except turned upside down, because the right-side up IPA symbol, /r/, indicates a trilled (rolled) “r,” as in the Spanish word “burro.” Some phonetics textbooks incorrectly let you get away with transcribing English using /r/ instead of /ɹ/, but I recommend forming good habits and using /ɹ/ whenever possible!



Saying, “I’m chilling with phonetics” isn’t completely inaccurate, because sucking in cool air while holding the mouth position for any given consonant is an effective way to feel where your articulators are. Try it with the *lateral* alveolar consonant, /l/. Make the /l/ of the syllable “la,” and hold the /l/ while sucking in air through your mouth. You should feel cool air around the sides of your tongue, showing that this is a *lateral* (made with the sides) sound. You may also notice a kind of Daffy Duck-like slurpy sound quality when you attempt it.

In the same column, under /ɹ/ you can see the symbol /l/. You can make a lateral sound by passing air around the sides of the tongue, which is different than most sounds, which are *central*, with airflow passing through the middle of the vocal tract. The consonant /l/ is another interesting case that occupies two columns in the consonant chart for English — you can also find it in the velar column.

There are actually two slightly different flavors of /l/:

- **Light /l/:** This one is produced at the alveolar ridge. You can always find the light l at the beginning of a syllable. It has a higher sounding pitch. Some examples include “light,” “leaf,” and “load.”
- **Dark /ɫ/:** This one is produced at the back of the tongue. The dark l, also called *velarized*, is marked with a tilde diacritic /-/ through its middle. The dark l occurs at the end of a syllable and sounds lower in pitch. Some examples include “waffle,” “full,” and “call.”

Pulling back to the palate: Alveolars and palatals

The English *palato-alveolar* (or *post-alveolar*) consonants consist of two manners of articulation:

- ✓ **Fricatives:** The *fricatives* are represented by the voiceless character “esh” or “long s.” Words with this sound include “*sheep*,” “*nation*,” “*mission*,” “*wash*,” and “*sure*.” The voiced counterpart, “ezh” or “long z,” /ʒ/ is rarer in English, including words, such as “*measure*,” “*leisure*,” “*rouge*,” and “*derision*.” There are almost no cases of word-initial /ʒ/ sounds (except Zsa Zsa Gabor).
- ✓ **Affricates:** The *affricates* /tʃ/ and /dʒ/ are sounds that begin abruptly and then continue on a bit in hissy frication. Some examples of the voiceless /tʃ/ include “*chip*,” “*chocolate*,” “*feature*,” and “*watch*.” When a person voices this sound, it’s /dʒ/, as in “*George*,” “*region*,” “*midget*,” and “*judge*.” Again, if you have any problems knowing which is voiced and which is voiceless, reach up and feel your Adam’s apple to see whether you’re buzzing or not.

The palatal consonant /j/ is interesting. You can find this sound in words, such as “*yes*,” “*youth*,” and “*yellow*.” However, it also occurs in the words “*few*,” “*cute*,” and “*mute*.” To see why, here’s a minimal pair: /mut/ versus /mjut/, “*moot*” versus “*mute*.” You can see that “*mute*” begins with a palatalized /m/, having a palatal glide /j/ right after it. Slavic languages (like Russian and Polish) use palatalized consonants much more than English; in fact, when teaching English as a second language (ESL) to these speakers, breaking them of this habit can be quite a challenge.

Reaching way back to the velars and the glottis

Three additional stop consonants are in the velar column, the oral stops /k/ and /g/, and the nasal stop /ŋ/. Examples of /k/ include “*Carl*,” “*skin*,” “*excess*,” and “*rack*.” Examples of /g/ include “*girl*,” “*aggravate*,” and “*fog*.” Notice that /g/ corresponds with what some call “hard g,” not a “soft g.”

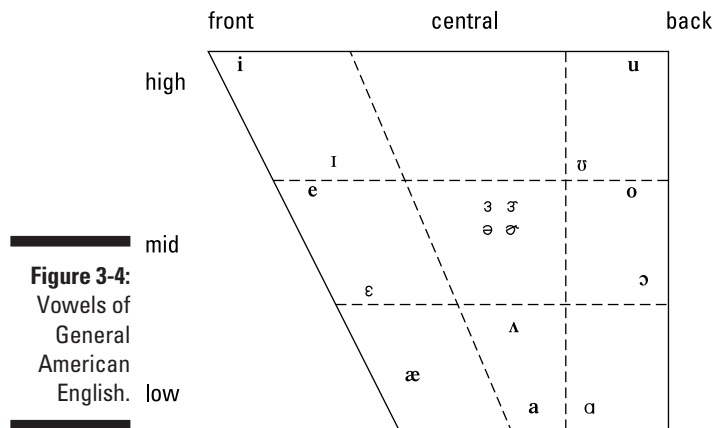
The last sound in the chart is what one might call “way down there.” That is, the glottal fricative, /h/. Your *glottis* is simply a hole or space between your vocal folds in your throat. When you cause air to hiss there, you get an “h” sound, as in “*hello*,” “*hot*,” “*who*,” and “*aha!*” In Chapter 2, I discuss making a stop with your glottis (a *glottal stop*, /ʔ/) — however, you don’t freely use this sound to make words in English; instead, it alternates and only appears under certain conditions. As such, glottal stop and flap are special sounds (called *allophones*) that aren’t included in the main chart.

Visualizing the GAE vowels

English vowels are more difficult to describe than English consonants because they’re produced with less precision of tongue positioning. Vowels differ systematically across major forms of English (such as American and British).

