

Introduction to the Pronunciation of German Vowels

(a simplified guide for Americans learning German)

! single letters representing vowel sounds

German characters

	approximate equivalent English pronunciation	German words with "fake" English pronunciation
i (tense)	"ee" as in "feel / see / keep"	ihn [een] mir [mee-uh] Maschine [mah SHEEN uh]
i (lax)	"i" as in "hit / lid / give"	in [inn] Mitte [MIT-uh] bist [rhymes with "missed"]
ü	"ee" with rounded lips	über [EE buh] fünf [finf] für [fee-uh] ("ee" with round lips)
u	"oo" as in "loot / moon"	gut [goot] du [doo] nun [noon] Mutter [MOOT uh]
e (tense)	"ay" as in "say / bay"	geht [gate] lesen [LAY zun] Gebet [guh BAIT]
e (lax)	"e" as in "set / peck / lent"	sechs [zeks] Bett [bet] gelb [gelp] Fenster [FENN stuh]
e (schwa)	"uh" as in "of / above"	bitte [BIT uh] bekommen [buh KOMM un] habe [HAH buh]
ä	"ay" as in "say / bay"	spät [schpate] Mädchen [MATE xhun] fährt [fay-ut]
ö	"ay" with rounded lips	Löffel [LAY full] zwölf [tsvelf] ("ay" with rounded lips)
o (tense)	"oa" as in "soap / roam"	Ton [tone] Not [note] sog [zoke] Telefon [TAY lay fone]
o (lax)	"o" as in "lot / gone"	Gott [got] Sonntag [ZONN tahk] Morgen [MO-uh gun]
a	"ah" as in "father / bother"	vater [FAH tuh] haben [HAH bun] Tag [talk] alt [ahlt]

tense vowels (sometimes called "long" vowels) can usually be identified by:

- an "h" following the vowel: "Ahnung" → "a" followed by "h" is tense
- a single consonant following the vowel: "löben" → "o" followed by one consonant is tense
- a doubled spelling of the vowel: "Bee" → "ee" (doubled spelling) indicates a tense vowel

lax vowels (sometimes called "short" vowels) can usually be identified by multiple consonants following the vowel:

- "bist" → "i" is lax, indicated by multiple consonants "st" following the vowel

schwa "e" (a super short vowel) occurs:

- at the end of a word: bitte, danke, habe
- at the end of a word in the combinations "-el, -en, -er": Gabel, sagen, Messer
- in the prefixes "ge-" and "be-": benehmen, Besteck, gehabt, Geschirr

! letter combinations representing vowel sounds

German character combinations

	approximate equivalent English pronunciation	German words with "fake" English pronunciation
ei	"eye" as in "high / eye"	heiß [hice] eins [eye-ns] deine [DINE uh]
ai	"eye" as in "high / eye"	Mai [my] Hai [high] Waise [VIZE uh]
au	"ou" as in "ouch / house"	Haus [house] Auto [OW toe] aus [ow-ss]
eu	"oi" as in "foil / loiter"	heute [HOY tuh] neun [noin] neu [noy] Deutsch [doich]
äu	"oi" as in "foil / loiter"	läuft [loyft] Gläubiger [GLOY bee guh] Verkäufer [feh-uh KOY fuh]
ie	"ee" as in "feel / see / keep"	viel [feel] sieht [zeet] vier [fee-uh]
ie	"ee-uh" (in words of Latin origin)	Familie [fah MEE lee uh] Studie [SCHTOO dee uh]
-r	"uh" at end of word	Butter [BOO tuh] Motor [moe TOE-uh] Papier [pah PEE-uh]