

Received Pronunciation

AKA Standard British

Received Pronunciation (RP) is a dialect spoken throughout England, historically associated with members of the upper class. It originated as the speech of educated men in Southern England, but it has become the standard non-regional dialect. The word ‘received’ indicates that its speakers would be received in polite society. RP is not entirely monolithic—there are a variety of RP styles ranging from very formal to more relaxed.

Placement:

Very far forward. If General American is placed in the middle of the mouth, RP is at the teeth. The soft palate is raised (be careful that this does not mean that you always raise your eyebrows!). Picture a pear in your mouth with the large end at the back and the stem at the lips.

Tune:

RP has a much more extensive pitch range than General American. Pitch drops at the ends of statements. In questions, often the second to last syllable is stressed and goes up in pitch while the last syllable drops.

Rhythm:

RP is relatively rapid, with a bit of a staccato feel due to the crisp articulation.

Vowel Changes:

All vowels are made in a more forward position. Also, the lips are never spread laterally.

MONOPHTHONGS

/i/ Make sure that lateral spread is kept to a minimum.

wheat eat he peace weak

Note: The word ‘been’ is sometimes pronounced with this vowel, especially when emphasized.

/i/ to /ɪ/ When this sound is in a final position, it is shortened considerably, more like /ɪ/.
city kitty really funny

/ɛ/ Further forward than GA and slightly more open.

bed left said pet

/æ/ to /ɑ/ Unfortunately, there is no pattern to this substitution. Whenever in doubt, consult a British dictionary. Here are some common words with this substitution.

ask master laugh last path pass half class dance demand

/ɒ/ This vowel does not exist in General American, though it is used in American Stage Standard. Americans usually use a sound that is a shorter version of the 'a' in 'father'. This sound is higher in the mouth.

hot honest not coffee odd

/ɑ/ Though not terribly different in placement, the palate is more lifted which gives the vowel a darker tone.

father master path fast

/ɔ/ Much more rounded than GA

ball thought shawl saw

DIPHTHONGS

/eɪ/ Starts slightly further forward than GA.

fate game day safe

/aɪ/ Starts further back than GA and does not end as high.

high I bike try

/oʊ/ to /əʊ/ This diphthong starts in the middle of the mouth in the schwa position rather than at the back of the mouth.

goal no float stone loaf

Consonant Changes:

Articulation is very crisp. Plosives have more bite than in General American.

/r/ to / / An 'r' preceding a consonant or a pause is not pronounced.

heart park shirt earnest car

If a word ends in 'r' and the next word starts with a vowel, the 'r' is pronounced. In that case, it links to the following vowel. Rather than "car is," it sounds more like "cah riz"
car goes versus car is

/u/ to /ju/ The liquid 'u' is used a great deal in RP. It happens in American speech (e.g. 'music' and 'beauty') but is not very common. Be careful that it does not become "ch" and "j" (as in judge) after t and d, respectively.

duke institute new dune during

Other changes:

Words ending in 'ery', 'ary' and 'ory' generally drop the vowel before the /r/.

library oratory dysentery extraordinary territory

The words ‘again’ and ‘against’ are often pronounced with a long vowel, though this pattern is changing over time. Most common when the word is being emphasized.

Words ending in ‘ile’ use /ai/ instead of the schwa, sounding more like “aisle”
fragile infantile missile futile hostile

Practice Sentences:

Sir, have you met the new duke?

The library has been sorely neglected.

The car is far too cold for driving.

Out of eternity, a new day is born. Into eternity, at night it shall return.

Resources

RP samples abound on radio, tv, and film. Here are a few good people to listen to:

Emma Thompson <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3cPhl84XQE0>

Ian McKellen <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UH2xGtbtp7M>

One last RP example: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NK3ODM5S0Lg>

This is Wills and Kate talking about their engagement in 2010. Interesting note: Kate's pronunciation is actually more "posh" than that of her royal husband.