

British English: /r/

Three Plus One



(4:40)

British English is **non-rhotic**, which means that most British speakers don't pronounce the [r]—except when it is followed by a vowel sound.

Near the 40-second mark in the video, you hear the narrator say: “*Three people live here.*” This sentence is an excellent example of the /r/ in British English because it contains an example of both situations.

- The /r/ in the word “*three*” is pronounced because a vowel sound follows it,
- but the /r/ in the word “*here*” is not pronounced because there is a silent [e] after it.

What is important is the sound—not the letter—that follows the [r].

You should also know that this rule applies both within and between words. (We will look at this in more depth in a moment.)

Another characteristic of many words with an unpronounced /r/ is that the vowel sound before the [r] is lengthened. For example, the word “*car*” is pronounced /kah/: the /r/ is generally silent after a long, open /ah/-sound. Listen to the following recording:

Now, compare the previous recording with the following:

In the first recording, the /r/ is not pronounced, but in the second recording, the /r/ is pronounced. Remember, the /r/ is pronounced when a vowel sound follows. It doesn't matter whether the following vowel sound is within the same word or at the beginning of the following word. The [a] of “*alarm*” immediately follows the [r] of “*car*”, so the /r/ is pronounced.

So, what does “here” sound like without /r/? It’s pronounced /hi ə/. (Do you remember the schwa (ə)?) Written another way (without the phonetic symbols), “here” is pronounced /hee uh/. Listen to the following recording which isolates the vowel sound before pronouncing the full word:

The vowel sound in the word “here” is called a **diphthong**. A diphthong is smooth glide from one vowel sound to another within a single syllable—in the case of the word “here” /i + ə = iə/. (Spanish has diphthongs too. The /ei/ in “peine” is an example.) There are 8 diphthongs in British English, and although we will look at each one over the next few months, we will focus on only 3 in this lesson because, in general, they only occur with the [r]:

- /iə/ as in “ear”
- /eə/ as in “hair”
- /uə/ as in “pure”

Listen to the recording that accompanies each example. In each of these diphthongs, the /r/ is replaced by the schwa (unless, as mentioned earlier, the word is followed by a vowel sound).

OK. There is one further use of /r/ in British English: sometimes an /r/ is pronounced when the letter [r] is not present, but we will discuss this intrusive-[r] in a separate lesson later.

One final note... It is not necessary that you learn and/or try to imitate the British pronunciation. That would be a waste of time and energy. The explanation offered here is not to encourage you to adopt the British pronunciation. It is simply to help you decipher words that you may hear. For someone accustomed to American English, British English will be a challenge at first. Words that you mastered years ago may challenge you again. Be calm. Be patient. And expose your ear to British English as often as possible.

Let’s practice. The recordings on the following page present the British pronunciation¹ of words with an [r]. There are also a few sentences to further test your ear. Try to decipher the words and sentences, writing them in the spaces provided. There is one example.

¹ I should mention that there are many accents in England. The accent presented here is called Received Pronunciation (RP). It is the standard, non-regional accent of British English, usually associated with high social status, education, and the BBC. It is sometimes called “the Queen’s English” or “BBC English”. It is the accent often used in dictionaries and teaching English as a foreign language.

