

Singing Better Vowels

How many vowel sounds are used in the English language? A E I O U? 5 Right? Wrong! 12.

Vowel Categories

5 FRONT VOWELS-----

ee **ih** **ay** **eh** **aa**
Pete Jim Dave Ted Dan

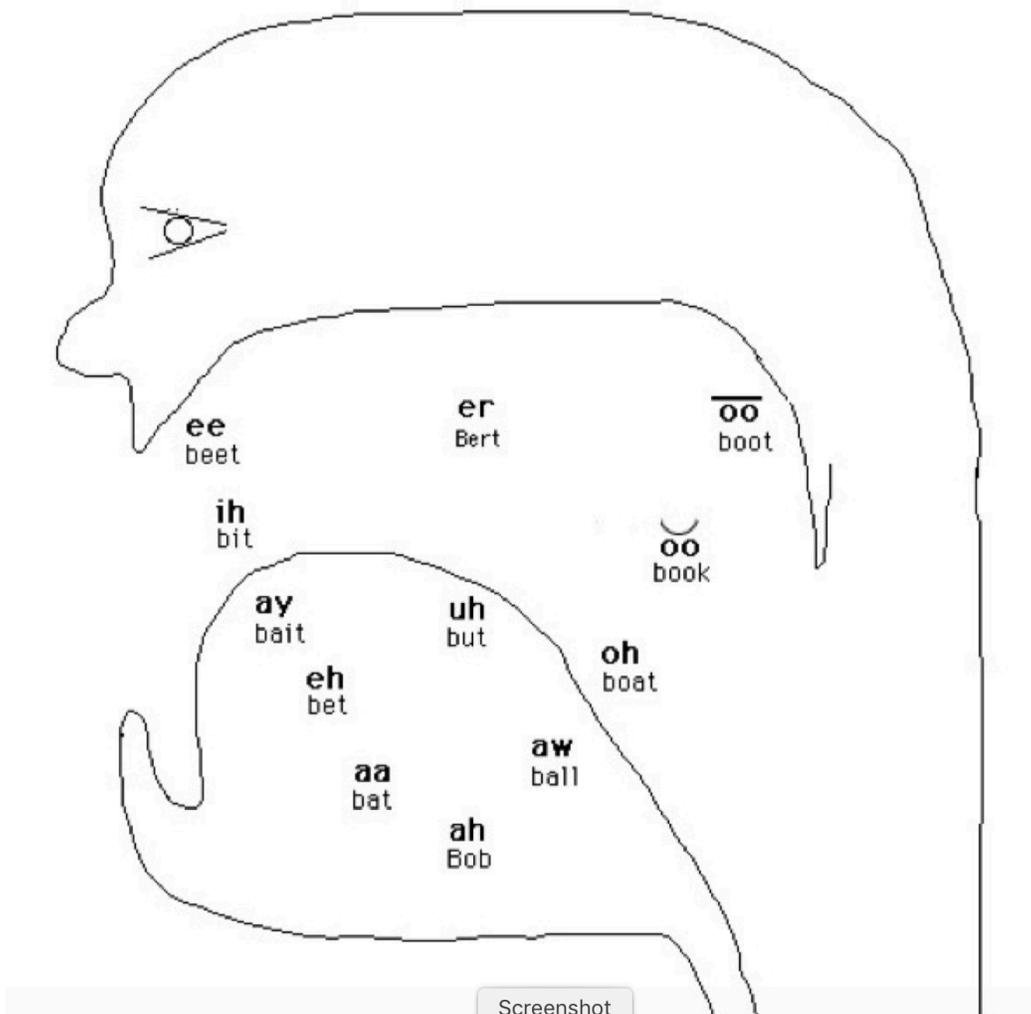
3 MIDDLE-----

ah **uh** **er**
Bob Bud Bert

4 BACK VOWELS-----

aw **oh** **oo** **oo**
Claude Joe Woody Lew

Vowel Placement



The above is a visualization of the back of the tongue position in the mouth that produces each of these vowel sounds. The only variant from this is the “long oo” sound of “boot” which, in addition to the tongue placement, requires lip protrusion.

Don’t be confused by the way we say the words used to describe the vowels in the English language: A E I O U. We say “A” as the diphthong (2 vowel sounds) “ay-ee”, “I” as “ah-ee” and “U” as “ee-oo. Here we are talking about pure single vowels not diphthongs.

Understanding the production position of the various vowels helps us to be clear and consistent in our diction and thus help our communication to our audience and to help produce the “lock and ring” associated with barbershop.

Vowel uniformity is often difficult to obtain in group singing. We not only come to the group with slight variations in dialects but also individuals are not consistent in producing vowel sound. For instance: for the word “Mom, is it pronounced “Mahm” or “Mawm”?

THE “ER” VOWEL

There are two particular vowel problems - both caused by the same thing - lack of long vertical mouth opening caused by the jaw not being down enough. Frequently we are lazy and just don’t open our jaws (not necessarily our lips) as much as necessary for optimum sound. Particularly the “er” vowel can be harsh if we don’t open our jaw enough. Sing or speak the following words making sure the sound is free with a lowered jaw.

“girl”, “sir”, “learn”, “turn”, “for”, (“four”), “adore”, “more”, “soar”, “Lord” “core”, “word”

LOWER VOWELS

We also tend to be lazy in opening up wide enough for the lower vowels of “ah”, “aw”, and “aa” . A deep open jaw will give you a fuller and richer tone.

