

Introduction to French Phonetics

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Key concepts, symbols, and practical tips for beginners

1. What Is Phonetics?

Branch	Focus
Articulatory	How speech sounds are produced by the vocal tract.
Acoustic	Physical properties of sound waves (frequency, amplitude, duration).
Auditory	How the ear and brain perceive and interpret sounds.

French phonetics mainly deals with **articulatory** and **acoustic** aspects because learners need to know how to shape sounds and recognize their distinctive patterns.

2. The French Sound System at a Glance

Category	Number of Units	Example(s)
Vowels	12–16 (depends on dialect)	/i/, /y/, /u/, /e/, /ø/, /o/, /a/, nasal /??/ etc.
Consonants	~20	/p, b, t, d, k, g, f, v, s, z, ʃ, ʒ, m, n, ɲ, ʁ, ʎ, j, w/
Semi-vowels (glides)	2	/j/ (like y in “yes”), /w/ (like w in “wet”)
Nasal vowels	4	/ɛ̃, ɔ̃, œ̃, ɑ̃/
Liaison & Elision	Phonological processes	<i>les amis</i> ? [le.z?a.mi], <i>je+ai</i> ? [??e]

3. French Vowels

3.1 Oral Vowels (IPA)

Symbol	Example Word	Description
/i/	si (if)	Close front unrounded

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Symbol	Example Word	Description
/y/	lune (moon)	Close front rounded
/u/	fou (crazy)	Close back rounded
/e/	été (summer)	Close-mid front unrounded
/ø/	peur (fear)	Close-mid front rounded
/o/	porte (door)	Close-mid back rounded
/ɛ/	belle (beautiful)	Open-mid front unrounded
/œ/	sœur (sister)	Open-mid front rounded
/ɔ/	porte (door, in some accents)	Open-mid back rounded
/a/	papa (dad)	Open front unrounded
/ɶ/	pâte (paste) – mainly in Quebec	Open back unrounded

3.2 Nasal Vowels

Symbol	Example	Articulation
/ɶ̃/	sans (without)	Vowel /a/ + velum lowered
/œ̃/	vin (wine)	Vowel /ɛ/ + velum lowered
/ø̃/	un (one)	Vowel /œ/ + velum lowered
/ɔ̃/	nom (name)	Vowel /ɔ/ + velum lowered

Tip: Nasal vowels are *not* a vowel plus a nasal consonant; the airflow stays through the nose throughout the vowel.

4. French Consonants

| Symbol | Example | Key Features | |