

Welcome to The Color Vowel Chart

The Color Vowel Chart is a pronunciation tool for teaching and learning English. When combined with the teaching techniques outlined here, the Chart provides an effective approach to teaching spoken English. The Chart will help you easily incorporate pronunciation into all of your classes so that your students can improve their comprehension and use of spoken English. This tool enables teachers and learners to talk easily and accurately about the key sounds of English without the use of phonetic symbols. Instead of phonetic symbols, the Chart uses colors and key words to represent the vowel sounds of English. This provides students and teachers with an easy way to describe and practice spoken English at the word level and at the phrase level.

The Chart is effective because it focuses the learners' attention on stress, an aspect of spoken English that is crucial to clear communication. This focus on word stress and phrase stress helps learners first hear and then produce the rhythm that characterizes spoken English. This rhythmical pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables is the key to speaking clearly and to understanding spoken English. Stress is a central element of spoken English. Stress can change the meaning of a word or a phrase. It can indicate agreement or disagreement, or be used to correct an inaccuracy or misunderstanding. Most importantly, it tells the listener what to pay attention to in a conversation. Thus, focusing on stress is fundamental.

Stress can change the meaning of a word.	Within a conversation, stress can change the focus and thus the meaning of a phrase.
Examples: <u>re</u> cord (noun) vs. re <u>co</u> rd (verb)	Examples: What are you doing? I'm <u>lis</u> tening.
<u>de</u> sert (a dry place) vs. des <u>se</u> rt (a sweet snack)	Who is listening? I'm <u>lis</u> tening.
<u>me</u> ssage (a piece of information) vs. <u>ma</u> ssage (body work)	Why aren't you listening? I <u>am</u> listening.

The vowel sounds of spoken English

Each language contains its own unique set of sounds. American English has approximately 15 vowel sounds. However, the English alphabet has only five vowel LETTERS (*a, e, i, o, u*), and the letters "y" and "w," which sometimes represent vowel sounds. Therefore, each letter (or combination of letters) can represent more than one vowel sound. As a result, it can be difficult to know how to pronounce a word based on its spelling. The Chart moves the focus away from spelling, which can be so misleading in English, and places the focus on learning to recognize the sound of the stressed vowel.

Example: Notice how the letter "o" sounds different in each of these words:

to so on of woman women work

Similarly, English spelling allows us to represent a single vowel sound in a number of ways.

Example: The following words use five different spelling patterns for the same vowel sound:

dress friend bread any said

Once learners are comfortable focusing on the vowel sounds of the stressed vowel, they can begin to notice which spelling patterns produce each sound.

Understanding The Color Vowel Chart

Get to know each Color Vowel

Each color in *The Color Vowel Chart* represents a single vowel sound. Each sound has a color name and a key word. For example, **GREEN** is the color name, and TEA is the key word. **GREEN** represents the vowel sound you hear in both of those words: /i/. Similarly, **BLUE MOON** represents the vowel sound /u/, as in *true*, *balloon* and *approve*. Even though these words have different spelling patterns, they share the same vowel sound, which we call **BLUE**.

Identify the “color” of new vocabulary words and phrases

The Color Vowel Chart allows us to describe any English word based on the pronunciation of the primary stressed syllable in the word. Here, it is important to focus on a fundamental rule of spoken English: each word has exactly one primary stressed syllable, and that syllable has a strong, lengthened vowel sound at its center. Using *The Color Vowel Chart* to assign a color to that vowel sound, we can say that each word has exactly one color.

- One-syllable words contain one vowel sound (even if it contains more than one vowel letter). For example, *soup* is **BLUE**, *bread* is **RED**, and *knife* is ~~WHITE~~.
- In multi-syllable words, only one of the syllables has primary stress. Stress makes the syllable higher, louder, and longer than the other syllables. For example: *education*, *classroom*, *biological*
- In common phrases, one word will receive the focus stress. For example, *See you later* is **GRAY**, *Let's have luunch* is **MUSTARD**, *Nice to meet you* is **GREEN** as is *Have a nice weekend*.

When you hear or say a word or phrase, try to identify the color (vowel sound) of the stressed syllable. For example, *teacher* receives stress on the first syllable, so this word is **GREEN**. Similarly, *English* receives stress on the first syllable, the sound of which is **SILVER**. *Education*, with stress on the third syllable, is **GRAY**. *She's a student* is **BLUE**. *She's studying biology* is **OLIVE**. *Please sit down* is **BROWN**.

