

Pure vowels

	Anterior vowels		Posterior vowels
	Spread	Round	Round
Most closed	[i]	[y]	[u]
	[e]	[ø]	[o]
		[ə]	
	[ɛ]		[ɔ]
	[a]	[œ]	
Most open			

Final e in opera

In singing, unlike spoken French, final *e*'s get their own syllable and are pronounced [ə].

e.g. *aime* [ɛm] → [ɛ mə] ; *chose* [ʃoz] → [ʃo zə]

This guide will include the added final *e* in phonetic spellings. It will also provide examples from the opera *Carmen* as reference.

Anterior spread vowels

[i] : *i* (by itself in a syllable), *î, î, y* (by itself in a syllable)

[e] : *é es, ai, ait, ais, aient, ay, ei, er, ez*

[ɛ] : *è, ê, e* (before a consonant in a syllable), *ai, ait, ais, aient, ay, ei*

- For syllables that are pronounced [e] or [ɛ], they are usually [e] if the syllable ends on a vowel, and [ɛ] if the syllable ends on a consonant, or followed by a final [ə] in singing.
- For *ai, ait, ais, aient*, both [e] and [ɛ] are acceptable. (e.g. *j'étais* [ʒe te] or [ʒɛ tɛ])
- Exception : *faisons* is pronounced [fə zɔ̃]

[a] : *a, à, â*

- The group *oi* is pronounced [wa]
- Exception : *femme* is pronounced [fam]

Anterior round vowels

[y] : *u, û*

- Exception : the word *eu* by itself (e.g. *j'ai eu*) is pronounced [y]

[ø] : *eu, œu*

[œ] : *eu, œu*

- For syllables that are pronounced [ø] or [œ], they are usually [ø] if the syllable ends on a vowel (e.g. *deux, feu*), and [œ] if the syllable ends on a consonant (e.g. *odeur, cœur*)
- Exception : *euse* [øz] as in *joyeuse, dangereuse, or heureuse*.

For those who struggle to pronounce the French *u* [y], go slowly from [i] to [u], the sound in the middle will be [y].

Neutral vowel [ə]

In French, the neutral syllable [ə] is produced by the letter *e* when it is not followed by a consonant in the syllable, or has any accent modifications. It is slightly more rounded than the German *Schwa*, almost between [ø] and [œ]. Making it more rounded will also help sustain the vowel in singing.

- To differentiate [ø], [ə], and [œ], practice by opening your mouth a little more every time. You can also put your fingers in front of your teeth, one for [ø], two for [ə], three for [œ].

Posterior round vowels

[u] : *ou, où, ôû*

[o] : *o, ô, eau, au*

[ɔ] : *o, au*

- When pronouncing *o* and *au*, because of regional differences, [o] and [ɔ] are the most interchangeable vowels in modern standard French.
- The letter *o* by itself is usually [ɔ], with the most common exception *ose* which is pronounced [oz], such as *rose* or *chose*.

Nasal vowels

There are three nasal vowels in modern France.

[ɛ̃] : *aim, ain, eim, ein, im, in, ym, yn, un, um*

- The group *oin* is pronounced [wɛ̃] (e.g. *coin* [kwɛ̃])
- The groups *ien, yen, éen* are pronounced [jɛ̃] (e.g. *rien* [ʁjɛ̃])

[ɑ̃] : *an, am, en, em, aen, aon*

[ɔ̃] : *on, om*

Note : adding a final *e* to a word will make the syllable lose its nasality.

e.g. *certain* [sɛʁ tɛ̃] vs *certaine* [sɛʁ tɛ nə]

To practice, pronounce their pure vowel equivalents and lift the soft palate towards the nose.

[ɛ] → [ɛ̃] ; [a] → [ɑ̃] ; [ɔ] → [ɔ̃]

Note that [ɑ̃] comes from the partially extinct posterior open vowel [ɑ], so therefore it sits further back than [a]. For those who struggle to differentiate [ɑ̃] and [ɔ̃], try to find [ɔ̃] from [o] rather than from [ɔ].

Semi vowels

There are three semi vowels in French. They can be understood as shorter variants of their pure vowel equivalents.