AH: “Ma”, “Mom”, “Bob”, “John”, “sob”, “not”, “lot”, “hot”. “down”, “town” etc.

AW: “saw”. “call”. “fall”. “God”. “lawn” etc.

AA: “and”, “that”, “can”, “lad”, “mad”, “sad” etc.

Sing or say all these sound with both a high jaw and then a low jaw. You’ll notice the difference in the quality of sound. Then try to remember to always keep the jaw down.

Singing Better Diphthongs, Triphthongs & Quadthongs

An even more crucial aspect of vowels is when two or more vowels are combined together.

We call them diphthongs, triphthongs and even quadthongs. The goal is to sound every sound and that is a particular challenge when they are on short notes and need to be done quickly. There is always a “target vowel sound” which is the sound that the note is held on with the rest being performed quickly either at the beginning or and the end of the “- thong” word.

Sing or say the following words giving particular attention to the part of the word the category is about.

1. The End “ee”

ay-ee: day say play may pray pay pain sleigh gay hay Ray tame ah-ee: I (eye) my cry mine
time bye (buy) dry

oh-ee: boy joy coin point voice toy Roy

oo-ay-ee: way (weigh)

oo-ah-ee: wise wine

wh-oo-ah-ee: why (See 6. below)

2. The Middle Triphthong Sounds "oo" & "ee"

ee-oo-er: your

ah-oo-er: our (hour) flower tower power sour bower ah-ee-er: fire liar hire wire tire

aw-ee-er: lawyer

3. The End “oo”

ah-oo: out how now loud crowd cloud sound down town frown oh-oo: go so (sow) hoe toe fro
low

4. The Beginning “ee”

ee-oo: you use cute few view cue beautiful ee-oo-er: your fewer cure

5. The Beginning “oo”

oo-ee: we

oo-uh: one once

oo-ih: will women witch twitch oo-eh: well wed wet

oo-aw: wall

6. The Beginning Aspirant, "wh" NOT "oo"

(The aspirant "wh" is whispered but "oo" uses the vocal cords.) wh-uh (what), wh-eh (when), wh-ih (which), wh-oo-ah-ee (why), wh-oo (who), wh-eh-er (where)

7. The Quadthongs - "ee"

oo-ah-ee-er: choir

er-ah-ee-ehn: Ryan

THE FOUR PROBLEM WORDS

There are 4 commonly sung words in English that are problems. They are "your", "our", ("hour"), "I'll", and "while".

"YOUR"

In common speech, "your" is spoken as a diphthong (2 vowels) "ee-er" rather than as a triphthong (3 vowel sounds) that it is. It should be sung "ee-oo'-er" but that takes more work with the mouth. Especially since "ee-oo-er" goes directly from the farthest front vowel "ee" to the farthest back vowel "oo" which also requires lip protrusion. (Check this out on the vowel placement graphic) You have to work to say "your" correctly especially when it's thrown in quickly in a phrase.

"OUR" (HOUR)

Not "ah-er" but "ah-oo-er" Be sure to get the middle "oo" sound in it. Again the problem is extreme movement - going from the low "ah" to the back "oo" then back to the middle "er". The lazy way is to leave out the "oo" especially since the "oo" also requires lip protrusion. When it's fast, you have to consciously work to pucker the lips. (Check this out on the vowel placement graphic)

"I'LL"

Not "ah-ll" but "ah-ee-ll". It takes more work to get the "ee" in as the middle vowel sound.

"WHILE"

Not “whoo-ah-ll” but “whoo-ah-ee-ll”. Moving to the front “ee” requires more movement.

Singing Better Consonants

An important aspect of good singing is an understanding of the consonant categories and thus the ways of dealing with the different categories of the 22 consonants. Study the chart below thinking about their categories.

22 CONSONANT SOUNDS

WHISPERED

VOICED

SHORT

Explosives*

1. P “Pat”
3. T “Ted”
5. K “kill”
7. CH “chain”

Sub-Vocals*

2. B “bat”
4. D “dead”
6. G “gill”
8. J “Jane”

SUSTAINED

Whispered*

9. F “fine”
11. TH “thigh”
13. S “sing”
15. SH “sure”

Tuned*

10. V “vine”
12. TH “Thy”
14. Z “zing” (is = iz)
16. ZH “pleasure”

Semi-Vowels*

17. M “men”
18. N “noon”
19. NG “sing”
20. L “love”
21. R (Harsh so use “uhr”

(Keep tongue down behind the lower teeth)

(Keep tongue down behind the lower teeth)

Aspirants^

22. H “how” W (oo) “way” (actually a vowel)
WH “who” “when”, etc.

The categories are the important thing. The “Sustained” are all singable whereas the “Short” consonants are never held but always precede a vowel sound. The left column are whispered whereas the right column use the vocal cords in their production.

The 4 (or 5) “Semi-Vowels” are particularly important as they can be sustained on a pitch and the length they are sustained is critical. When a “sustained consonant” starts a word, the length that it is held gives emphasis or less emphasis on that word and thus greatly affects expressive communication. For instance, sing the word “love” contrasting the emotional impact when you make the “L” long in contrast to short.

The “Short Consonants” and “Aspirants” interrupt the flow of sound so need to be carefully done. Yet they are important for diction of course.