Try it! → What color is each word or phrase?

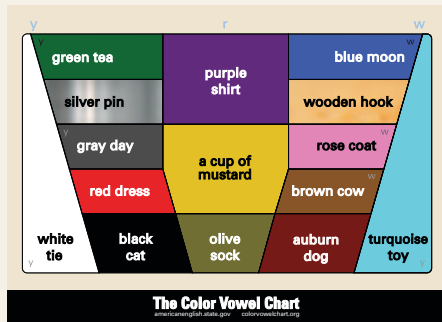
pencil paper computer type delete Good luck. See you later.

(Answers: *pencil* = **RED**; *paper* = **GRAY**; *computer* = **BLUE**; *type* = ~~WHITE~~; *delete* = **GREEN**; *Good luck.* = **MUSTARD**; *See you later.* = **GRAY**)

The Shape of the Chart

The shape of the Chart mirrors the shape of the vocal tract, with **GREEN** representing the high front vowel /i/, **OLIVE** representing the low central vowel /a/, and **BLUE** being the high back vowel /u/. The shape helps learners visualize the relationships between the various vowel sounds and how they are formed in the mouth, eliminating the need for descriptions such as *low*, *central*, or *high*.

What are the “y” and “w” for?



There are two types of English vowels: moving vowel sounds and non-moving (still) vowel sounds. Moving vowel sounds move in one of two directions: toward “y” or toward “w.” Y-moving vowels move toward the “y” at the top left corner of the Chart (as heard in **GRAY** and **WHITE**), while w-moving vowels move toward the “w” in the top right corner (as heard in **ROSE** and **BROWN**). The “y” and “w” therefore identify the direction of the vowel’s movement. You can help your students notice this movement by saying each sound and illustrating the movement with your hand on the Chart. The chart below summarizes the still and moving vowel sounds in English.

The “y” and “w” at the top of the Chart serve another purpose: namely, they remind us and our learners about *vowel-to-vowel linking*, both within words and between words, something we hear, but don’t see in writing.

Within words: vari**Y**ation, situ**W**ation

Between words: see**Y**it, do**W**it

What is the “r” for?

The Color Vowel Chart enables you to use a visual approach in teaching r-controlled vowels. R-controlled vowels are vowels that, when followed by an “r,” have a modified sound.

- First, say the word and hold the vowel sound that precedes the “r.” Then locate the sound of the stressed vowel on the Chart. For example, the word *car* would start at **OLIVE**. Point to **OLIVE** on the Chart.
- Then, using your hand as a guide, glide that sound up through **PURPLE** to the watermark “r” just above the Chart and say the rest of the word: *caaaaarrrrrr*. This movement illustrates the actual movement of the tongue and jaw while making the sound.

Try it! → Say each word slowly, paying attention to the color of the vowel before you start pronouncing the “r” sound.

What color is it? here there car care sorry blurry

(Answers: here = **GREEN** → **PURPLE**; there = **RED** → **PURPLE**; car = **OLIVE** → **PURPLE**; care = **RED** → **PURPLE**; sorry = **OLIVE** or **AUBURN** → **PURPLE**; blurry = **PURPLE**)

IPA Symbol	COLOR	
i	GREEN	MOVING VOWELS
eɪ	GRAY	
aɪ	WHITE	
oʊ	ROSE	
u	BLUE	
aʊ	BROWN	
ɔɪ	TURQUOISE	NON-MOVING VOWELS
ɪ	SILVER	
ɛ	RED	
æ	BLACK	
ɑ	OLIVE	
ɔ	AUBURN	
ʌ	MUSTARD	
ɜ	PURPLE	
ʊ	WOODEN	

The sounds at the left are all *moving* vowels (tense vowels, diphthongs, and glides). That is, the jaw and/or tongue move from one position to another in order to produce these vowel sounds. The “y” and “w” featured in the Chart indicate the direction of the movement in these vowel sounds.

These are all *non-moving* (still) vowels (lax vowels and monophthongs). That is, each sound is produced with a single non-moving tongue-jaw position.

