

# ACTING WITH AN ACCENT

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## STANDARD BRITISH

*(Received Pronunciation)*

- Third Edition -

***David Alan Stern, PhD***

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## **About the Author**

**David Alan Stern** received a BFA in Theatre (UConn) and a PhD in Speech (Temple) and then served on the faculties of both Wichita State and Penn State before founding **Dialect Accent Specialists, Inc.** in Hollywood in 1980—working there primarily as a dialect/accent coach for professional actors. Since 1993, he's kept his foot in the industry while serving as Professor of Dramatic Arts at the University of Connecticut. Among the many actors he has helped to prepare for stage, television, and film roles are **Vince Tyner** (*Chappaquiddick*), **Geena Davis** (*The Accidental Tourist*), **Julie Harris** (*Carried Away*), **Jennifer Jason Leigh** (*Fast Times at Ridgemont High*), **Shelley Long** (*Outrageous Fortune*), **Terrence Mann** (*My Fair Lady*), **Liam Neeson** (*Next of Kin*), **Lynn Redgrave** (*Sweet Sue*), **Pat Sajak & Joe Moore** (*The Boys in Autumn*), **Forest Whitaker** (*Bird and The Crying Game*), and **Julia Roberts, Sally Field, Olympia Dukakis**, and **Daryl Hannah** (*Steel Magnolias*). David has served since 2000 as resident dialect coach for the Berkshire Theatre Group in Massachusetts.

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## SOME PRELIMINARY CONCERNS

### **When should I use dialects & accents?**

Here are a few guidelines I've put together after years of performing and coaching accents and dialects.

(1) If there are characters in the script who come from a different speech group than the rest of the cast, consider differentiating them with appropriate accents. (2) If the entire script is set in a country or region where a specific dialect of English is spoken, determine whether the whole cast can use that pattern while still creating complete, believable characters. (3) Avoid using foreign accents for translations of non-English scripts. For example, don't play Chekhov with a Russian accent or Molière with a French accent. For such "classics," try using an "elevated" style of American diction. (4) Elevated diction is also appropriate when American casts are doing Shakespeare, especially those plays that are not set in England. (5) Finally, DON'T USE ACCENTS UNLESS THEY ARE GOING TO BE PERFORMED WELL!

### **What techniques lead to good accents?**

In my experience, relatively few actors have the skill to imitate the accents that they hear with a sense of accuracy and believability. Other actors must use a systematic approach in order to create authentic-sounding accents and dialects. Here is a brief discussion of the most important factors:

***PRONUNCIATION:*** Just making the correct pronunciation changes is not enough to create an authentic-sounding accent. Most teachers, texts, and recorded programs drill students almost exclusively with the appropriate vowel and consonant substitutions for the target pattern. Although I believe that correct pronunciation is one essential component, these vowel and consonant changes will not sound authentic unless you combine them with several other important vocal features.

***PITCH CHARACTERISTICS:*** "Pitch" can refer to any of several vocal traits—from how high or low a voice is to how much intonation or pitch variety is used. But, the most important pitch traits that help characterize many accents and dialects are different kinds of upward and/or downward glides that take place during the sounding of vowels—especially vowels in stressed syllables. This trait, which

I call INNER-VOWEL LILT, contributes significantly to the familiar, distinctive sounds of many accents and dialects.

***STRESS PATTERNS:*** American English has a complex pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables. Many dialects and languages have distinctly different patterns. Some have few, if any, unstressed syllables, while others have rather intricate staccato rhythms that must be present before a performance of that accent can sound authentic.

***RESONANCE or MUSCULAR SPEECH IMPULSE:*** My research, teaching, and performing experiences have taught me that the most important part of an accent's aural essence comes from the specific way that the tongue, lips, soft palate, and larynx shape and position the resonance tract. Different tract configurations, in turn, give many unique resonances or "timbres" to the overall sound. Each specific "tone focus" is very noticeable throughout an accent, regardless of whether actual pronunciation changes are occurring on certain words. In fact, once an actor has mastered an accent's muscularity and tone focus, many of the important new pronunciations can happen more easily and convincingly. Most of the programs in this series begin with a detailed lesson on resonance. Pronunciation drills then extend out of the new muscularity. As such, the speech sounds are now "organic," and no longer a set of vowels and consonants you try to memorize in isolation.

