

Talk a Lot

Learn the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA)

Spelling and Sounds – Vowel Clusters

A vowel cluster is a group of two or more vowel letters together in a word that represent a single vowel sound. For example, in the word “road”, “oa” is a vowel cluster that represents the sound /ɔʊ/, whilst in the word “shoe”, “oe” is a vowel cluster that represents the sound /u:/. In the same way, “ar” in the word “car”, is a vowel cluster that uses a silent “r” to help make the vowel sound /ɑ:/. The reason we have vowel clusters is simple: there are 23 different single vowel sounds (vowel phonemes) in spoken English, but only 5 single vowel letters in written English. We need vowel clusters to represent in spelling all of the different vowel sounds. For example, the letter “a” on its own can make the sound /æ/ when sandwiched between two consonant sounds, for example in the word “cat” – /kæt/ – but there is no single letter which can make the very common vowel sound /u:/, as in “true” /tru:/. We have to use a vowel cluster – in this case “ue” – to represent this sound on paper.

Vowel clusters can occur anywhere in a word – at the beginning (initial), as in “out”; in the middle (medial), as in “please”; and at the end (final), as in “true”. Focusing on vowel clusters and consonant clusters (see p.18.39) is useful if you want to look at some of the differences between spelling and sounds in English words. (See also Rhyming Words, pp.18.19-18.28.)

Vowel clusters can be divided into **eight** categories:

1. Vowel Digraphs
2. Vowel Trigraphs and Quadgraphs
3. Vowel Clusters that end with “-r”
4. Other Vowel Clusters with “r”
5. Vowel Clusters with “w”
6. Vowel Clusters with “y”
7. Vowel Clusters with “gh”
8. Vowel Clusters with Other Consonant Letters

What follows is a comprehensive list of vowel clusters, with the sounds that they represent, grouped by letter in alphabetical order. (Note: you may wish to add your own examples in the space provided.)

1. Vowel Digraphs

Vowel digraphs are two vowel letters together in the spelling of a word that represent a single sound (one vowel phoneme). For example, in the word “meat”, “ea” is a vowel digraph that represents the sound /i:/, whilst in the word “meet”, “ee” is a vowel digraph that also stands for the same vowel sound: /i:/. This kind of thing can lead to a lot of confusion between spelling and sounds in English!

digraph: *sounds like:* *for example:* *my example(s):*

ai	/eɪ/	paid, wait, fail, paint, gain	_____
ai	/eɪ/	said, again	_____

au	/ɔ:ʊ/	fraud, pause, autumn, August	_____
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au	/ɑː/	laugh, laughter	_____
ea	/eɪ/	break, steak, great	_____
ea	/iː/	read, appeal, lead, clean, leaf, steal	_____
ea	/e/	read, bread, dreamt, dead, dread	_____
ee	/iː/	wheel, peel, kneel, heel	_____
ei	/iː/	receive, deceive, receipt	_____
ei	/eɪ/	rein, vein	_____
eo	/e/	leopard, Leonard	_____
eu	/ɔɪ/	Freud	_____
ia	/aɪə/	vial	_____
ie	/aɪ/	tie, die, lie, pie	_____
ie	/ɪə/	field, yield, wield	_____
ie	/iː/	activities, believe, achieve	_____
ie	/aɪə/	variety	_____
io	/ə/	station, completion, ration	_____
iu	/ɪə/	valium, tedium, radium	_____
oa	/əʊ/	oak, foam, loaf, encroach, road	_____
oa	/ɔː/	broad, abroad	_____
oe	/uː/	shoe	_____
oe	/əʊ/	toe, hoe, woe, foe, goes	_____
oe	/ʌ/	does, doesn't	_____
oi	/ɔɪ/	avoid, void, coin, toilet	_____
oo	/uː/	school, tool, fool, choose	_____
oo	/ʊ/	good, book, took, rook, hood	_____
oo	/ʌ/	blood, flood	_____
oo	/əʊ/	brooch	_____
ou	/aʊ/	sound, loud, proud, round, house	_____
ou	/uː/	route, you, soup, group	_____

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ou	/ə/	famous, jealous, onerous	_____
ou	/ʊ/	cough, trough	_____
ou	/ʌ/	rough, enough, tough	_____

ue	/u:/	blue, true, sue	_____
ue	/e/	guess, guest	_____
ue	/ʊə/	fuel, puerile, duel	_____

ui	/aɪ/	guide, guidance	_____
ui	/u:/	juice, bruise	_____
ui	/ɪ/	build, building, guilt	_____

Most of the vowel sounds of English (18 out of 23) are represented by these 18 different vowel digraphs. The sounds not represented are: /æ/, /i/, /ɜ:/, /eə/, /aʊə/. The last three sounds are represented by vowel clusters that use “r” (see below).

