Vowels | Diphthongs | 4 Problem Words | Consonants

**Singing Better Vowels**

How many vowel sounds are used in the English language? A E I O U? 5 Right? Wrong! 12. Here’s a visualization of the back of the tongue position in the mouth that produces them. 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 vowel words A E I O U as we say “A” as a diphthong “ay-ee”, “I” as “ah-ee” and “U” as “ee-oo:. Here we are talking about pure single vowels not diphthongs (2 vowel sounds).

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.

Vowel uniformity is very important 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, do we pronounce it “Mahm” or “Mawm”?

**THE “ER” VOWEL**

There are 2 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 up as much as necessary for optimum sound. Particularly the “er” vowel can be harsh if we don’t open up enough. Sing the following word making sure the sound is free with a lowered jaw.

“core”, “word”, “world” etc.
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”

“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.
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
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  wh-eh  wh-ih  wh-oo-ah-ee  wh-oo  wh-eh-er
what  when  which  why  who  where

7. The Quadthrongs - "ee"

oo-ah-ee-er: choir
er-ah-ee-ehn: Ryan
Singing Better
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 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 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.
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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WHISPERED</th>
<th>VOICED</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>SHORT</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Explosives*</td>
<td>Sub-Vocals*</td>
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<td>2.</td>
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<td>3.</td>
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<td>4.</td>
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<td>6.</td>
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<td>7.</td>
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<td>SUSTAINED</td>
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<td>8.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Whispered*</td>
<td>Tuned*</td>
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<td>10.</td>
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<td>16.</td>
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<td><strong>Semi-Vowels</strong></td>
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<td>18.</td>
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<td>19.</td>
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<td>20.</td>
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<tr>
<td>21.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Aspirants^</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>22. H “how”</td>
<td>W (oo) “way” (actually a vowel)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WH “who” “when”, etc.</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
The categories are the important thing. Particularly notice that those in the black rectangle 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.

Happy Singing!

Ted Norton

My E-Mail:  tednorton@roadrunner.com

http://musicedted.info/indexSite/index.html

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