

The letter “e” and the sound [e]

1. Sounds produced by the letter “e”

In English, several sounds are produced by the letter “e”; for example:

[eɪ] hey*	}	Letter “e”
[i] English, need		
[e] ever		

*Notice that in English, the sound is a combination of a vowel and a semivowel, [e] and [ɪ]. The pure [e] does not exist in English (see **diphthong explanation**).

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

This sound is the [e] as in “hey,” but without the glide at the end.

[e] letra, español, triste → Letter “e”

2. Letters that produce the sound [e]

In English, more than one letter can produce the sound [eɪ].

Letter “e”	→	[eɪ] as in hey
Letter “a”	→	[eɪ] as in made
Letters “ai”	→	[eɪ] as in maid
Letters “ei”	→	[eɪ] as in sleigh

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

Letter “e” → [e] as in letra

3. Diphthong Explanation

The English tendency for pronouncing the sound [e] in Spanish is to add on [ɪ] at the end, making it into the diphthong [eɪ].* As noted above, the pure [e] doesn't exist in English; it is

* The diphthong is denoted by a curve (˘) under the semivowel.

is always pronounced as the diphthong, so the Spanish sound [e] is easily mispronounced as [ej]. It is important to keep the sounds short and distinct to prevent confusion, because while the sound does not affect the meaning in English, in Spanish the sounds [e] and [ej] signify different meanings. For example, the Spanish word "pena" (pain) is pronounced [pé.na]. With the English accent, it becomes [péj.na]. Although the sounds are very close, they are distinct, and with the diphthong it becomes a new word: "peina" (he/she combs). For this reason, it is important to make sure the Spanish [e] is pronounced as just [e].

4. Pronunciation Reminder

The Spanish vowels are "short" in duration in comparison to English; [e] is not long like when you see a good friend after a long time: "Heeeeeeeey! How are you?" It is short, as in, "Dang! I forgot today's the test."

5. Making the Sound

The sound [e] is called an unrounded front middle vowel. The tongue raises about halfway up in the oral cavity, pushing toward the front of the mouth. The lips are tensed, almost like a smile. The drawing below illustrates the approximate position of the tongue while producing the sound [e].



Exercises to practice the Spanish [e]

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 [e] sound closest to the [e] for the Spanish letter "e."

English	Ever	Eight
Heyday	Detain	Letter
Mermaid	Festive	Echo
Hat	Even	Essay
Freight	Rest	Blame

B. Look at the following pairs of words in English and Spanish. Listen to them aloud and focus on the different pronunciations of the bold vowels. Using the phonetic guide table, choose the correct phonetic symbol for each 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 "e."

English		Spanish	
1. Excellent	[_____]	Excelente	[_____]
2. Letter	[_____]	Letra	[_____]
3. Returnable	[_____]	Retornable	[_____]
4. Telephone	[_____]	Teléfono	[_____]
5. Rest	[_____]	Resto	[_____]
6. Super	[_____]	Super	[_____]
7. Mexico	[_____]	México	[_____]
8. Thesis	[_____]	Tesis	[_____]

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

Condescendencia	(condescension)
Ensoberbecerse	(to become arrogant, haughty)
Permanentemente	(permanently)
Quebrantahuesos	(white-tailed eagle)
Verdaderamente	(honestly)
Tarjetahabiente	(cardholder)

D. Practice saying the following Spanish words with [e]. Focus particularly on avoiding the [eɪ] diphthong where it should be a short and pure [e].

Café
Alegre
Excelente
Español
Pena

Estar
Importante
Teléfono
Padre
Cafetería

Mente
Vale
Yacer
Reserva
Delante