

CHAPTER FIVE

The Backing Vowels

[u]/[ju] Production

The vowel sounds [u] and [ju] are related in English. The vowel [u] appears in German, Italian, and French, though the European version has more intensity. The vowel [ju] is found only in English. The vowel [u] is found in the words: too, wound, blue, juice; [ju] in the words: view, beautiful, usual, music.

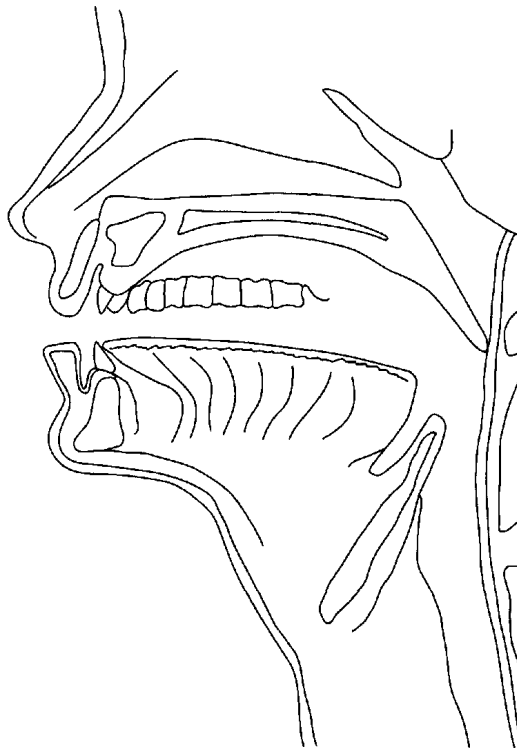


FIGURE 5.1 [u] / [ju]

Action

<i>Tongue</i>	tip touching lower front teeth back of tongue arched toward <i>soft palate</i> sides of tongue in contact with upper molars for [ju]-movement begins with [j] glide position— sides in contact with inner surface of upper teeth, then glides forward as it merges with [u]
<i>Lips</i>	round, smallest circular shape lip rounding essential to accurate production the rounder the lip contour, the higher the tongue arch
<i>Jaw</i>	mouth opening and jaw very small vertically <i>wide opening</i> in center of mouth between tongue and hard palate

Pitfalls to Avoid

Do not arch tongue too high in back.

Do not hold tongue/jaw too stiffly—muffles sound.

Do not nasalize [u] when adjacent to m, n—moon, fume.

Do not form vowel in throat—squeezed and guttural.

Avoid regional substitution of [ʊ] for [u].

EXAMPLES roof: [ɹuf] not [ɹʊf]
 root: [ɹut] not [ɹʊt]

Avoid off-glides with l.

EXAMPLES fool [ful] not [fu(ə)l]
 school [skul] not [sku(ə)l]

[ju] PRONUNCIATION: THE LIQUID U

Certain words often spelled “u” or “ew” can have two different pronunciations—either [u] or [ju]. The words “duty” and “duke” can be pronounced either [duti] or [djuti], [duk] or [djuk]. The second pronunciation, commonly called the Liquid U, is considered preferable when singing art song, oratorio, and opera and is the *only* pronunciation for RP and MA. Of course, there are exceptional circumstances. In North American songs with a juvenile text or colloquial flavor, the [ju] sounds too stuffy.

The words with two possible pronunciations usually contain the English spellings “u,” “ew,” “eu,” or “ue” and are preceded by one of the following consonants: d, n, l, s, t, or th.

Below is a list of the most commonly used of these words:

d	duty, duly, due, dew, duke, endure, induce, duplicate
n	new, knew, renew, news, nuisance, numerous, nuclear*
l	lute, alluring, illusion, elude, prelude, interlude
s	suitor, pursuit, assume, consume, presume, resume
t	tune, Tuesday, tumult, student, stupid, gratitude, multitude, astute, tutor
th	enthuse, enthusiasm

Exceptions to these spellings are words that should be pronounced with [u] only: blue, blew, clue, include, exclude, flute, flew, flue, glue, plume, slew, and words spelled with “u” but that have an [ʌ] pronunciation: dumb, numb, lung, sung, tumble, thunder, and so on.