2. Vowel Trigraphs and Quadgraphs

It is possible, though fairly uncommon, to find more than two vowel letters together in an English word. A group of three letters that make a single sound is called a *trigraph*. For example:

trigraph: *sounds like:* *for example:* *my example(s):*

eau	/əʊ/	beau, eau de toilette ¹	_____
-----	------	------------------------------------	-------

eou	/ə/	outrageous, contagious	_____
-----	-----	------------------------	-------

iou	/ɪə/	industrious, harmonious, tedious	_____
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A group of four letters that makes a single sound is called a *quadgraph*. For example:

quadgraph: *sounds like:* *for example:* *my example(s):*

ueue	/u:/	queue	_____
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3. Vowel Clusters that End with “-r”

The “r” in the spelling helps to make the single vowel sound. Note: the consonant sound /r/ is not pronounced.

¹ in loan words from French

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<i>v/cluster:</i>	<i>sounds like:</i>	<i>for example:</i>	<i>my example(s):</i>
air	/eə/	air, fair, hair, chair, stair, pair	_____
ar	/ɑ:/	car, guitar, star, bar, shark	_____
ar	/ɔ:/	war, wart, warm	_____
ar	/ə/	popular, singular, regular	_____
ear	/ɑ:/	heart	_____
ear	/ɪə/	ear, beard, dear, appear, fear	_____
ear	/ɜ:/	learn, earn, search, pearl, heard	_____
ear	/eə/	bear, tear, wear, pear	_____
eer	/ɪə/	leer, peer, beer, engineer, steer	_____
er	/ɜ:/	verb, herd, herb, her	_____
er	/ə/	teacher, cleaner, hotter, mother	_____
iar	/aɪə/	liar	_____
ier	/ɪə/	tier, pier	_____
ier	/aɪə/	pliers	_____
ir	/ɜ:/	fir, bird, girl, whirl, twirl	_____
irr	/ɜ:/	whirr	_____
oar	/ɔ:/	oar, boar, hoar, hoard, board	_____
oor	/ɔ:/	door, floor, poor, moor	_____
or	/ɔ:/	form, nor, for, conform, port, sword	_____
or	/ɜ:/	word, worm	_____
or	/ə/	doctor, tractor, administrator	_____
our	/ɔ:/	pour	_____
our	/aʊə/	our, flour, hour, dour, sour	_____
our	/ə/	harbour, colour, splendour	_____
ur	/ɜ:/	hurl, churl, unfurl, curl	_____

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Spelling and Sounds – Vowel Clusters

4. Other Vowel Clusters with “r”

The “r” in the spelling helps to make the single vowel sound. Note: the consonant sound /r/ is not pronounced.

v/cluster: *sounds like:* *for example:* *my example(s):*

aire	/eə/	millionaire, Claire	_____
are	/ɑ:/	are	_____
are	/eə/	hare, rare, ware, care	_____
ere	/ɪə/	here, mere	_____
ere	/ɜ:/	were	_____
ere	/eə/	there, where	_____
ire	/aɪə/	wire, fire, mire, tire	_____
oare	/ɔ:/	hoare	_____
ore	/ɔ:/	more, before, core, store, lore	_____
re	/ə/	centre, metre, litre, acre	_____
ure	/ɔ:/	sure	_____
ure	/ə/	brochure	_____
yre	/aɪə/	tyre, lyre, pyre	_____

5. Vowel Clusters with “w”

The “w” in the spelling helps to make the single vowel sound. Note: the consonant sounds /w/ and /r/ are not pronounced.