Between these two major dialects, one major difference is the presence or absence of *rhotacized* (r-colored) vowels. Whereas most GAE speakers would pronounce “brother” as /ˈbrʌðə/, most British speakers pronounce it as /ˈbrʌðə/. The difference is whether the final vowel has an r-like quality (such as /ɜ:/) or not (/ə/). Refer to Chapters 7 and 18 for more information about American and British vowel differences. Vowels typically differ across the dialects within any given type of English. For example, within American English think of the difference between a talker from New York City and one from Atlanta, Georgia. In British English, one would expect differences between speakers from London (in the south) and Liverpool (in the north).

Figure 3-4 is a chart of the vowels most commonly found in General American English (GAE).



In Figure 3-4, I use the terms *high* and *low* in place of IPA *close* and *open*. To keep things simple, I also use “h_d” words, as examples to capture the typical vowels produced by speakers of General American English.

Starting with the front vowels, say “heed,” “hid,” “hayed,” “head,” and “had.” These five words include examples of the front vowel series, from high to low. You can find the symbol /i/, lower case “i,” in the words “fleece,” “pea,” and “key.” A vowel slightly lower and more central is /ɪ/, “small capital I”, as in the words “thick,” “tip,” “illustrate,” and “rid.”

Say that you’re a speaker of English as a second language (ESL) and come from a language like Spanish that has /a/, /i/, /u/, /e/, and /o/ vowels (but not /æ/, /ɪ/, /ʊ/, /ɛ/, and /ɔ/ vowels). I discuss more about these vowel differences in Chapter 7. For now, you may need to work a bit extra to be able to identify these English sounds. Using minimal pairs is a good way to sharpen up your ears!

My Fair Lady. Famous phonetics story with an important message

A world-famous story dealing with phonetics is the musical *My Fair Lady*, based on the play, *Pygmalion*, by George Bernard Shaw. In this drama, a British phonetician, Henry Higgins, teaches a lower-class flower girl, Eliza Doolittle, to switch from her Cockney accent to proper English. This saga is a satire of the British class system, a love story, and a taste of phonetics, all in one.

The goal of changing someone's accent is called *prescription* (judging what is correct).

Today, linguists and phoneticians spend much less time *prescribing* how people should sound and more time *describing* how different languages and dialects do sound. There is still a market for foreign accent reduction, although a bit different than at the time of Eliza Doolittle. Also, as wonderful as the song is, clients aren't necessarily required to sing "The rain in Spain stays mainly in the plain." Refer to Chapter 1 for more information on prescribing and describing.

The symbol /e/ is a mid-front vowel, as in "sail," "ape," and "lazy." "You can find the symbol /ɛ/, *epsilon*, in the words "let," "sweater," "tell," and "ten." The low-front vowel, /æ/ is called *ash*. Phoneticians introduced this Old English Latin character into the IPA. To write an ash, follow the instructions in Figure 3-5.


















I			
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ʒ		θ	
ʊ		ð	
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ɑ		ʔ	

Figure 3-5:
How to draw some of the common made-up IPA symbols.

To master the symbols for the GAE back vowels, say “who’d,” “hood,” “hoed,” “hawed” (as in “hemmed and hawed”), and “hospital.” (You can also say “hod,” but few people know what a hod [coal scuttle] is anymore.) These words represent the back vowel series /u/, /ʊ/, /o/, /ɔ/, and /ɑ/, which I discuss here with some examples:

- ✓ /u/: You can find this high back vowel in the words “blue,” “cool,” and “refusal.”
- ✓ /ʊ/: This symbol has a Greek name, *upsilon*, and you form it by taking a lower case u and placing small handles on it. You can find this sound in “pull,” “book,” and “would.”
- ✓ /o/: The mid-back vowel can sometimes sound pretty much like it’s spelled. You can find it in words, such as “toe,” “go,” “own,” and “melodious.”
- ✓ /ɔ/: This mid-low vowel is called *open-o* and is written like drawing a “c” backwards. You can find this vowel in the words “saw,” “ball,” “awe,” and “law,” like most Americans pronounce.
- ✓ /ɑ/: You can find this low-back vowel, referred to as *script a*, in the words “father,” “psychology,” and “honor.”

You may have noticed a different flavor of the vowel “a,” in Figure 3-4, found slightly fronted to script a. This IPA /a/, “lower case a,” is used to indicate the beginning of the English diphthongs /aɪ/ and /aʊ/, as in “mile” and “loud.”

Why the IPA Trumps Spelling

When it comes to explaining language sounds, English spelling doesn’t have the power or the precision to deal with the challenge because there is a loose relationship between English letters and language sounds. Therefore, a given sound can be spelled many different ways. Here are some famous examples:

- ✓ The word “ghoti” could logically be pronounced like “fish.” That would be the “gh” of “enough,” the “o” of “women,” and the “ti” of “nation.” Playwright and phonetician George Bernard Shaw pointed out this example.
- ✓ The vowel sound in the word “eight” (transcribed with the symbol /e/ in IPA) can be spelled “ay,” “ea,” “au,” “ai,” “ey,” and “a (consonant) e” in English. If you don’t believe this, say the words “day,” “break,” “gauge,” “jail,” “they,” and “date.”
- ✓ Many languages have sounds that can’t be easily spelled. For instance, Zulu and Xhosa have a consonant that sounds like the clicking noise you make when encouraging a horse (“tsk-tsk”) and another consonant that sounds like a quick kiss.
- ✓ Most world languages convey meaning by having some syllables sound higher in pitch than other syllables.