How to Use The Color Vowel Chart in the Classroom

Strategy #1: Get to know the color vowels. Show *The Color Vowel Chart* to the class. Point to each color, and say the color name and the key word. Make sure you are producing the same vowel sound for both words, such as **BLUE** MOON. With beginning students, introduce and practice just a few colors at a time.

Strategy #2: Study by color. Create a Color Vowel Word List or word wall in the classroom to categorize and review words and phrases according to their stressed vowel sound. Identify the color of a given word or short phrase, and review it alongside other words of the same color. Have students create their own word lists in their notebooks and write words in the boxes according to the sound (color) of the stressed vowel. Together, read the words in each box, noticing their shared stressed vowel sound. Note: The color of a phrase is based on which word in the phrase receives the most stress, the focus word. For example, in the phrase *a bunch of bananas*, the words *bunch* and *bananas* both receive stress but *bananas* receives more stress because it is the last content word in the phrase.

Try it! → Look at the Color Vowel Word List. Say each color and key word and the vocabulary words and phrases below. Then have students repeat, emphasizing the stressed vowel sound.

Color Vowel Word List					
GREEN TEA		WHITE TIE		BLUE MOON	
peaches	cheese	papaya	pineapple	cucumbers	tuna
beans	zucchini	ice cream	limes	blueberries	soup
a jar of <u>pea</u> nut butter		rice		noodles	juice
SILVER PIN		TURQUOISE TOY		WOODEN HOOK	
chicken	fish	oil		cookies	pudding
a dozen <u>shri</u> mp	a carton of <u>mil</u> k	oysters		sugar	
GRAY DAY		PURPLE SHIRT		ROSE COAT	
mangoes	grapes	turnips		goat cheese	oatmeal
a box of <u>rais</u> ins	a dozen <u>egg</u> s	a <u>bur</u> ger		soda	coconut
a sack of <u>potato</u> es	<u>grape</u> fruit				milk
RED DRESS		A CUP OF MUSTARD		BROWN COW	
a head of <u>lett</u> uce	a loaf of <u>br</u> ead	mushrooms	onions	flour	
a bottle of <u>ket</u> chup		<u>h</u> oney		flowers	
BLACK CAT		OLIVE SOCK		AUBURN DOG	
apples	yams	hotdogs	popcorn	sausage	oranges
<u>rad</u> ishes	a bunch of <u>ban</u> anas	squash	avocados	strawberries	
cabbage		pasta	almonds		

Try it! → Add these words and phrases to the Color Vowel Word List.

coffee, cream, a jar of pickles, toast, pancakes, muffin, syrup, soy sauce, a bunch of carrots, celery, pepper, butter, yogurt, hamburger

(Answers: coffee = **AUBURN** or **OLIVE***; cream = **GREEN**; a jar of pickles = **SILVER**; toast = **ROSE**; pancakes = **BLACK**; muffin = **MUSTARD**; syrup = **GREEN** or **SILVER** or **PURPLE***; soy sauce = **TURQUOISE**; a bunch of carrots = **RED** or **BLACK***; celery = **RED**; pepper = **RED**; butter = **MUSTARD**; yogurt = **ROSE**; hamburger = **BLACK**. *Pronunciation varies depending on one's national, regional, or cultural background.)

Note: Compounds or set phrases are typically stressed on the first word and treated as one word whether they're written as one word (e.g., hotdogs, grapefruit, blueberries, pancakes) or two words (e.g., peanut butter, goat cheese, ice cream, soy sauce).

Strategy #3: Focus on word forms. Vocabulary development means knowing not just a single word, but the various forms that a word can take. For example, the word *photograph* is related to *photographer* and *photographic*. In English, a different form of the word may stress a different syllable. When teaching word forms, draw students' attention to the color of the stressed syllable in one form of the word and compare it to the color of its related forms.

ROSE	OLIVE	BLACK
photograph (or photo)	photographer	photographic

Try it! → What color is each word? Underline the stressed vowel and identify its vowel-color.

educator educational electric electrician

(Answers: educator = **RED**; educational = **GRAY**; electric = **RED**; electrician = **SILVER**)

Introducing *The Color Vowel Chart* at Different Levels

Beginning through intermediate learners

We recommend using *The Color Vowel Chart* with beginning learners. Most languages do not use stress the same way English does, so helping learners focus on stress is essential to a strong start in speaking and understanding English.