v/cluster: *sounds like:* *for example:* *my example(s):*

aw	/ɔ:/	paw, flaw, lawn, prawn, sawn	_____
ew	/u:/	grew, brew	_____
ow	/əʊ/	know, grow, snow, show, tow, bow, own	_____
ow	/aʊ/	bow, cow, now, how, brown	_____

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owe	/əʊ/	owe	_____
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ower	/aʊə/	flower, power, shower, tower	_____
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6. Vowel Clusters with “y”

The “y” in the spelling helps to make the single vowel sound. Note: the consonant sounds /j/ and /r/ are not pronounced.

v/cluster: *sounds like:* *for example:* *my example(s):*

ay	/eɪ/	pay, say, day, lay, May, play	_____
----	------	-------------------------------	-------

ayer	/eə/	prayer	_____
ayer	/eɪə/	player	_____

ey	/eɪ/	they, hey, prey	_____
ey	/iː/	key, monkey, alley	_____

eye	/aɪ/	eye	_____
-----	------	-----	-------

eyer	/eɪə/	greyer	_____
------	-------	--------	-------

oy	/ɔɪ/	toy, joy, annoy, employ, boy	_____
----	------	------------------------------	-------

uay	/iː/	quay	_____
-----	------	------	-------

ye	/aɪ/	bye, rye, dye, tye	_____
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7. Vowel clusters with “gh”

The “gh” in the spelling helps to make the single vowel sound. Note: the consonant sounds /g/ and /h/ are not pronounced.

v/cluster: *sounds like:* *for example:* *my example(s):*

augh	/ɔː/	caught, taught	_____
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eigh	/eɪ/	weight, eight, weigh, neigh	_____
eigh	/aɪ/	height	_____

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igh	/aɪ/	high, sigh, night, right, flight, might, bright	_____
-----	------	---	-------

ough	/aʊ/	bough, plough, Slough	_____
ough	/uː/	through, throughout	_____
ough	/ɔː/	bought, thought, ought, sought, nought	_____
ough	/əʊ/	though, although	_____

8. Vowel Clusters with Other Consonant Letters

Sometimes you may find a vowel cluster representing a vowel sound that employs a consonant letter other than “r”, “w”, “y”, or “gh”. Below are a few examples. In each case the consonant in the spelling is not pronounced (it is a *silent letter*).

a) Vowel clusters with “b”:

v/cluster: *sounds like:* *for example:* *my example(s):*

oub	/aʊ/	doubt	_____
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b) Vowel clusters with “g”:

v/cluster: *sounds like:* *for example:* *my example(s):*

eig	/eɪ/	reign	_____
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c) Vowel clusters with “l”:

v/cluster: *sounds like:* *for example:* *my example(s):*

al	/ɔː/	talk, walk, chalk, stalk	_____
al	/ɑː/	half, calf, palm, calm, balm	_____

ol	/əʊ/	yolk	_____
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oul	/u/	could, would, should	_____
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d) Vowel clusters with “t”:

v/cluster: *sounds like:* *for example:* *my example(s):*

out	/uː/	ragout	_____
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List of Vowel Clusters – In Alphabetical Order

a

<i>v/cluster:</i>	<i>sounds like:</i>	<i>for example:</i>	<i>my example(s):</i>
ai	/eɪ/	paid, wait, fail, paint, gain	_____
ai	/e/	said, again	_____
air	/eə/	air, fair, hair, chair, stair, pair	_____
aire	/eə/	millionaire, Claire	_____
al	/ɔ:/	talk, walk, chalk, stalk	_____
al	/ɑ:/	half, calf, palm, calm, balm	_____
ar	/ɑ:/	car, guitar, star, bar, shark	_____
ar	/ɔ:/	war, wart, warm	_____
ar	/ə/	popular, singular, regular	_____
are	/ɑ:/	are	_____
are	/eə/	hare, rare, ware, care	_____
au	/ɔ:/	fraud, pause, autumn, August	_____
au	/ɑ:/	laugh, laughter	_____
ough	/ɔ:/	caught, taught	_____
aw	/ɔ:/	paw, flaw, lawn, prawn, sawn	_____
ay	/eɪ/	pay, say, day, lay, May, play	_____
ayer	/eə/	prayer	_____
ayer	/eɪə/	player	_____

Phonemes represented by vowel clusters beginning with the letter "a":

