

Whether you're enrolled in a class or studying on your own, you may still be wrestling with how to turn combinations of letters into Irish sounds. As a print newsletter, we're not going to teach you how to pronounce Irish here. But we can help you get more out of some of the *other* tools you're probably using, like textbooks and dictionaries.

Most of these tools, as well as handouts from teachers and a lot of the material available on the Internet, provide English approximations for Irish sounds. This works pretty well most of the time, especially for the consonants – “shay” is a fairly decent representation of sé.

But one of the areas where you might be looking for just a little more help is where several vowels run into one another in Irish words. Those funny sequences of three vowels – can they possibly all be pronounced? (no)

How do all those vowels get there in the first place? Very often, one of them is there not to be heard, but to mark a consonant. The vowels next to consonants identify those consonants as either *broad* or *slender*. And the general spelling rule of “broad to broad and slender to slender” – a slender consonant in the middle of a word, for example, must have slender vowels on both sides of the consonant – means that many words end up with an extra vowel or two, in a sense, just to keep other broad or slender vowels company!

So what should you do when you face a combination of vowels?

- **First, look for any accented vowels.** They are *always* pronounced, so if you meet a sequence with an accented vowel in it, *pronounce the accented vowel*.

If none of the vowels are accented, the following is a rough guide to vowel combinations:

- **ai:** at the beginning of a word, like the vowel in “cat”. Elsewhere pronounce it the same way you say the letter *a* in other Irish words.

PRONUNCIATION TIPS

by Nancy Stenson

- **ae, aei:** pronounced as if written *é*.
- **ao, aoi:** pronounced as if written *í*, except in Munster, where it sounds like *é*.
- **ea, eai:** a short *a* sound, as in “cat”.
- **eo, eoi:** pronounced as if written *ó*.
- **ei, oi:** generally like a short *e*, as in “get”. (In some dialects, these two combinations are more distinct).
- **ia, iai:** especially in short words, like *bia* and *siad*, the *i* usually sounds like *í*, and both the *i* and the *a* are pronounced.
- **ua, uai:** similar to *ia*: the *u* is pronounced as *ú*, and the *a* is also pronounced.
- **ui:** like a short *i*, as in “fish,” especially at the beginning of a word. Sometimes this combination falls between consonants and creates a *wi* sound (*muid* = “mwid”).

These are oversimplifications, of course, and dialects certainly vary. But if you're just starting out, following these rules will get you a recognizable pronunciation most of the time.

Irish spelling really is a good deal more systematic than English – although you may sometimes get the feeling that teachers and texts tell you that just to annoy you. It just takes some getting used to – and a lot of practice.



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