

L

IPA Symbol: /l/

How to Pronounce /l/

Feel your tongue position: The tongue tip and front of the tongue raise to touch the roof of the mouth on the palate, just behind the front top teeth. The sides of your tongue should be down. Your lips should be relaxed, so avoid any tension or rounding that may be similar to /w/. If you feel this tension, try to smile slightly so that your lips are retracted away from your teeth.

Common Errors

Problem 1- Vowelization/deletion:

The most common issue with “L” is keeping the tongue too neutral and flat in the mouth so that it does not actually touch the roof of the mouth on the palate. This results in a vowel-like sound. In some cases, if the lips are also tense with rounding, it can sound like a /w/. so, “ball” can sound like “baw.”

Problem 2- Substituting with N:

Another common issue with “L” is substituting it with an /n/ instead. If air travels out the nose since the front of the mouth is closed by the tongue contacting the palate, then the result is an /n/ sound. To change this to an “L,” let the sides of your tongue fall down so that the air can come out of the mouth. Try to add a little “h” to help feel the air coming out of the mouth, instead of the nose.

Problem 3- Creating a “Clear L”:

The General American English “L” has a “darker” quality than most other languages. This means that the sound of the “L” is a bit more throaty, since more of the tongue is raised up to the palate, rather than just the very very tip of the tongue. The more of the front and middle of the tongue raises to the roof/palate, the “darker” sounding the “L” is. A “Clear L” involves only the tip of the tongue and the middle of the tongue falls very low in the mouth. This “Dark L” quality is more notable at the ends of syllables and word sin English, although an overall darker quality of L is observed in all word positions.

Spelling

If you see an “L” you can generally say the “L.” But there are a few exceptions.

Spelling Exceptions:

Here is the list of the very few exception words to be aware of:

The following “Ls” are not pronounced at all.

calm	The sea was calm.
palm	The palm tree swayed in the wind.
half	I practice for half an hour each day.
calf	One of our cows recently had a calf.
chalk	These cliffs are made of chalk.
talk	Don't talk with your mouth full.
walk	Let's walk home.



salmon	Salmon is a healthy food.
could	We could hear the wolves howling.
would	Would you like a strawberry?
should	You should put a coat on.

Minimal Pairs

The term “minimal pair” refers to one change in sound that changes the entire meaning of a word. As you say the second “L” version, ensure you feel the front of your tongue make full contact with the roof of your mouth. If both words sound the same, the “L” was not correctly pronounced.

W vs. L Minimal Pairs:

Beginning of words:

whoa	low	work	lurk	wide	lied
why	lie	where	lair	whim	limb
wham	lamb	wick	lick	went	lent
wax	lax	war	lore	weep	leap
wag	lag	womb	loom	ward	lord
whip	lip	wire	liar	wink	link
wit	lit	white	light	wait	late
way	lay	walk	lock	weed	lead (v)
wet	let	wimp	limp	wine	line
wed	led	wean	lean	wife	life
weak	leek	west	lest		

W and Deletion vs. L Minimal Pairs:

Ends of words:

bow	bowl	loco	local	row	roll
camo	camel	mayo	mail	sew	soul
chew	chill	meadow	medal	toe	toll
dough	dull	mow	mole	view	veal
duo	duel	NATO	natal	whoa	wool
foe	full	ow	owl	wow	wall
go	goal	radio	radial	xo	excel
hoe	hole	Reno	renal		
how	hall	Rio	real		

Minimal Pairs

/n/ vs. /L/

nap	lap	night	light	knife	life
neigh	lay	nine	line	knock	lock
net	let	nip	lip	knot	lot
nice	lice	no	low	know	low



ben bell
bin bill
nun null
bone bowl
bun bull
chin chill
coin coil
con call
cone coal
dawn doll
dean deal
done dull
even evil

fin fill
gin Jill
gun gull
hen hell
hun hull
in ill
baron barrel
Jane jail
Jen gel
keen keel
main mail
mean meal
on all

pin pill
rain rail
sane sail
sewn soul
sin sill
ten tell
tin till
tone toll
tune tool
vein veil
when well
win will
connect /collect

Difficult words with "L" and "N":

Walnut
Illness
Hazelnut
Wellness
Vulnerable
Only
Inlet
Mainly
Openly

Inlet
Evenly
Unleash
Unload
Enlist
Unlock
Inland
Online
Unlike

Unless
Alien
Manly
Plainly
Enlarged
Unlucky
Skinless
Heavenly
Painless