/eɪ/ /e/ /eə/ /ɑ:/ /ɔ:/ /ə/ /eɪə/

e

<i>v/cluster:</i>	<i>sounds like:</i>	<i>for example:</i>	<i>my example(s):</i>
ea	/eɪ/	break, steak, great	_____
ea	/i:/	read, appeal, lead, clean, leaf, steal	_____
ea	/e/	read, bread, dreamt, dead, dread	_____
ear	/ɑ:/	heart	_____
ear	/ɪə/	ear, beard, dear, appear, fear	_____
ear	/ɜ:/	learn, earn, search, pearl, heard	_____
ear	/eə/	bear, tear, wear, pear	_____
eau	/əʊ/	beau, eau de toilette ¹	_____
ee	/i:/	wheel, peel, kneel, heel	_____
eer	/ɪə/	leer, peer, beer, engineer, steer	_____
ei	/i:/	receive, deceive, receipt	_____
ei	/eɪ/	rein, vein	_____
eig	/eɪ/	reign	_____
eigh	/eɪ/	weight, eight, weigh, neigh	_____
eigh	/aɪ/	height	_____

¹ in loan words from French

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eo	/e/	leopard, Leonard	_____
eou	/ə/	outrageous, contagious	_____
er	/ɜ:/	verb, herd, herb, her	_____
er	/ə/	teacher, cleaner, hotter, mother	_____
ere	/ɪə/	here, mere	_____
ere	/ɜ:/	were	_____
ere	/eə/	there, where	_____
eu	/ɔɪ/	Freud	_____
ew	/u:/	grew, brew	_____
ey	/eɪ/	they, hey, prey	_____
ey	/i:/	key, monkey, alley	_____
eye	/aɪ/	eye	_____
eyer	/eɪə/	greyer	_____

Phonemes represented by vowel clusters beginning with the letter “e”:

/eɪ/ /i:/ /e/ /ɪə/ /aɪ/ /ɜ:/ /eə/ /aɪ/ /ə/ /u:/ /eɪə/ /əʊ/

i

<i>v/cluster:</i>	<i>sounds like:</i>	<i>for example:</i>	<i>my example(s):</i>
ia	/aɪə/	vial	_____
iar	/aɪə/	liar	_____
ie	/aɪ/	tie, die, lie, pie	_____
ie	/ɪə/	field, yield, wield	_____
ie	/i:/	activities, believe, achieve	_____
ie	/aɪə/	variety	_____
ier	/ɪə/	tier, pier	_____
ier	/aɪə/	pliers	_____
igh	/aɪ/	high, sigh, night, right, flight, might, bright	_____
io	/ə/	station, completion, ration	_____
iou	/ɪə/	industrious, harmonious, tedious	_____
ir	/ɜ:/	fir, bird, girl, whirl, twirl	_____
ire	/aɪə/	wire, fire, mire, tire	_____
irr	/ɜ:/	whirr	_____
iu	/ɪə/	valium, tedium, radium	_____

Phonemes represented by vowel clusters beginning with the letter “i”:

/ɪə/ /aɪ/ /i:/ /aɪə/ /ə/ /ɜ:/

O

<i>v/cluster:</i>	<i>sounds like:</i>	<i>for example:</i>	<i>my example(s):</i>
oa	/əʊ/	oak, foam, loaf, encroach, road	_____
oa	/ɔ:/	broad, abroad	_____