### **What is the best way to practice?**

Begin by drilling the mechanics of the new accent—the resonance, lilt, rhythm, and pronunciations. Go on to integrate the changes into phrases, sentences, and passages. Then try improvising and actually generating your own speech while using the new accent. Don't limit your new accent to the target script. If you do, you are apt to be very mechanical and never create the sense that you are a real person who actually talks this way.

# ACTING with an ACCENT

## STANDARD BRITISH

"Received Pronunciation"  
(Third Edition)

### LESSON ONE:

#### BRITISH RESONANCE or MUSCULAR SPEECH IMPULSE

The first step in creating a "Received" British accent is to make an overall change in the resonance features of the voice. As I explain on the recording, Standard British speech focuses its tone or resonance in the front part of the mouth—between the lips and in front of the teeth. An overt change in speech muscularity causes this resonance shift. Standard American speech locates most of its muscle work in the middle part of the tongue. British Received, by contrast, requires much more work in the muscle groups of the lips and front face.

Follow the recording through the series of exercises for shifting from the mid-mouth American focus to the more frontal muscularity of British RP speech by:

1. visualizing the change in tone focus and feeling a difference in the tissue vibration, [TRACK 2]
2. gliding the tongue tip and lips forward at the onset of each new sound, [TRACK 3]
3. combining both of the above exercises and applying the new resonance to words and phrases, [TRACK 4]
4. and, activating the front-face muscles through a dilation of the nostrils. [TRACK 5]

Finally, follow the recording on the track, and try the new resonance on a series of numbers and on the following sentence:

[TRACK 6]

*THE CAT IS IN THE HOUSE.*

### LESSON TWO:

#### PRONUNCIATION CHANGES RELATED TO RESONANCE

The following vowel substitutions are extensions of the resonance shift you just learned. Repeat the words and sentences after hearing them on the tracks that follow. Don't just imitate the new pronunciations. Create the new muscularity, and let the British vowels grow naturally out of that change in speech impulse.

əʊ əʊ

**1. "LONG-O" as in GO HOME (aka the GOAT Vowel in the Wells system of word-sets)****IPA: GA [oʊ] and London [æʊ] becomes [əʊ]****[TRACK 7]***no, go, home, alone, grow, solo, motion, explode*

- *Oh no, I won't go home.*
- *Slowly the ocean rolled home.*
- *I wrote to Joe, hoping he would grow up.*
- *The rowboat slowly floated over the ocean.*
- *The oboe and cello sat alone, woefully echoing tone for tone.*
- *going home tonight - slowing down the car - owing lots of money*

Here are extra "LONG-O" drills that aren't on the recording:

- \* *Long ago people slept on the cold earth.*
- \* *He was bloated from eating a roasted tomato.*
- \* *Of all the folks I know, he is the most hopeful.*
- \* *I told Joan that I was rowing on the Ohio River.*
- \* *Smoke was flowing out the open hotel window.*

ɒ

**2. "SHORT-O" as in KNOWLEDGE (aka the LOT Vowel)****[TRACKS 8 and 9]****IPA: [ɑ] becomes [ɒ].***hot, got, honor, common, orange, shop, lopsided, contest, job on time, on top, on the spot, one-on-one*

- *Bob had the option of sleeping on the cot.*
- *Sir Lancelot traveled nonstop to Camelot.*
- *The obstinate opera singer was preoccupied.*
- *Becket was positive about the honor of God.*
- *The rocks and logs were on top of the cot.*

