

Understanding Phonetic Spelling Symbols and What They Mean

KS3 Ages 11-14 🕒 3 min read

What is Phonetic Spelling?

Phonetic spelling is a way of writing down exactly how a word sounds using special symbols. It helps us pronounce words correctly, even if we've never heard them spoken aloud before. When you see a word in a dictionary with funny symbols next to it, that's phonetic spelling!

English spelling can be really confusing. The word "tough" doesn't sound like it's spelled, and neither does "through" or "island." That's why dictionaries use phonetic symbols to show the real pronunciation.

The Main Phonetic Symbols

The most common system is called the **International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA)**. Here are some key symbols you'll see:

Vowel sounds are shown with simple letters and special marks. For example, the **schwa** (ə) is the most common vowel sound in English—it's the "uh" sound you hear in words like "about" and "forgotten." The symbol /æ/ shows the "a" sound in "cat," while /i:/ shows the long "ee" sound in "tree."

Think of it like: phonetic symbols are instructions for your mouth, like a recipe telling you exactly which ingredients to mix and how.

Consonant sounds mostly use letters you already know, but some have special marks. The symbol /ŋ/ shows the "ng" sound at the end of "ring," and /θ/ is the "th" sound in "think."

Stress marks are tiny lines that show which part of a word to emphasize. A mark before a syllable (like ') means say that part louder. For example, "CATerpillar" has stress on the first syllable: 'kætəpɪlə.

Why Phonetic Spelling Matters

Learning phonetic symbols helps you become independent when reading new words. You don't have to wait for someone to tell you how to say "algorithm" or "Renaissance"—you can sound it out using the symbols. It's especially useful when learning to spell tricky words correctly.

Teachers and dictionaries love phonetic spelling because it takes away the guesswork from English pronunciation. Once you know what the symbols mean, you can read any word correctly!