

The letter “a” and the sound [a]

1. Sounds produced by the letter “a”

In English, several sounds are produced by the letter “a”, such as:

[a] father	}	Letter “a”
[æ] cat		
[^] approach		
[eɪ] blame		
[ɔ] awe		

➤ In Spanish, only one sound is produced by the letter “a.”

This sound is the [a] as in “father.”

[a] casa, alto, la letra → Letter “a”

2. Letters that produce the sound [a]

In English, more than one letter produces the sound [a].

Letter “a” → [a] as in father
 Letter “o” → [a] as in hot

➤ In Spanish, only one letter produces the sound [a].

Letter “a” → [a] as in casa

3. Pronunciation Reminder for Vowels

Spanish vowels are “short” in duration in comparison to English vowels.

The Spanish [a] sound is not drawn out, like the sound made when a doctor asks you to stick out your tongue: “Aaaaaaaaaaaaaa.” It is short, like when you tell someone, “Careful, don’t touch that hot dish.”

The English tendency is to make the Spanish [a] longer than what is native-like, and this creates a distinct foreign accent.

4. Making the Sound

The sound [a] is called a low central vowel. The tongue is low in the oral cavity, the jaw drops, and the lips are not tensed in any way (they remain neutral). The drawing below illustrates the approximate position of the tongue while producing the sound [a].



Exercises to practice the Spanish [a]

A. For the following list of English words, look at the bold vowel. Say the words aloud, and circle the words with bold vowels that produce the [a] sound like the Spanish letter "a."

F ather	D ock	A ppropriate
R ather	S tapler	H a
C ast	B lack	A we
H at	R obot	B arbecue
K arate	B athroom	G ame

B. Look at the following pairs of words in English and Spanish. Listen to them aloud and note the different pronunciations of the bold vowels. Using the phonetic guide table, choose the correct phonetic symbol for the bold vowel and write it on the line next to the word. Try to use correct pronunciation of all the vowels, but focus particularly on the letter "a."

English		Spanish	
1. A ctual	[_____]	A ctual	[_____]
2. B lank	[_____]	B l anco	[_____]
3. A ctor	[_____]	A ctor	[_____]
4. S p anish	[_____]	E s pañol	[_____]
5. A ccess	[_____]	A ceso	[_____]
6. R adio	[_____]	R a dio	[_____]
7. A ttention	[_____]	A tención	[_____]
8. M a ma	[_____]	M a má	[_____]

C. Look at the following long words. Sound them out slowly with correct vowel pronunciation, then practice saying them faster while maintaining correct pronunciation.

A f ortunadamente	(fortunately)
A f rancesarse	(to become Frenchified)
E n guayabado	(homesick)
M a ncomunadamente	(together)
P a jarsearse	(to goof)
Y a nquilandia	(the States)