ɒ      ɒ      ɒ      ɒ

**3. "UK SHORT-O" as in LOST, CLOTH, COFFEE, SONG (aka CLOTH Vowel)***coffee, lofty, cloth, moth, lost, moss, wrong, song*

- *Lost boys often sell cloth.*
- *The dog was wrong to kill the moth.*
- *The loft smelled of strong coffee.*

**And, some "SHORT-O" words spelled with the letter "A."****[TRACK 10]***what, want, wash, watch*

- *What do you want to watch while doing the washing up?*

Now a few more drills for the "SHORT-O" groups that aren't on the recording:

- \* *He wanted to occupy the newly washed golf cart.*
- \* *The rocket shot toward the opposite air lock.*
- \* *Oxygen is commonly found in air pockets.*
- \* *Move the fox from the rocks to the bog.*

ɔ:                      ɔ:

#### 4. "AW" as in BROUGHT and AUTUMN (*aka the THOUGHT Vowel*) [TRACK 11]

**IPA: GA [ɔ] an London [ɔ:] becomes [ɔ:].**

*Paul, autumn, awful, flawless, call, walk, thought, brought, talk*

- *The tall author walked awkwardly.*
- *He stalked the ball, and then vaulted.*
- *He thought he saw the autumn leaves falling.*
- *The awful sauce made Paul pause.*
- *He bought a shawl and brought it home from the mall.*

Try a few unrecorded drills for the "Broad-AW" vowel.

- \* *The awkward, awful, tall man walked home.*
- \* *Leaves were falling all along the road.*
- \* *The cat crawled over the lawn with its hurt paw.*
- \* *You taught me to vault flawlessly without falling.*

#### 5. COMBINING THESE THREE CHANGES

[end of TRACK 11]

- *He's grown a lot. - a rock wall - We saw the show.*
- \* *We'll all go to the shopping mall.*
- \* *There's a lot going on here.*
- \* *I thought we had so much in common.*

### **LESSON THREE: BRITISH PITCH GLIDES**

[TRACK 12]

Some, but not all Received-British speakers use pitch glides. Follow the instructions on the track for creating upward glides on the following sentences. Of course, the underlined words need not always be stressed. They serve as examples of possible pitch glides in these sentences.

- *I just don't know.*
- *I am not going to argue with you.*
- *Don't lose your heads in the Tower of London.*
- *He gave an incredible speech at Hyde Park Corner.*

Now listen to the recorded instructions for using downward glides on some of the words of the National Anthem of the United Kingdom.

*God save our gracious Queen; long live our noble Queen.  
 God save the Queen.  
 Send her victorious, happy and glorious, long to reign over us.  
 God save the Queen.*

## **LESSON FOUR: MORE CHANGES IN VOWEL PRONUNCIATION**

### 1. "SHORT-I" ENDINGS as in MOSTLY EVERYBODY (aka the happy Vowel)

I            I            I

**IPA: GA final [i] and London final [əi] become [ɪ].** [TRACK 13]

When English words end in the letters "Y" or "LY," standard American speakers use a "LONG-E" sound. Standard British speakers, however, use a "SHORT-I."

*Mary, mostly, pretty, twenty, thirty, foggy, lovely*

- *Everybody has the ability to be mighty.*
- *Frankly, that's a thorny path.*
- *Generally, Mr. Hornsby's parties are lovely.*

If the final "Y" runs right into a word that begins with a vowel sound, you won't be able to soften the ending quite as much. Follow the samples on the recording:

- *Mary is lovely.*
- *He's very active.*
- *some lovely apples*

And now a few extra sentences with the "Y" and "LY" endings:

- \* *Mary moved the heavy copy of Shakespeare.*
- \* *Money earned faithfully should be given to the needy.*
- \* *I worry about cloudy weather and stormy skies.*
- \* *He told a scary fairy story that was set in another country.*

### 2. "-ARY"/"-ERY"/"-ORY" as in NECESSARY CATEGORY [TRACK 14]

I            I

**IPA: GA [ɛri] and [ɔri] usually become [ɪ].**

In American speech, words ending in "ERY," "ARY," and "ORY" stress the vowel before the "R" and end in a "LONG-E." In standard British, the vowel before "R" almost disappears, and the final vowel softens to "SHORT-I."

