



The Guide to Sing-lish!

Learning to read vowels



Traditionally when learning how to read English – we were told there are 5 vowels (a, e, i, o, u) – and given a bunch of rules to know when to use “short A” as in “man” or “long A” as in “mane”.

When you take all the combinations, it turns out that we pronounce 12 vowel sounds when speaking English.

Take a moment to sing or say them to yourself on the same note.

A	man, hand, sand	EE	me, she, see	OH	go, foal, boat
AH	father, cot	EH	men, head, red	OO	soon, food, you
AW	gone, off, fall	ER	girl, word, learn	oo	full, stood, book, could
AY	mane, hay, date	IH	sit, bill, win	UH	sun, hush, love

The 12 target vowel sounds we use to sing English.

(Note that long OO as in soon is traditionally written as \overline{OO} . Short OO as in stood is traditionally written as $\underset{\sim}{OO}$ – however this is difficult for email, so for the purposes of Sing-lish we use lowercase “oo” to mean short $\underset{\sim}{OO}$.)

Diphthongs



Obviously, with just the 12 vowels, we can’t say very interesting words in English. To create more interesting words, we combine vowel sounds – if this combination occurs in the same syllable, this is called a diphthong. These are so common we hardly know we’re using them.

If the diphthong lands on a really long note, the director will usually direct when the first vowel ends and the second one begins. In slow songs, the first vowel is held longer than in fast songs.

Take a minute to sing or say these diphthongs to yourself on the same note.

AY-EE	<i>Say, eight</i>	OH-OO	<i>Show, coat, go</i>
AH-EE	<i>My, eye, find, night, time</i>	OH-EE	<i>Boy, toy</i>
AH-OO	<i>How, now, cow</i>		

The most common diphthongs in English.

Three vowels together is called a triphthong – for example **flower** is (**FL-AH-OO-ER**).

Singable consonants



Consonants break down into two major categories: those which can hold a note and those which cannot. For example, you can't hold out the letter "P" for very long, but you can hum on the letter "M".

There are 22 consonant sounds, 9 of which are considered "Singable Consonants" as they can hold a pitch.

Try singing "Sue" then sing "Zoo". Notice how the "Z" can hold a pitch, but the "S" cannot? That's a singable consonant.

Sing each word on the same note, pausing on the bolded singable consonant.

Voiced Fricatives	Nasals	Liquids
V as in Valve	M as in Moo	L as in Love
TH as in Other	N as in Soon	R as in Rare
Z as in Zoom	NG as in Sing	
ZH as in Pleasure		
Fricatives create sound using friction between the lips, tongue or teeth. E.g. the "v" sound is created by putting your lower lip on your upper teeth.	Nasals create sound by lowering the soft palette (the squishy bit of the roof of the mouth) so the air mostly pushes out of the nasal passage.	Liquids are similar to vowels in that they are produced "without friction".

The singable consonants.

How long you decide to hold out a singable consonant can often add interpretation the music – there's a difference between singing **love** and **//////////love**. For ends of phrases, it is critical to support and sing through these consonants so as to not create gaps in the sound.

...and sometimes Y and W.



The consonant Y is always pronounced with an 'EE' vowel. For example **you** is **EE-OO**.

Anything starting with a 'WH' stays spelled with a 'WH'. For example **where** is **WHEHR**. The 'wh' sound is called an 'aspirant' – coming from 'aspiration' meaning 'breathing' - which means it's a whispered consonant.

However, if the word only starts with a 'W', then the vowel 'OO' is used. For example **world** is **OO-ERLD**.

Sing-lish! for iPhone – <http://www.toothbrushisland.com/singlish/>

Hey, you forgot about the schwa!



For Sing-lish! we don't worry about the 'ə' thing as much, because schwas are the unstressed syllable in the word. For these we typically try and find the closest match to the 12 target vowels and use that. Sometimes you may find you want to switch from the suggested vowel to a brighter one.

e.g. the translator may translate "angel" as AY-EE-NJUHL, but you may prefer AY-EE-NJEHL.

About Sing-lish! for iPhone



All these rules can get a bit complicated to remember. Starting out, I just wanted a dictionary to tell me how to sing the words rather than trying to sort it all out in my head.

