Lesson plan: learning to transcribe pronunciations

Student activity:

Look at the symbols shown between slashes / /, next to the "play" icon in the image below.

What information are these symbols giving?

Do you know where these symbols come from, and what the system is called?

transcribe, *v.*

View as: Outline | Full entry

Pronunciation: ⓘ Brit. ▶/trɑːnˈskrʌɪb/, ▶/tranˈskrʌɪb/, U.S. ▶/træn(t)ˈskraɪb/

Teacher notes:

The symbols form the pronunciation transcription. These symbols are taken from the International Phonetic Alphabet, also known as IPA. IPA is a standardized way to represent speech sounds in written form. A dictionary such as the *OED* uses these symbols to show how a word is pronounced.

Teacher notes:

The *OED* has given transcriptions for pronunciations since its inception in the late 19th century. James Murray, the OED's first editor, viewed transcriptions and transcribed pronunciations as essential, as they sought to represent 'the actual living form or forms of a word, that is, *the word itself*, of which the current spelling is only a symbolization'.

OED editors aim to show the current form or forms of each living word, or as Murray put it 'the latest fact in the form history of the word'.

So in giving pronunciations, the *OED* reflects how language is first and foremost spoken (rather than how it is spelled), and is representative of modern users of each word.

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Teacher notes:

Why might there be two British versions, and is there always only one correct pronunciation of a word?

OED reflects variation where more than one pronunciation is current or sufficiently widespread. Another example would be **scone,** where the *OED* records both /skəʊn/ (rhymes with 'cone') and /skɒn/ (rhymes with 'gone').

This really opens up the issue of variants – some words are pronounced in more than one way, and both those ways can be deemed 'correct", and both can appear in dictionaries. Variants can be about a vowel sound (*scone, transcribe*), a consonant sound (*schedule*), placement of stress (*controversy*), and other possibilities. Who's more likely to use which variant? (think about age, region, ability to speak other languages…). In the case of *transcribe*, the variation is in the BATH vowel in the first syllable, as in words like *grass, bath*.

Some other suggested words for discussion for whether there is one correct pronunciation of a word are:

nuclear	February	sudoku
genealogy	chorizo	kilometre
pronunciation	debris	patent
restaurateur	cervical	harass
schedule	Uranus	controversy

Why does US use a different symbol?

The OED uses slightly different transcription models for British and US pronunciations, choosing different symbols for some vowels, because the phonetic quality of those vowels is different. This includes the vowels in TRAP (British a, US æ), CUT (British ʌ, US ə) and GOAT (British əʊ, US oʊ), and the absence of length marks in US (so PALM is British ɑː or US ɑ). The keys (https://public.oed.com/how-to-use-the-oed/key-to-pronunciation/) give a full list of differences.

Student activity:
Think about how you say a word yourself. Can you think of a different way that someone else might pronounce that word? How could you interrogate your own biases about a word? Do you pronounce a word differently because of your age, because of where you were brought up, etc.?

As a class, discuss where a dictionary editor might find evidence of how a word is pronounced.

Teacher notes:

Here are some of the sources an *OED* editor might use:

- Knowledgeable users: consulting subject specialist directly
- Trusted dictionaries: pronouncing dictionaries, dialect/variety dictionaries, foreign language dictionaries, specialist dictionaries (e.g. botanical, slang), etymological dictionaries
- Evidence in natural use: online video platforms, television/radio programmes, films, news sites, speeches, TED talks
- Existing evidence in the *OED*: spelling variants over time, etymologies, the word's use in rhymes and other poetic uses, analogies

The editors might also use surveys to explore how others might pronounce a word.

OED's ability to gather pronunciation evidence from spoken language has been transformed by the increasing online availability of video and audio from around the English-speaking world. Subtitles and captions make this material more searchable and therefore more useful.

Student activity:
Spend a couple of minutes thinking about how the words below might be pronounced:

- **Pwn**
- **Womxn**
- **Record**
- **Hygge**

Teacher notes:

Pwn

British English: /pəʊn/

US English: /poʊn/

Pwn, meaning 'To inflict a humiliating defeat on (an opponent), esp. in an online game. Also: to gain unauthorized access to or compromise (a computer, network, etc.).' is an alteration of the word 'own', perhaps originating in a typing error (the letters *o* and *p* being adjacent on a standard computer keyboard). New words like this that arise from written discourse aren't always straightforward to speak out loud.

You can hear the OED Executive Editor, Catherine Sangster, talking about the pronunciation of 'pwn' in our meet the editor video here: https://public.oed.com/blog/meet-the-editors-catherine-sangster/

Womxn

The pronunciation of x in English words is unusually variable: it can be 'ks', 'eks', or 'iks', 'z', 'sh', 'h', 'kh', or silent. Where a new word is created by using x to overwrite part of an existing word, as in *Mx, Latinx,* or *folx,* pronunciations with /ks/ typically prevail. There is also a possibility, when such words are spoken rather than written, that a longer phrase will be used; compare our pronunciation note on the older entry for *[Latin@](#)* which explains that it is 'often expanded to "Latino and/or Latina" or "Latina and/or Latino" when spoken aloud'.