*necessary, commissary, secretary, ordinary*

- *Was that revolutionary statement necessary?*



- *Many missionaries come from Salisbury Cathedral.*
- *The commissary has extraordinary food categories.*

And a few more drills:

- \* *She was a very satisfactory apothecary.*
- \* *Is it ordinary for him to be so contrary?*
- \* *Ordinary pay is not satisfactory for good secretaries.*
- \* *The revolutionary leader said some extraordinary things.*

a

### 3. "SHORT-A" SHIFT as in GLASS (*aka the BATH Vowel*)

[TRACK 15]

**IPA:** GA [æ] occasionally becomes [a] (the frontal version of AH).

As discussed on the track, this characteristic change takes place only when the vowel comes immediately before a limited number of consonants or consonant clusters.

a. Before the [f] sound as in:

*after, laugh, half, calf*

MAJOR EXCEPTIONS: *caffeine, saffron, sapphire*

b. Before the [s] sound as in:

*fast, rascal, repast, pass* (but not *passenger* or *passage*)

OTHER EXCEPTIONS: *gastric, hassle, tassel* (but "*castle*" changes)

c. Before the voiceless TH [θ] as in:

*bath, pathway, wrath*

MAJOR EXCEPTIONS: *Catholic, mathematics, catheter, cathode*

d. Before the [ns] sound combination as in:

*dance, chancellor, Lancelot, France*

MAJOR EXCEPTIONS: *fancy, cancer, romance*

e. Before the [nt] sound combination as in:

*advantage, plant, chant, can't*

MAJOR EXCEPTIONS: *banter, fantasy, fantastic, tantalize, ranting*

f. Occasionally before the [nd] sound combination as in:

*commander, demand, slander, Flanders*

MAJOR EXCEPTIONS: (Remember, most of the ND words do not make the change.) *and, grand, stand, hand, land, etc.*

g. And in these isolated words:

*banana, example, sample, soprano, ranch, branch* (The last two are optional.)

[TRACK 16]

Try these sentences where all of the "SHORT-A" vowels do broaden to "AH" [a].

- *The rascal chancellor demanded the castle.*
- *At last, the commander's repast is half ready.*
- *I just can't ask her to dance.*

Now here are some words and sentences where the vowel does not change into the "AH" [a].

- *can, hand, bat, sandwich, grandstand*
- *My batting hand soaks in a vat of apple cider.*
- *Stan and Joanne sat in back of the bank instead of standing.*

In the next group, the "SHORT-A" shifts are underlined.

- *That man is dancing divinely.*
- *Last night the cat transferred the kittens to the back room.*
- *He comes from a class of radical rascals.*
- *Ask any bashful man to dance and accept his answer.*

Now, here are a few more sentences that are not recorded. Once again, the underlined vowels do change to the "AH."

- \* *The soprano laughed as she shattered the glass.*
- \* *The passengers and baggage were trapped in the alcove.*
- \* *Pam made an ample snack of the wax apples.*
- \* *Lady Astor handed the annual to the commanding admiral.*
- \* *Ask any bashful man in Alabama and accept his answer.*
- \* *The huddled masses sang the National Anthem.*
- \* *Let's have a lamb and ham sandwich.*
- \* *Sam rammed the flag into the anthill.*
- \* *During the disaster, the master commanded the castle.*
- \* *The staff has a rash of bad habits.*

j

**4. THE "LIQUID OO" as in TUESDAY (aka the YAD Vowel)**

[TRACK 17]

**IPA:** [u] occasionally becomes [ju].

As happens in some elevated American dialects, the English insert a gliding "y" [j] sound before the "LONG-OO" vowel after certain consonants and when the vowel is not spelled with a "DOUBLE-O."