[ju] only: There are some words not listed that always use the [ju] pronunciation. The most common of them are:

music, amuse, huge, few, cure, imbued, human, Hugh,
humility, humorous, excuse, calculate, refute, future,
beautiful, mute, value, hue, unison, university, unit,
usurp, community

* Nuclear is often mispronounced in the United States as [nukjulə-]. The American Standard pronunciation is [nuklɪə-] or [njuklɪə-].

EXERCISES

1. Practice intoning/singing the following words containing [u] vowel:

too	cool	blue	blew
through	lose	who	whom
fruit	moon	noon	flute
roof	choose	glue	flew
gloom	soothe	tomb	wounded
June	bruise	peruse	recruit
school*	fool*	tool*	cool*

* Avoid off-glide [ə] by not anticipating [l].

2. Practice making the distinction between [u] and [ju] in the following words:

stoop → stupid	noon → new
two → tune	do → dew
pooh → pew	who → hue
coo → cue	flute → lute*



3. Transcribe and recite the following text:

I have wished a bird would fly away
 And not sing round my house all day.
 I have clapped my hands at him from the door
 When it seemed as if I could bear no more.
 The fault must partly have been in me,
 The bird was not to blame for his key.
 And besides there must be something wrong
 In wanting to silence any song.

(Robert Frost / Celius Dougherty, "A Minor Bird")**



4. Transcribe the following song text:

Slowly, silently, now the moon
 Walks the night in her silver shoon;
 This way, and that, she peers, and sees
 Silver fruit upon silver trees;
 And moveless fish in the water gleam,
 By silver reeds in a silver stream.

(Walter de la Mare / John Duke, "Silver")



5. Transcribe the following song text:

See how they love me,
 Green leaf, gold grass,
 Swearing my blue wrists
 Tick and are timeless.
 See how it woos me,

*In AS and Historic RP/MA, [ljut], in Modern RP/MA, [lut].

**From "A Minor Bird" in *The Poetry of Robert Frost*, edited by Edward Connery Lathem. Copyright 1928, 1969 by Henry Holt and Company. Copyright 1956 by Robert Frost. Reprinted by permission of Henry Holt and Company, LLC.

Old sea, blue sea,
Curving a half moon
Round to surround me.
Yet you rebuke me,
O love, I only pursue,
See how they love me.

(Howard Moss / Ned Rorem, "See How They Love Me")

[ʊ] Production

The vowel [ʊ] is a very characteristic vowel in English that is considered short in duration. It appears in German, but not in Italian or French. In English, it can be found in stressed words such as: good, could, book, full, bosom, cushion; or in unstressed positions as a substitute for [ə]: fulfill, joyful, supreme, today.

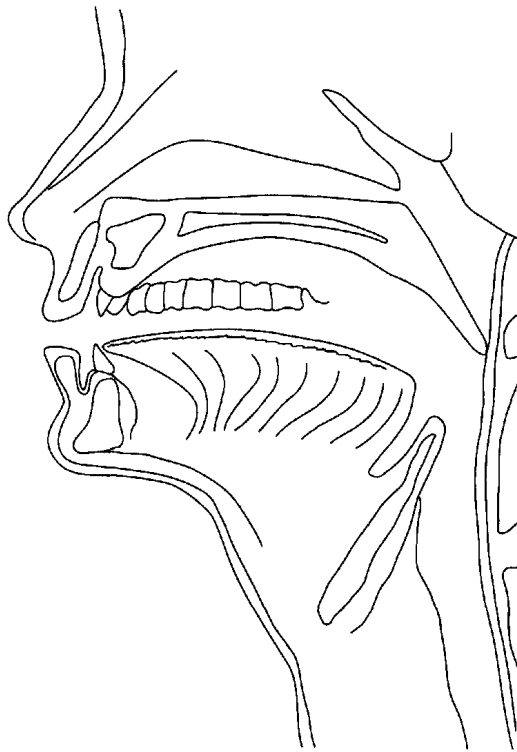


FIGURE 5.2 [ʊ]