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oar	/ɔ:/	oar, boar, hoar, hoard, board	_____
oare	/ɔ:/	hoare	_____
oe	/u:/	shoe	_____
oe	/əʊ/	toe, hoe, woe, foe, goes	_____
oe	/ʌ/	does, doesn't	_____
oi	/ɔɪ/	avoid, void, coin, toilet	_____
ol	/əʊ/	yolk	_____
oo	/u:/	school, tool, fool, choose	_____
oo	/ʊ/	good, book, took, rook, hood	_____
oo	/ʌ/	blood, flood	_____
oo	/əʊ/	brooch	_____
oor	/ɔ:/	door, floor, poor, moor	_____
or	/ɔ:/	form, nor, for, conform, port, sword	_____
or	/ɜ:/	word, worm	_____
or	/ə/	doctor, tractor, administrator	_____
ore	/ɔ:/	more, before, core, store, lore	_____
ou	/aʊ/	sound, loud, proud, round, house	_____
ou	/u:/	route, you, soup, group	_____
ou	/ɒ/	cough, trough	_____
ou	/ʌ/	rough, enough, tough	_____
ou	/ə/	famous, jealous, onerous	_____
oub	/aʊ/	doubt	_____
ough	/aʊ/	bough, plough, Slough	_____
ough	/u:/	through, throughout	_____
ough	/ɔ:/	bought, thought, ought, sought, nought	_____
ough	/əʊ/	though, although	_____
oul	/ʊ/	could, would, should	_____
our	/ɔ:/	pour	_____
our	/aʊə/	our, flour, hour, dour, sour	_____
our	/ə/	harbour, colour, splendour	_____
out	/u:/	ragout	_____
ow	/əʊ/	know, grow, snow, show, tow, bow, own	_____
ow	/aʊ/	bow, cow, now, how, brown	_____
owe	/əʊ/	owe	_____
ower	/aʊə/	flower, power, shower, tower	_____
oy	/ɔɪ/	toy, joy, annoy, employ, boy	_____

Phonemes represented by vowel clusters beginning with the letter "o":

/əʊ/ /ɔ:/ /u:/ /ʌ/ /ɔɪ/ /ʊ/ /ə/ /aʊ/ /ɒ/ /aʊə/ /ɜ:/

r

v/cluster:	sounds like:	for example:	my example(s):
re	/ə/	centre, metre, litre, acre	_____

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List of Vowel Clusters – In Alphabetical Order

u

<i>v/cluster:</i>	<i>sounds like:</i>	<i>for example:</i>	<i>my example(s):</i>
uay	/i:/	quay	_____
ue	/u:/	blue, true, sue	_____
ue	/e/	guess, guest	_____
ue	/ʊə/	fuel, puerile, duel	_____
ueue	/u:/	queue	_____
ui	/aɪ/	guide, guidance	_____
ui	/u:/	juice, bruise	_____
ui	/ɪ/	build, building, guilt	_____
ur	/ɜ:/	hurl, churl, unfurl, curl	_____
ure	/ɔ:/	sure	_____
ure	/ə/	brochure	_____

Phonemes represented by vowel clusters beginning with the letter “u”:

/æ/ /aɪ/ /u:/ /ɪ/ /e/ /ʊə/ /ə/ /ɜ:/ /i:/ /ɔ:/

y

<i>v/cluster:</i>	<i>sounds like:</i>	<i>for example:</i>	<i>my example(s):</i>
ye	/aɪ/	bye, rye, dye, tye	_____
yre	/aɪə/	tyre, lyre, pyre	_____

Phonemes represented by vowel clusters beginning with the letter “y”:

/aɪə/ /aɪ/

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Spelling and Sounds – Common Vowel Clusters

A vowel cluster is a group of two or more vowel letters together in a word that represent a single vowel sound. They can be **initial** (at the beginning of a word), **medial** (in the middle of a word), and **final** (at the end of a word). Focusing on vowel clusters and consonant clusters (see p.18.39) is useful if you want to look at some of the differences between spelling and sounds in English words. Vowel clusters can be divided into eight categories:

1. Vowel Digraphs (two vowel letters together make a single sound)

<i>digraph:</i>	<i>sounds like:</i>	<i>for example:</i>	<i>my example(s):</i>
ai	/eɪ/	paid, wait, fail, paint, gain	_____
ea	/i:/	read, appeal, lead, clean, leaf, steal	_____
ea	/e/	read, bread, dreamt, dead, dread	_____
ee	/i:/	wheel, peel, kneel, heel	_____
ei	/i:/	receive, deceive, receipt	_____
ie	/aɪ/	tie, die, lie, pie	_____
oa	/əʊ/	oak, foam, loaf, encroach, road	_____
oa	/ɔ:/	broad, abroad	_____
oe	/əʊ/	toe, hoe, woe, foe, goes	_____
oe	/u:/	shoe	_____
oo	/u:/	school, tool, fool, choose	_____
oo	/ʊ/	good, book, took, rook, hood	_____
ou	/aʊ/	sound, loud, proud, round, house	_____
ui	/aɪ/	guide, guidance	_____
ue	/u:/	blue, true, sue	_____

