

## French Vowels - Voyelles françaises

A vowel is a sound that is pronounced through the mouth (and, in the case of nasal vowels, the nose) with no obstruction of the lips, tongue, or throat.

There are a few general guidelines to keep in mind when pronouncing French vowels:

- Most French vowels are pronounced further forward in the mouth than their English counterparts.
- The tongue must remain tensed throughout the pronunciation of the vowel.
- French vowels do not diphthong. In English, vowels tend to be followed by a y sound (after a, e, or i) or a w sound

(after o or u). In French, this is not the case - the vowel sound remains constant: it does not change into a y or w sound. Thus the French vowel is a "purer" sound than the English vowel.

## **Hard and soft vowels**

A, O, and U are sometimes called hard vowels and E and I are soft vowels, because certain consonants (C, G, S) have a "hard" and a "soft" pronunciation, depending on which vowel follows.

## **Nasal vowels**

Vowels followed by M or N are usually nasal. Nasal pronunciation can be very different from the normal pronunciation of each vowel (For more details please scroll to the end of the page).

## A - French Pronunciation of A

The pronunciation of the letter A in French is fairly straightforward. It is usually pronounced more or less like the A in "father," but with the lips wider in French than in English: listen it in Alphabets section. An a with the accent grave à is pronounced the same way.

The a is sometimes pronounced further back in the mouth and with the lips more rounded than for the a sound described above above: listen. This sound is becoming obsolete, but technically should be pronounced when the letter a

- is followed by a z sound - base, gaz
- is followed by a silent s - bas, cas (exception: bras)
- has an accent circonflexe - pâtes, âne

## **E - French Pronunciation of E**

The French letter E can be pronounced several different ways:

Like the E in angel (like a schwa) - listen. This sound is often heard in single syllable words like le, me, etc.

Like the vowel sound in "weigh" except without the y sound at the end - listen.

This sound occurs with

- E with an acute accent: été
- E in an open syllable (i.e., a syllable that ends in a vowel sound): trajet
- the verb endings -er and -ez: manger, veuillez.

Like the E in bed - listen. This sound is found in

- E with a grave accent: exprès
- E with a circumflex: tête
- E followed by a double consonant: belle

- E in a closed syllable (a syllable that ends in a consonant sound): sept

An unaccented E at the end of a word is called an E muet and may or may not be pronounced.

## **I - French Pronunciation of I**

The French letter I is pronounced more or less like the ee in "fee," but without the Y sound at the end: listen.

An i with an accent circonflexe î or tréma ï is pronounced the same way (as is the letter Y when it's a vowel in French).

However, the French I is pronounced like the English Y in the following instances:

- When I is followed by a vowel -  
châtier, addition, adieu, tiers

- When IL is at the end of a word and preceded by a vowel - orteil, orgueil, œil
- In most words with ILLE - mouiller, fille, bouteille, veuillez

## **O - French Pronunciation of O**

The French letter O is pronounced one of two ways:

Like the o in "cold." Listen. This is called the closed O.

More or less like the o in the English word "ton." This is called the open O.

The rules for determining which pronunciation to use are fairly complicated, so only the most important

ones are listed here. When in doubt, always check in the dictionary.

- When the O has an accent cironflexe ô, it's a closed O.
- When the O is the last sound of the syllable (trop, mot, héros, etc), it's a closed O.
- When the O is followed by a consonant sound (notre, téléphone, etc), it's an open O. Unless the consonant sound is a z sound (rose, chose), in which case it's a closed O.

**Note:** The letter combinations AU and EAU are also pronounced like closed O's.

## **U - French Pronunciation of U**

The French letter U is one of the two most difficult sounds in French for most people. (R is the other one.)

The unaccented U and the U with an accent circonflexe  $\hat{U}$  or tréma  $\ddot{U}$  are all pronounced the same way: with the lips tightly pursed:

There is no equivalent sound in English, so for this letter more than any other it is essential to get help from a native French speaker.

## **French Nasal Vowels - Voyelles nasales françaises**

A nasal vowel is a sound made by expelling air through the mouth and nose without obstruction of the lips, tongue, or throat. Nasal pronunciation can be very different from the normal pronunciation of the same vowels.



Vowels followed by M or N are usually nasal, except when the nasal consonant is followed by another vowel, in which case the vowel and consonant are both voiced. For example:

un nasal

une voiced

It may help you to know that there are nasal vowels in English, even though they are a bit different than French nasal vowels. In English, the nasal consonant (M or N) is pronounced and thus nasalizes the vowel that precedes it, whereas in French the vowel is nasal and the consonant is not pronounced.

## **Liaisons - French Pronunciation**

Part of the reason that French pronunciation and aural comprehension

are so difficult is due to liaisons. A liaison is the phenomenon whereby a normally silent consonant at the end of a word is pronounced at the beginning of the word that follows it.

In addition, consonants in liaisons sometimes change pronunciation. For example, an S is pronounced like a Z when it is in a liaison (see chart).

<b>Letter</b>	<b>Sound</b>
D	[t]
F	[v]
G	[g]
N	[n]
P	[p]
R	[r]
S	[z]
T	[t]
X	[z]
Z	[z]

The basic requirement of a liaison is a word that ends in a normally silent consonant followed by a word that begins with a vowel or mute H. This does not mean, however, that all possible liaisons are necessarily pronounced. In fact, the pronunciation (or not) of liaisons is subject to very specific rules, and liaisons are thus divided into three categories:

- Required liaisons (Liaisons obligatoires)
- Forbidden liaisons (Liaisons interdites)
- Optional liaisons (Liaisons facultatives)

If you are a beginner, I recommend studying just the required liaisons and maybe the forbidden liaison sections, as these are the essentials. If you're more advanced, study all three sections. It may be boring, but your pronunciation and

ability to communicate at different levels of formality will improve dramatically.

There is a related phenomenon in French called *enchaînement*. The difference between *enchaînement* and *liaisons* is this: *liaisons* occur when the final consonant is normally silent but is pronounced due to the vowel that follows it (*vous* vs *vous avez*), whereas *enchaînement* occurs when the final consonant is pronounced whether or not a vowel follows it (*pour* vs *pour elle*). See the *enchaînement* page for an in-depth look at this.

Note that *enchaînement* is simply a phonetic issue, while the pronunciation of *liaisons* is based on linguistic and stylistic factors. See the *liaison linguistics* page for a detailed explanation.

\*Pronunciation key - This is only a guide to help you get the most out of the sound files - refer to a dictionary for the exact pronunciation.