Action

<i>Tongue</i>	tip behind lower front teeth back of tongue arched toward soft palate but lower than for [u]
<i>Lips</i>	rounded but less firm than [u] cheeks energized
<i>Jaw</i>	slightly dropped from [u] position

Pitfalls to Avoid

Avoid pushing from throat with guttural sound.

Avoid drawled, off-glides: put-[pʊ(ə)t]

pull-[pʊ(ə)l]

Avoid substitution of [u] for [ʊ]—sounds foreign

EXAMPLES put: [pʊt] not [put]

pull: [pʊl] not [pul]

look: [lʊk] not [luk]

The vowel [ʊ] is frequently difficult for singers because it is rarely vocalized and therefore is often distorted or substituted with [u]. As with the [æ] vowel, [ʊ] must be drilled and vocalized in order to easily produce the beautiful English vowel it can be.

EXERCISES

1. Practice alternating between the [ʊ] and [u] sounds in the words listed below:

[ʊ]	[u]
pull	pool
stood	stewed
could	cooed
would	wooded
full	fool
should	shoed
cook	kook
hood	who'd

2. Practice speaking/intoning the following words:

full	wood	good	look
put	book	stood	would
push	foot	crooked	wolf
fulfill	wool	forsook	woman

3. Transcribe and intone the following text:

Oh, sweet and lovely lady, be good!
 Oh, lady be good to me!
 I am so awf'ly misunderstood,
 So lady, be good to me.
 Oh, please have some pity,
 I'm all alone in this big city,
 I tell you I'm just a lonesome
 babe in the wood,
 So lady be good to me!

(Ira Gershwin and George Gershwin, "Oh, Lady Be Good!")*

*OH, Lady Be GOOD! Music and Lyrics by George Gershwin and Ira Gershwin. © 1924 WBMusic Corp. (Renewed) Gershwin®, George Gershwin® and Ira Gershwin™ are trademarks of Gershwin Enterprises. All Rights Reserved. Used by kind permission.

[o] Production

The sound [o] represents the vowel in an unstressed syllable like in the word "obey." When it is found in a stressed position, it becomes the diphthong [ou]. This single pure vowel appears in German, Italian, and French; the diphthong does not.

Action

<i>Tongue</i>	tip on contact with lower front teeth back arched halfway between [u] and [ɔ]
<i>Lips</i>	rounded, with larger circle than for [u]
<i>Mouth</i>	quite open jaw released cheeks lifted and energized

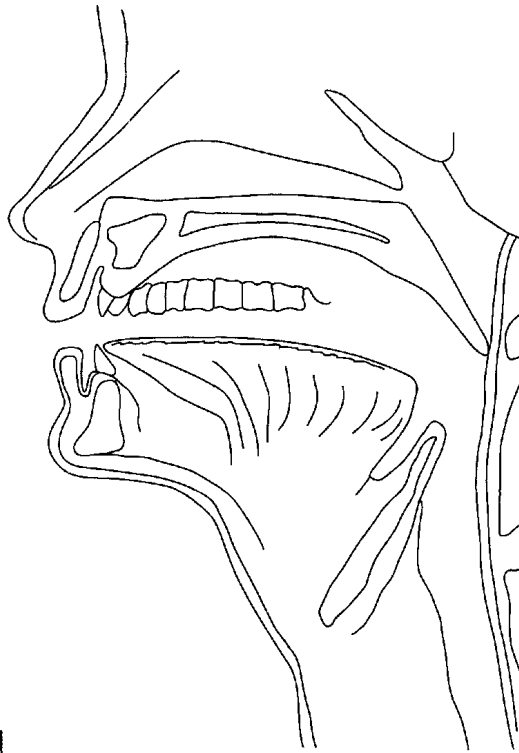


FIGURE 5.3 [ɔ]

More detail will be given on this vowel as it appears within the diphthong [ou] later in this text. Listed below are words that contain the unstressed [ɔ] vowel as a [ə] substitute.