Sample Lesson:

Preparation:

- Select common words that have one of the following sounds in the stressed syllable. Here are possible words:
 - **GREEN**: *me*, *seat*, *teacher*, *tree*, *feet*, *teeth*, *meet*, *meal*, *read*
 - **OLIVE**: *hot*, *box*, *hospital*, *doctor*, *knock*, *clock*
 - **BLUE**: *shoe*, *student*, *afternoon*, *spoon*, *food*, *noon*
- Draw a blank Color Vowel Word List on the board.
- Have students draw a blank Color Vowel Word List in their notebooks, or provide copies for your students.

Lesson Steps:

1. Show students *The Color Vowel Chart*. Say *Tree. Tree. Tree. Teeeea-cher, teeeeach, teeeeach*. (Use pictures or drawings of each word if needed.) Exaggerate. Use gestures or a rubber band to show the lengthening of the first vowel sound. *Can you hear the same sound? Eeeeeee Seat. Seat. GREEN TEA, seat.* Now pointing to the Chart. **GREEN** TEA, *tree*, **GREEN** TEA, *teacher*, **GREEN** TEA, *seat*. [Continue until students seem to understand that you are drawing their attention to the stressed vowel sound in each word.]
2. Repeat the words *tree*, *teacher*, and *seat* as you write those words in the **GREEN** section of the Color Vowel Word List on the board.
3. Have students repeat the words on the list as you have modeled, using gestures to indicate the lengthening of the stressed vowel sound in each word.
4. Have students write the words on a Color Vowel Word List in their notebooks.
5. Repeat steps 1–4 when you introduce new words.

Key Points:

- Make a Color Vowel Word List on the wall and add new words to it as you study new vocabulary.
- Have students keep their own word lists in their notebooks.
- Be patient. It will take students time to be able to correctly identify the color of the stressed vowel. In the meantime, they are learning that it is important for them to listen for and begin to produce stress in spoken English.

Introducing *The Color Vowel Chart* at Different Levels

High intermediate through advanced learners

Sample Lesson:

Lesson Steps:

1. Show students *The Color Vowel Chart*. Say each color and key word, and have students repeat after you.
2. Invite students to identify the featured vowel sound in each color and key word. Make sure students are able to identify the featured vowel sounds before you move on in the lesson.
3. Facilitate discovery by using the days of the week. Have students identify the color of the stressed syllable in each word. Don't write the words on the board—the focus here is on listening to the vowel sound in the stressed syllable. *Monday* and *Sunday*, for example, are both **MUSTARD**. *Tuesday* is **BLUE**. *Wednesday* is **RED**.
4. Write (on the blackboard) and say each of the words below one by one. Have students repeat and then write (in their notebooks) each word in the Color Vowel Word List that corresponds to the vowel sound in the stressed syllable of the word or phrase. Students should work in pairs to decide where to place the word. The teacher should stand back during this activity, speaking only to provide model pronunciation.
 - (1-syllable words) *good*, *best*, *nice*, *sure*, *new*
 - (2-syllable words) *super*, *superb*, *awesome*, *skillful*, *friendly*
 - (3-syllable words) *amazing*, *fantastic*, *wonderful*
 - (4- and 5-syllable words) *approachable*, *unbelievable*, *out of this world*
5. To conclude this lesson, give students a small piece of paper each and have them write down one new word or phrase that they personally find difficult to pronounce. Collect the pieces of paper. Pick one word and write it on the board. Model the pronunciation of the word, and have students repeat. Have the class identify the stressed syllable, and underline the stressed vowel sound in the word on the board. Then have students identify the color of the stressed vowel sound. Do this with a few of the students' words at the end of each class, each time reminding students to write any difficult words in their Color Vowel Word List.

Key Points:

- Explain that you will use the Chart on a regular basis as an easy way to talk about the pronunciation of a word. For example, when a student comes upon the word *receive* in a text and asks you how to pronounce it, you might say “that word is **GREEN**; listen to how I say it,” then model the word and have the student repeat it back: “receive, **GREEN** TEA, receive.”
- Make a word wall and add new words and phrases to it as you study new vocabulary.
- Have students keep their own word lists in their notebooks.
- Post the Chart in your classroom and refer to it as needed. It will become a tool for helping students pronounce words and phrases correctly and can be used with any kind of lesson.