*duke, duel, due, neutral, nuclear, news, Tuesday, tune, tunic,*  
*lubricate, ludicrous, lunatic* (but—*lieutenant* is pronounced "leftenant").

## 5. AVOID COCKNEY VOWEL CHANGES

[TRACK 18]

In your initial learning of Received Pronunciation, avoid letting "LONG-A," "LONG-E," and "LONG-I" gravitate toward a Cockney or "Street-London" pronunciation.

### "LONG-A" (*aka the FACE Vowel*) remains [eɪ]

- *a great day* - *going away in April*

\* *playing games* \* *May the eighth* \* *the saving grace* \* *stage play*

### "LONG-E" (*aka the FLEECE Vowel*) remains [i]

- *eating green beans* - *See me ski.*

\* *We seem to agree.* \* *three dollars each* \* *I'm pleased to meet you.*

### "LONG-I" (*aka the PRICE Vowel*) remains [aɪ]

- *riding high in the sky* - *We had a fine time.*

\* *nighttime* \* *five sidewinders* \* *side by side* \* *bright and shining*

### [all three]

- *Save my seat.* \* *the same side of the street* \* *The baby feels tired.*

## LESSON FIVE: THE R-DROP as in MOTHER

When "R" follows a vowel, the English drop off the actual glide sound of the "R," leaving only the vowel or diphthong stem. Listen carefully to the recording for the proper style of "R-dropping."

[TRACK 19]

### 1. "ER" (*aka the lettER Vowel*)

*IPA Target: [ə]*

*runner, player, helper, sweeter, heavier*

- *The runner staggered over the hill and became a walker.*

- *My mother, father, sister, and brother thank you again.*

### 2. STRESSED "ER" (*aka the NURSE Vowel*)

*IPA Target: [ɜ]*

*earth, word, work, curse, thirsty, burn*

- *Ernest was very dirty and thirsty.*

- *Searching for the curse words was hard work.*

### 3. "AR" (*aka the START Vowel*)

*IPA Target: [ɑ]*

*star, car, alarm, hard, march*

- *He parked the car down in the yard by the barn.*

- *Arthur played cards in the cardinal's garden.*

**4. "OR" (aka the NORTH & FORCE Vowels)                    IPA Target: [ɔ:]**

*four, door, chores, more, important*

- *The exhaust that poured forth caused sore throats.*
- *At a quarter to four the sportsmen adorned the shore.*

**5. "EER" (aka the NEAR Vowel)                                IPA Target: [iə]**

*clear, beer, here, tears, career*

- *Never fear; the wheel to steer is near the gearbox.*
- *I'm sincere about wanting the deer to appear next year.*

**6. "AIR" (aka the SQUARE Vowel)                            IPA Target: [ɛə]**

*hair, pair, barely, everywhere, scared*

- *Where did the rare polar bear go?*
- *He carefully prepared to go upstairs.*

**7. "OOR" (aka the CURE Vowel)                                IPA Target: [uə]**

*sure, cure, endure, secure*

- *Are you sure that you can endure the long tour?*
- *Can you ensure that the poor man can cure his headache?*

Now try these additional sentences for the dropping of the "R-shading" from all the different vowel stems.

- \* *The burglar and his helper stirred up such a clamor.*
- \* *This summer went faster and further than last.*
- \* *Herman was the first to win thirty games.*
- \* *He searched the world for a perfect curve.*
- \* *He disembarked from the sparkling new car.*
- \* *Father Charles argues about the guard's identity card.*
- \* *Fourteen bored sportsmen adorned the shore.*
- \* *More and more support came forth for the orphans' party.*
- \* *Pay your fare, and then tell the driver where to stop.*
- \* *If you're scared, be prepared to run downstairs.*
- \* *The earring fell clear of the nearby pool.*
- \* *Be sincere, my dear; it's a queer world.*
- \* *The cure for polio makes Salk's name endure.*
- \* *I'm secure that velour will endure.*

**"R-GLIDES" as in THERE IS****[TRACK 20]**

Between vowels, either the "R" returns to its full pronunciation or it becomes a quick "tap," much like the sound of a soft "D."