[u] → [w] ; [i] → [j] ; [y] → [ɥ]

[w] : *w, ou* followed by a vowel sound

- The group *oi* is pronounced [wa] (e.g. *moi* [mwa], *oiseau* [wa zo])
- The group *oin* is pronounced [wɛ̃]

[j] : *ll, y, i* or *y* followed by a vowel sound

[ɥ] : *u* followed by a vowel sound

- Note : sometimes *u* followed by a vowel is sung as one syllable (e.g. *puis* [pɥi]), and sometimes as two. (e.g. *tuer* [ty e])

For those who struggle to find [ɥ], follow the steps to find [y], then glide quickly from [y] to the next vowel. If you still cannot pronounce [ɥ], it is acceptable to use a more closed [w] to approximate, as it is pronounced this way in some francophone regions.

Note : the group *ill(e)* is usually pronounced [j] except in some cases where it is pronounced [l].

Examples for both pronunciations :

[l] : *ville, mille, tranquille*

[j] : *fille, aille, travaille, gentille, Séville*

Consonants

French consonants are mostly similar to other Latin alphabet-based languages, with a few distinctive sounds worth mentioning :

[ʒ] : produced by *j* and sometimes *g*. [ʒ] is the voiced equivalent of [ʃ], similar to [z] being the voiced equivalent of [s]. To practice, pronounce [s], [z], [ʃ], then add vocal fold vibration to [ʃ]. [ʒ] is often easier to produce before some vowels than others. If you cannot pronounce [ʒ] before certain vowels and need to approximate, it is acceptable to use [ʃ].

[ɲ] : *gn* is usually pronounced [ɲ], such as in the word *montagne*. It is very similar to [n] followed by a quick [j]. For Spanish speakers, it is the same sound as *ñ*.

h : the consonant *h* never produces a sound by itself. However, it will affect the enchaînement and liaison rules discussed below.

Singing voiced consonants

When singing words ending in voiced consonants, it is important to distinguish whether the word ends in a consonant or a final [ə]. This distinction only happens in singing, not speaking.

Speaking : *l'appel* [la pɛl] ; *je m'appelle* [ʒə ma pɛl]

Singing : *l'appel* [la pɛl] ; *je m'appelle* [ʒə ma pɛ lə]

In the above example, with *l'appel*, you would hold the vowel [ɛ] of [pɛl] and close the [l] at the very end, producing as little pitch as possible, whereas *je m'appelle* will have [pɛ] and [lə] on two different notes or repeated notes, and you will enunciate both of them.

Enchaînement

Enchaînement happens when a final [ə], or a final pronounced consonant, is followed by a vowel in the next word. The final pronounced consonant will then join the next syllable. Enchaînement is not always easy to identify in musical scores. If you find yourself singing a neutral [ə] followed by a vowel, check if they should be connected by enchaînement.

Examples in *Carmen* :

Habanera : Prends garde [prɑ̃ gar də] → Prend garde_à toi [prɑ̃ gar_da twa]

Finale : Je t'aime [ʒə tɛ mə] → Je t'aime_encore [ʒə tɛ_mɑ̃ kə rə]

Finale : On harcèle [ɔ̃ ar sɛ lə] → On harcèle_en [ɔ̃ ar sɛ_lɑ̃]

Liaison

Liaison happens when a normally silent final consonant becomes pronounced before a following vowel sound. The consonant joins the beginning of the next syllable.

s, x, z → [z] ; t, d → [t] ; r → [r] ; p → [p] ; c, g, k, q → [k] ; n → [n]

In opera, most final unpronounced consonants will have a liaison, except the word *et*, which never has a liaison.

- The *n* in nasal vowels participates in liaison.
(e.g. *mon ami* [mɔ̃_na mi], *certain officier* [sɛr tɛ̃_nɔ̃ fi sje])
- Names that begin with vowels, such as *Je suis_Escamillo* are acceptable both ways depending on the phrasing.
- Liaisons do not carry over notated rests, even if they are not separated by punctuation.

The letter h in enchaînement and liaison

There are two types of *h*, called *h muet* and *h aspiré* in French. This distinction comes from the etymology of the word, not the phonetics of modern French. For phonetic purposes, neither produces a sound. However, *h muet* allows enchaînement and liaison, while *h aspiré* does not. If you do not know the etymology of a word, you will need to identify it on a word-to-word basis.

Examples of *h aspiré* :

La honte [la ɔ̃ tɔ̃] ; *en haut* [ɑ̃ o] ; *on harcèle* [ɔ̃ ar sɛ lə]

Examples of *h muet* :

Les_hommes [lɛ_zɔ̃ mɔ̃], *une_histoire* [y_nis twa rə], *sont_heureuses* [sɔ̃_tø rø zə]