

Diphthongs

“Diphthong” comes from the Greek word diphthongs. It literally means “having two sounds.” More specifically, diphthongs deal with vowels. Every vowel has its own short sound and long vowel sound. However, diphthongs come into play whenever a vowel makes a new and different sound, usually because it’s working in conjunction with another vowel.

One of the best diphthong examples is the word “oil.” Here, we have two vowels working side by side and, together, they create a sound different than anything “O” or “I” alone can produce. And that’s just scratching the surface. Let’s take a closer look.



Diphthongs and Gliding Vowels

A single vowel, such as the “O” or “I” in “oil” is called a monophthong (mono for one, di for two). An example of a monophthong is the “O” in “hop.” But, when we move from one vowel sound to another, such as the “oi” in “oil,” it’s called gliding. As such, diphthongs are sometimes referred to as “gliding vowels.”

Linguists love studying diphthongs because they vary between dialects, languages, and continents. For example, New Yorkers adopted a diphthong that features an “aw” sound. An example would

be the way certain New Yorkers pronounce “dog” in a manner that sounds more like “dawg.”

Likewise, folks over in Birmingham, England adopted a diphthong that features an “oi” sound, among others. An example would be how certain folks in Birmingham pronounce “nice” in a manner that sounds more like “noice”

American English Diphthongs

Considering the intricacy of the subject, you won’t be surprised to learn there are dividing opinions about the number of diphthongs in American English. Some will say eight; others ten.

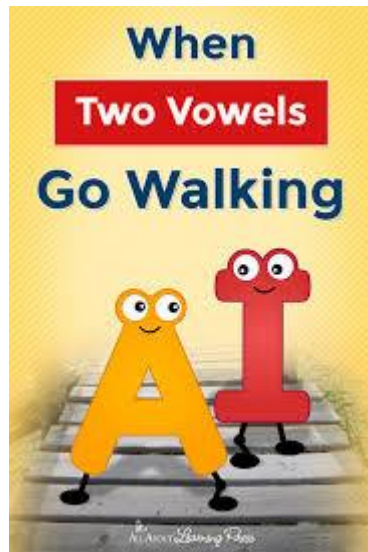
In some of the examples below, there’s only one vowel. How can this be a diphthong, you say? Well, whenever there’s movement in your mouth as you pronounce the letter and it makes a long vowel sound, it’s mimicking two vowels. That’s why the “di” or “two” remains, even though there may be only one vowel written.

Maybe the easiest way to recognize a diphthong is to listen to the sound created by the vowel or vowels when you say it out loud. If the vowel sound changes, you've got yourself a diphthong. Without getting too detailed (or any more confusing), let's look at eight of the heavy hitters.

/aɪ/

This diphthong uses letters and letter combinations like /i/, /igh/, and /y/ to form sounds similar to “eye.” Here are a few more examples:

Cry



My
Like
Bright
Lime

This diphthong uses letters and letter
/eɪ/

combinations like /ey/, /ay/, /ai/ and /a/ to form sounds similar to “great.” Here are a few more examples:

Bake
Rain
Lay
Eight
Break

/əʊ/

This diphthong uses letters and letter combinations like /ow/, /oa/ and /o/ to form sounds similar to “boat.” Here are a few more examples:

Go
Oh

This diphthong uses letters and letter

Slow

Loan

Though

/aʊ/

combinations like /ou/ and /ow/ to form sounds similar to “ow!” Here are a few more examples:

Bound

House

Brown

How

Now

/eə/

This diphthong uses letters and letter combinations like /ai/, /a/, and /ea/ to form sounds similar to “air.” Here are a few more examples:

This diphthong uses letters and letter

Pair

Lair

Stare

Care

Bear

/ɪə/

combinations like /ee/, /ie/ and /ea/ to form sounds similar to “ear.” Here are a few more examples:

Career

Here

Near

Year

Pier

This diphthong uses letters and letter
/ɔɪ/

This diphthong uses letters and letter
combinations like /oy/ and /oi/ to form sounds
similar to “oil.” Here are a few more examples:

Boy

Coy

Foil

Coin

/ʊə/

combinations like /oo/, /ou/, /u/, and /ue/ to
form sounds similar to “cure.” Here are a few
more examples:

Fur

Sure

Lure

Pure

