

The IPA

Languages

Why one alphabet for all sounds, and how to read the symbols.

The International Phonetic Alphabet assigns exactly one symbol to each distinguishable speech sound, so a word's pronunciation can be written unambiguously regardless of its spelling.

SYMBOLS
~107 letters

DIACRITICS
~52

FIRST PUBLISHED
1888

- Slashes /kæt/ show phonemes; brackets [k^hæt] show precise sounds.
- Consonants are classified by place, manner and voicing.
- Vowels are placed on a chart by tongue height and frontness.
- ' marks primary stress, on the syllable that follows it.
- : marks a long vowel.
- Every dictionary pronunciation guide is built on it.

LOOK FOR IT

English 'through' is /θru:/ — three sounds written with seven letters.

English spelling maps badly onto sound. The IPA exists precisely because alphabets like ours are unreliable.