*very, sorry, miracle, carry*

*- sore at me - a pair of socks - I prefer it. - the year after*

Now a few R-Glides or Taps that aren't recorded:

\* *parrot, married, clearing, sorrow, carriage, parable, charity*

\* *Secure it. Mr. Adams better at it Treasure Island*

**LESSON SIX:  
ISOLATED SOUND CHANGES**

t t

**1. "MEDIAL" and "FINAL T" as in A BIT BRITISH****[TRACK 21]**

With most dialects in England, speakers use a fully exploded "T" sound at the ends of words. Also, unlike most Americans, the English usually do not substitute an "almost-D" when "T" falls between two vowels, as in WRITER.

*hit, get, sit, at - Get out. - Sit on the chair. - I don't like it at all.*

*matter, later, sitting, better, after*

*- The beautiful British writer scattered the letters.*

*- They fought over the battle plans.*

Now, here are a few more unrecorded "Medial-T" drills.

\* *Put the kettle on. a bottle of beer Get in. Let it go.*

\* *What is it about city settlers? I want a little water.*

**2. FORWARD ENERGY ON "L" as in LITTLE LAMB****[TRACK 22]**

The British "L" is pressed against the gums harder than the American version. This pressure also helps the sounds before and after the "L" to focus forward.

*little, long, allow, illegal, kettle, bottle*

*- with a little bit of luck - a lot of bottles of beer*

Now, here are a few more unrecorded "L" drills.

\* *Pull the kettle down. clear and cloudy weather*

\* *Will the lion live longer? Let's allow the cattle to linger.*

**3. ISOLATED WORDS****[TRACK 23]**

Now let's look at some words that simply have pronunciations of their own within British dialect. These words don't follow any of the rules; they just are what they are.



t t  
 ACTORS TO REMEMBER THE OTHER FUNDAMENTALS: TO  
 DISCOVER THE SAME ACTIONS, BEATS, UNITS (WHATEVER  
 ɜ ɒ ɪ ɪ  
 TERMINOLOGY YOU'VE USED FOR IT) AND SIMPLY PLAY  
 əʊ əʊ j  
 THOSE MOMENTS THROUGH THE NEW SPEECH REFLEXES.  
 ɜ t ɪ ɪ ɜ  
 IT'S PERFECTLY SATISFACTORY TO RETURN, WHENEVER  
 ɪ  
 NECESSARY, TO AN AMERICAN ACCENT TO HELP YOU DIS-  
 əʊ əʊ  
 COVER THOSE MOMENTS. THEN YOU SHOULD RE-DISCOVER  
 ɔ: əʊ j  
 THE SAME OR SIMILAR MOMENTS WITH THE NEW PHYSICAL  
 TRAITS OF ENGLISH SPEECH.

Now follow the recording and try different degrees of upper class dialect by including or intensifying (a) the Long-O triphthong, (b) the Tapped-R between vowels, (c) pitch glides, and (d) slight nasal resonance. The passage is from the Gilbert & Sullivan operetta **PATIENCE**.

[TRACK 25]

ɜ t t ɔ: ɒ  
 WHEN I FIRST PUT THIS UNIFORM ON,  
 ɑ  
 I SAID AS I LOOKED IN THE GLASS,  
 t ɪ  
 "IT'S ONE TO A MILLION THAT ANY CIVILIAN  
 ɔ: ɑ  
 MY FIGURE AND FORM WILL SURPASS.  
 əʊ ɔ:  
 GOLD LACE HAS A CHARM FOR THE FAIR,  
 t ɪ t  
 AND I'VE PLENTY OF THAT, AND TO SPARE.  
 WHILE A LOVER'S PROFESSIONS,  
 t  
 WHEN UTTERED IN HESSIANS,  
 ɪ  
 ARE ELOQUENT EVERYWHERE!"