2. Vowel Trigraphs and Quadgraphs

<i>v/cluster:</i>	<i>sounds like:</i>	<i>for example:</i>	<i>my example(s):</i>
eau	/əʊ/	beau, eau de toilette ¹	_____
iou	/iəʊ/	industrious, harmonious, tedious	_____
ueue	/u:/	queue	_____

3. Vowel Clusters that End with “-r” (the consonant sound /r/ is not pronounced)

<i>v/cluster:</i>	<i>sounds like:</i>	<i>for example:</i>	<i>my example(s):</i>
air	/eə/	air, fair, hair, chair, stair, pair	_____
ar	/ɑ:/	car, guitar, star, bar, shark	_____
ear	/ɪə/	ear, beard, dear, appear, fear	_____
ear	/ɜ:/	learn, earn, search, pearl, heard	_____
ear	/eə/	bear, tear, wear, pear	_____
eer	/ɪə/	leer, peer, beer, engineer, steer	_____
er	/ɜ:/	verb, herd, herb, her	_____

¹ in loan words from French

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er	/ə/	teacher, cleaner, hotter, mother	_____
ier	/ɪə/	tier , pier	_____
ir	/ɜ:/	fir , bird, girl, whirl, twirl	_____
oar	/ɔ:/	oar , boar, hoar, hoard, board	_____
oor	/ɔ:/	door , floor, poor, moor	_____
or	/ɔ:/	form , nor, for, conform, port, sword	_____
our	/aʊə/	our , flour, hour, dour, sour	_____
ur	/ɜ:/	hurl , churl, unfurl, curl	_____

4. Other Vowel Clusters with “r” (the consonant sound /r/ is not pronounced)

<i>v/cluster:</i>	<i>sounds like:</i>	<i>for example:</i>	<i>my example(s):</i>
are	/ɑ:/	are	_____
ere	/ɪə/	here , mere	_____
ere	/eə/	there , where	_____
ere	/ɜ:/	were	_____
ore	/ɔ:/	more , before, core, store, lore	_____
re	/ə/	centre, metre, litre, acre	_____
ure	/ə/	brochure	_____

5. Vowel Clusters with “w” (the consonant sound /w/ is not pronounced)

<i>v/cluster:</i>	<i>sounds like:</i>	<i>for example:</i>	<i>my example(s):</i>
aw	/ɔ:/	paw , flaw, lawn, prawn, sawn	_____
ew	/u:/	grew , brew	_____
ow	/əʊ/	know , grow, snow, show, tow, bow, own	_____
ow	/aʊ/	bow , cow, now, how, brown	_____

6. Vowel Clusters with “y” (the consonant sound /j/ is not pronounced)

<i>v/cluster:</i>	<i>sounds like:</i>	<i>for example:</i>	<i>my example(s):</i>
ay	/eɪ/	pay , say, day, lay, May, play	_____
ey	/eɪ/	they , hey, prey	_____
ey	/i:/	key , monkey, alley	_____
oy	/ɔɪ/	toy , joy, annoy, employ, boy	_____

7. Vowel Clusters with “gh” (the consonant sounds /g/ and /h/ are not pronounced)

<i>v/cluster:</i>	<i>sounds like:</i>	<i>for example:</i>	<i>my example(s):</i>
augh	/ɔ:/	caught , taught	_____
igh	/eɪ/	weight , eight, weigh, neigh	_____

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Talk a Lot

Learn the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA)

Spelling and Sounds – Common Vowel Clusters

igh	/aɪ/	high, sigh, night, right, flight, might, bright	_____
ough	/ɔː/	bought, thought, ought, sought, nought	_____
ough	/uː/	through, throughout	_____

8. Vowel Clusters with Other Consonant Letters (the consonant sounds are not pronounced)

<i>v/cluster:</i>	<i>sounds like:</i>	<i>for example:</i>	<i>my example(s):</i>
oub	/aʊ/	doubt	_____
eig	/eɪ/	reign	_____
al	/ɔː/	talk, walk, chalk, stalk	_____
al	/ɑː/	half, calf, palm, calm, balm	_____
ol	/əʊ/	yolk	_____
oul	/ʊ/	could, would, should	_____
out	/uː/	ragout	_____

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