

Thai Pronunciation and Phonetic Symbols

Prawet Jantharat Ed.D.

This guideline contains a number of things concerning the pronunciation of Thai. Thai writing system is a non-roman alphabet system. This pronunciation guideline is known as Thai phonetic system. It is important that students who study Thai memorize the phonetic symbols. Each symbol represents a spoken sound of Thai, not necessarily a transcribing of the Thai writing. This course attempts to teach spoken Thai. Students may not be able to read or write many words that are immediately needed for speaking. The phonetic symbols in the text will help students to sound out the words and phrases needed.

This guideline divides the phonetics symbols into 3 basic components; consonants, tones, and vowel symbols.

Consonants are divided into initial consonants, final consonants, and consonant clusters. Vowels are divided into 9 pairs for short and long vowels and 3 pairs of short and long diphthongs. Four tones marks represent 4 of the 5 tones and a syllable with no tone mark represents a mid tone.

Remember, though, that no written instructions can take the place of a native speaker. You as a student should strive to imitate the pronunciation of your teachers and other native speakers of Thai.



Phonetic Symbols for Thai Pronunciation

A. Consonant Sounds

1. Initial Consonants

	Symbol	English Sample	Note
1.	ch-	Cheese	It is very close between Thai “ch” and English “ch” in cheese only a practiced ear can hear the different.
2.	c-	None	The sound is slightly like a ch- or the “j” in the word “joy”
3.	r-	None	Thai “r” usually approximates the trilled “r” of Spanish
4.	ŋ	singer	In English, it only occurs as the final sound of a syllable, where as in Thai it can occur as either an initial or a final.
5.	ʔ-	Oh, oh	ʔ represents a closing of the throat. It occurs frequently in Thai as both an initial and a final consonant. It is called the glottal stop.
6.	p-	Spin	This consonant may sound like a “b” to students at first. Say spin many times and drop the “s” you will get the Thai “p”.
7.	t-	steam	Thai “t” may sound like “d” to English speaker. Use the word “steam” and then drop the “s”.
8.	k-	Skate	In practicing Thai “k”, use the word skate and follow the same practice as Thai “p” and “t”.
9.	ph-	Pea	Say these as you would in English but not so forcefully.
10.	th-	Tea	
11.	kh-	Key	
12.	b-	Bee	

Symbol	English Sample	Note
13. d-	Day	Numbers 14 to 21 are pronounced the same in Thai as in English
14. s-	See	
15. f-	Far	
16. m-	Me	
17. n-	Not	
18. l-	Law	
19. h-	Him	
20. w-	We	
21. y-	Ye	

2. Final Consonants

Only 9 of the 21 symbols occur at the end of a syllable. The symbols –m, -n, -ŋ, -w, and –y are called sonorant finals and –p, -t, and –k are called stop finals.

Symbol	English Sample	Note
1. -m	Ham	The sonorant finals are pronounced as they are in English.
2. -n	Can	
3. -ŋ	King	
4. -w	Cow	
5. -y	Boy	
6. -p	Captain	Note that “p”, “t”, and “k” and not “ph”, “th”, and “kh” occur as finals in Thai.
7. -t	Pitman	
8. -k	Back	
9. -ʔ*	Oh, oh	

*many textbooks drop this sound

3. Consonant Clusters

There are 12 consonant combinations in Thai. The following chart shows all of them. They all occur as initial consonants

	r	l	w
k	kraap	klap	kwaa
kh	khraŋ	khlaŋ	
p	praap	plaa	
ph	phraom	phleŋ	
t	tii		
th	nithraa*		

* very rare

B. Vowels

Thai language has 9 pairs of short and long simple vowels and 3 pairs of short and long diphthongs. The difference in speech between the short and the long is one of duration.

1. Simple Vowels

A simple letter represents a short vowel, and a double letter represents a long vowel.

Often, in many textbook, a short vowel is accompanied by a final “ʔ” when written alone.

In this textbook, a short vowel is written with a single letter only except in diphthongs.

	Short	Long	English Sound	Note
1.	a	aa	fa	
2.	ə	əə	her	Somewhat like “her” without “r”
3.	ɯ	ɯɯ	none	No English sound
4.	i	ii	me	
5.	e	ee	may	
6.	ɛ	ɛɛ	dad	
7.	u	uu	soon	
8.	o	oo	so	
9.	ɔ	ɔɔ	law	

2. Diphthongs

Here are the three pairs of short and long diphthongs.

	Short	Long
1	iaʔ	ia
2	ɯaʔ	ɯa
3	uaʔ	ua

Follow the pronunciation of your teachers for more accuracy.

3. Other combinations when vowels combine with “w” or “y”.

These spelling may be some difficulty in pronunciation.

1	iw	iaw
2	eew	uy
3	ɛɛw	uay
4	aaw	ɯay

Note: - ai - is used throughout the text instead of -ay – for shorter sound

C. Tones

Each Thai syllable is said with one of 5 tones. The tone of the syllable is important in determining the meaning of the word.

Tone Marks

The following diacritical marks are used to indicate tone in Thai phonetics.

	Mark	Name
1	none	Mid
2	̀	Low
3	´	High
4	ˆ	Falling
5	ˇ	Rising

The Royal Academy of Thailand also has a guideline how to transcribe Thai words and sounds into English. Signs and names in Thai follow this guideline. However, this guideline does not include tones.