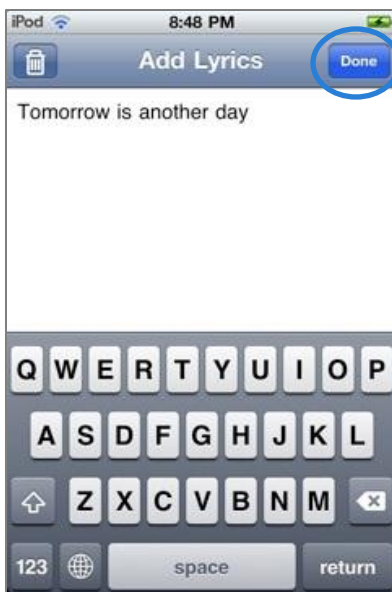
If you have an iPhone, iPad or iPod Touch, the [Sing-lish!](#) app can be downloaded from the Apple App Store. You can easily add lyrics and translate.

The translation can then be sent via email so you can later print out the translation from your home computer or send it onwards.

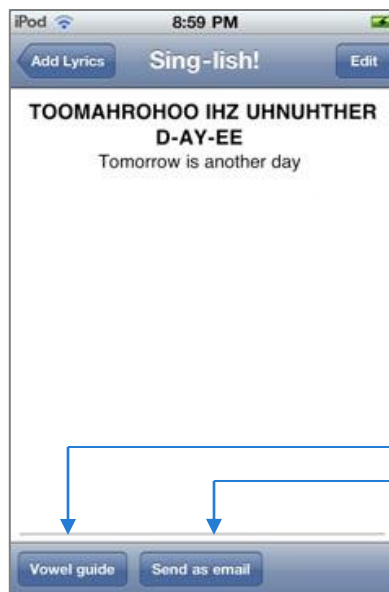


Using Sing-lish!

Sing-lish! is very straightforward to use. Simply add text and translate!



Enter the lyrics and press done.



The lyrics are converted to Sing-lish!

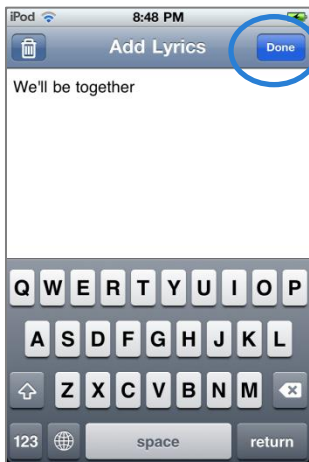
The 'Vowel guide' can be used to quickly remind yourself how to say each vowel.

'Send as email' can be used to send these lyrics to a home computer or to others who might need the translation.

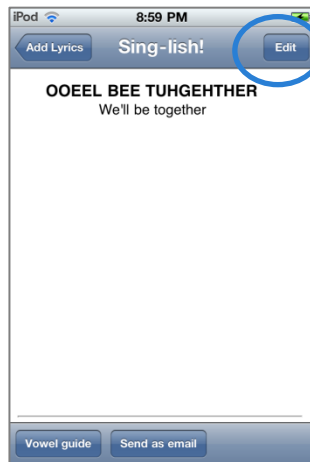
Customizing the dictionary

The Sing-lish! translator is based on the [CMU Pronouncing Dictionary](#), which has encoded how people say particular words in American English. The CMU dictionary uses a phonetic spelling with symbols from a special [Arpabet](#) (as opposed to alphabet). The translator interprets this to create a translation using the 12 vowels described above. Fortunately you don't need to know any of that to use the dictionary, but we must give credit to the origins of the Sing-lish! translations.

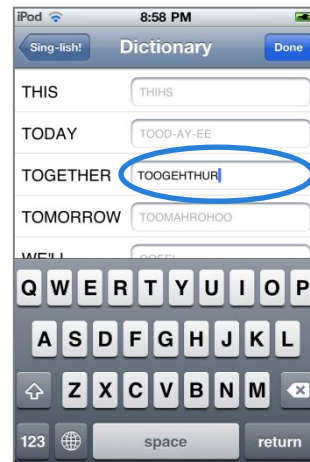
While this dictionary is fairly extensive, it is based upon how you would say the words in English – this means occasionally you might decide to override the spelling. The [Sing-lish! for iPhone app](#) allows you to customize the dictionary.



Enter the lyrics and press done to view the Sing-lish! translation



Press the Edit button to change the translation.



Type in the new translation, then press done to return. Removing the text using the delete key returns the dictionary to its default.