<u>o</u> bey	pr <u>o</u> vide	mel <u>o</u> dy
<u>o</u> mit	pr <u>o</u> tect	desol <u>o</u> late
p <u>o</u> lice	pr <u>o</u> found	indol <u>o</u> lent
p <u>o</u> lite	pr <u>o</u> nounce	omnip <u>o</u> tent

[ɔ] Production

A characteristic, long English vowel, [ɔ] also appears in Italian, German, and French in shorter versions. For singing, it should be a very long “aw”-shaped vowel, as opposed to the shorter versions of the European languages. It is found in words such as: saw, caught, daughter, broad, office, walking, call, and sought.

The English spellings for [ɔ] in American Standard pronunciation are:

al	as in	all, call
aw	as in	awe, awful
augh	as in	caught, daughter
ough	as in	bought, thought
ong	as in	song, long
off/of	as in	off, often*, soft
oss	as in	cross, loss
ost	as in	lost, cost

In RP, the [ɔ] is actually a more closed, raised vowel than its AS counterpart. To notate the difference in this vowel, it will be written as [ɔ̄]. See chapter 14 for the production of [ɔ̄].



FIGURE 5.4 [ɔ]

* The “t” in “often” is not sounded in AS, RP, or MA. It is, however, sounded in several regional dialects.

Action

<i>Tongue</i>	tip in contact with lower front teeth back arch slightly lower than for [o] lowest arch of all the lip vowels sides of tongue in contact with <i>lower molars</i>
<i>Lips</i>	protruded forward lips far apart, narrowed at corners
<i>Jaw</i>	dropped as much as for [a]

Pitfalls to Avoid

Do not change lip shape during production.

Do not tense back of tongue.

Do not substitute [ɑ] for [ɔ]—a common U.S. regionalism.

EXAMPLES water [wɔtə] not [wɑtə]
 thought [θɔt] not [θɑt]
 broad [brɔd] not [brɑd]

Do not substitute the RP vowel—[ɜ] for [ɔ].

EXAMPLES water [wɔtə] not [wɜtə]
 thought [θɔt] not [θɜt]
 broad [brɔd] not [brɜd]

Do not substitute a Brooklyn accent—[ʊɔ] for [ɔ].

EXAMPLES dog [dɔg] not [dʊɔg]
 office [ɔfɪs] not [ʊɔfɪs]

Tips for Vocal Ease

The vowel [ɔ] can be closed to [o] in the *passaggio* and for melismatic settings of this vowel. It keeps the vowel from spreading in the *passaggio*. It also conserves breath, which makes it easier to negotiate the run.

3. Practice the following text in Historic RP:

Unlearned he in aught
Save that which love has taught . . .
I am the lowliest tar
That sails the water,
And you, proud maiden, are
The captain's daughter.

(W. S. Gilbert / Arthur Sullivan, From *H.M.S. Pinafore*)

[ɒ] Production

The vowel [ɒ] is a short open o vowel. This vowel is found in words with an “o” spelling, as in “honest,” “on,” “upon,” “not,” “opera” in RP and is heard regionally throughout North America. It is the lowest of the tongue vowel sounds that has lip rounding. The vowel sound is halfway between [ɑ] and [ɔ]. The position is most easily found by saying [ɑ] while slightly rounding the lips.

This vowel is heard on the Eastern Seaboard and several parts of North America, influenced historically by British immigration patterns. It is somewhat controversial as to whether this vowel usage is considered standard for neutral American speech. Since this vowel is not used in American broadcast speech, it will not be used in this book for American Standard pronunciation. Details about its production and use can be found in chapters 14 and 15.