In the case of *Latinx* and *Mx*, with x replacing a letter in final position, pronunciations which insert a vowel before /ks/ conform to the rules of English syllable structure and have generally been adopted (although when researching *Mx*, one correspondent did report the pronunciation 'mixter', by analogy with 'mister'). *Womxn*, though, has an x where a non-final vowel used to be, which makes saying it out loud a little more of a challenge. When exploring video evidence, it was found that although some speakers shuffled the order of sounds ('women-eks'), inserted more vowels to make it a trisyllabic word ('wo-mix-en'), or used an expanded phrase ('women-with-an-x'), in the majority of cases the word was pronounced just as if it were 'women' (or 'woman' if singular). This is also the line taken in most written sources which offer advice on the pronunciation. Therefore, the pronunciation note on the *OED* entry advises that *womxn* is 'typically pronounced the same as women or woman depending on context, although pronunciations with /ks/ are also attested'.

Record

The pronunciation for this word varies according to part of speech: /ˈrɛkɔːd/ for the noun, /rəˈkɔːd/ for the verb. Can you think of other words whose pronunciation varies in this way?

Hygge and loan words

Hygge is a loan word from Danish. It contains a vowel sound and a consonant sound that we do not have in English. If someone is pronouncing it in English (not code-switching to Danish to say it) then they need to modify those sounds to the closest sounds that we do have in English. With new loans, this isn't done by everyone in the same way. The vowel spelt <y> in **hygge** is a front rounded vowel (like the u in the French word vu – the IPA symbol for this sound is /y/). English speakers can substitute a front unrounded vowel like /iː/ or /ɪ/, or a back rounded vowel like /ʊ/ or /uː/.

Look back at other words like **sudoku**, **restaurateur**, **chorizo** and think about how those have been modified in English.

British English pronunciation key:

Vowels

	as in…
iː	fleece /fliːs/
i	happy /ˈhapi/
ɪ	kit /kɪt/
ɛ	dress /drɛs/
a	trap /trap/
ɑː	father /ˈfɑːðə/
ɒ	lot /lɒt/
ɔː	hawk /hɔːk/, force /fɔːs/
ʌ	cup /kʌp/
ʊ	foot /fʊt/
uː	goose /guːs/
ə	alpha /ˈalfə/
əː	nurse /nəːs/
ɪə	here /hɪə/
ɛː	square /skwɛː/
ʊə	cure /kjʊə/
eɪ	face /feɪs/
ʌɪ	price /prʌɪs/
aʊ	mouth /maʊθ/
əʊ	goat /gəʊt/
ɔɪ	choice /tʃɔɪs/
ã	gratin /ˈgratã/
õ	mignon /ˈmiːnjõ/
ɫ	honest /ˈɒnɫst/ – free variation between /ɪ/ and /ə/
ᴜ	July /dʒᴜˈlʌɪ/ – free variation between /ʊ/ and /ə/

Consonants

	as in…
b	big /bɪg/
d	dig /dɪg/
dʒ	jet /dʒɛt/
ð	then /ðɛn/
f	fig /fɪg/
g	get /gɛt/
h	how /haʊ/
j	yes /jɛs/
k	kit /kɪt/
l	leg /lɛg/
m	main /meɪn/
n	net /nɛt/
ŋ	thing /θɪŋ/
p	pit /pɪt/
r	rain /reɪn/
s	sit /sɪt/
ʃ	ship /ʃɪp/
t	tame /teɪm/
tʃ	chip /tʃɪp/
θ	thin /θɪn/
v	vet /vɛt/
w	win /wɪn/
z	zip /zɪp/
ʒ	measure /ˈmɛʒə/
x	(Scottish) loch /lɒx/
ɫ	(Welsh) penillion /pɛˈnɪɫɪən/

Teacher notes:

Answers:

1. Special
2. Quidditch
3. Robot
4. Porcupine
5. Exam

Student activity:

Make a list of 5 words – these can be your favourite words, words you find interesting, words you think are very complicated, etc.

Can you transcribe them in IPA? We have included the British English pronunciation key here, but please use whichever pronunciation model is most relevant to your variety of English (you can find the *OED*'s keys here: https://public.oed.com/how-to-use-the-oed/key-to-pronunciation/)

Please don't worry if the transcription you come up with doesn't match that given in the *OED* entries for the words you have chosen – it's not possible to capture all accents and variations of a word's pronunciation in the *OED*, and your way of pronouncing a word may be different to another's.