Suggestions for translation improvement are always welcome:
singlish@toothbrushisland.com

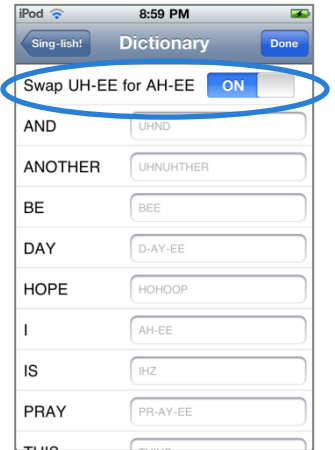
Swap UH-EE for AH-EE

The AH vowel can be hard to match amongst a larger group. In certain cases there may be overachievers that raise the soft palette too high for AH, some who open their mouth too wide, etc. For larger groups sometimes it is easier to use the UH-EE diphthong rather than the AH-EE diphthong. This setting can also be found in the [Edit Dictionary](#) page.

Convince yourself these are pretty similar:

Climb: KL-AH-EEM

Climb: KL-UH-EEM



Tip: Making your vowels sound great...



Vowels are produced when your lips, tongue and teeth are set up in particular ways. Getting everyone to agree on the basic shape of the mouth means is one step towards creating a great unit sound.

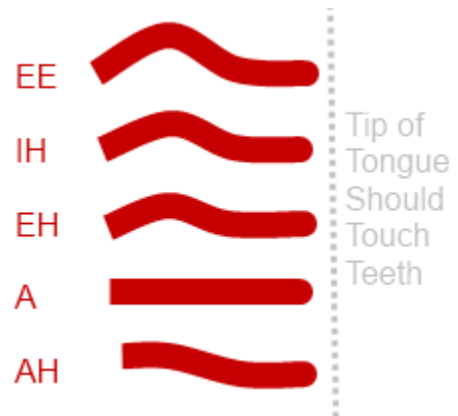
Rule of thumb - Your tongue must touch the back of your lower teeth all the time.

The square vowels – EE, IH, EH, A, AH and UH

For these vowels think as if the inside of your mouth is a rectangular Tupperware container – this will help you envision creating a square tunnel of space all the way to the back of your mouth.






To find how far your mouth should be open, tilt your head all the way back, then slowly bring it forward letting your jaw hang loose. There should be a finger-width of space between your teeth.

The relative placement of the tongue for the major square vowels is demonstrated to the left. Have a moment to try these vowels out and see if you can feel your tongue's position!



The round vowels – AW, OH, oo, OO, and ER

For these vowels your lips should form a more circular shape.

AW		OO as in food	
OH		ER or UR	
oo as in book			

Lip shapes for the round vowels.

Of these vowels, the most important to get matched are OH and OO as they are often held out. These are quite tricky to remember to match.

Getting a good OH vowel – a resonant OH vowel will have lots of space in the back. Sing K-OH to get the sensation of how open it should be.

Getting a good OO vowel – to get a great OO vowel – make your lips form the bell of a trumpet. Your lower lip should be out enough to catch a drop of morning dew.

Tip: Target vowels



When singing longer notes in a group, two things are important:

1. How you are going to sing the vowel on the held out note
2. Getting to the vowel at the very same time

Sometimes, notes sound out of tune, when it is really a matter of hitting the target cleanly and the same way across the group.

It is often the case that two parts might have different words. In this case, it's good to look at both sets of lyrics to see what vowels they have in common.

Example from the end of "Carol of the Bells"		
Part 1	(Their joyful tone) THEHR J-OH-EE-FooL T- OH-OO -N	(To every home) TOO EHVEREE H- OH-OO -M
Part 2, 3 & 4 (at the same time)	H- OH ----- OO -M (Home)	H- OH ----- OO -M (Home)

In the example above, it would be important to make sure parts 2, 3, and 4 [set up a good round OH vowel for part 1 to lock into](#). All the parts then must agree to switch to the OO vowel – which is usually a signal from the director - but in a quartet situation can be done by the lead.

Tip: Don't have an iThing?

That's ok, there is a simplified translator on the web!

Visit it at <http://www.toothbrushisland.com/singlish/>

Other resources

- Henry, Jim. (2008). Singlish: Word Sounds, Not Words - <http://www.sweetadelineintl.org/Handouts2008/Singlish%20-%20Word%20Sounds%20Not%20Words%20-%20Henry.pdf>
- Norton, Ted. (2009). Singing Better Vowels - <http://www.musicdted.info/SingingBetter2/Vowels.html>
- Henderson, Larra. (2001). "How to Train Singers: With Illustrated Natural Techniques & Audio Exercises", Parker Pub Co; 2nd edition. ISBN 0130429031.
- The CMU Pronouncing Dictionary, 2008. Carnegie Mellon University. - <http://www.speech.cs.cmu.edu/cgi-bin/cmudict>

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