

English Pronunciation – The Letter 'U'

English vowels have different pronunciations, depending on the surrounding consonants.

For example, the letter 'u' can be:

- short (example: *gun*)
- long (example: *pure*)

In a short word, 'u' usually has a short sound:

- run
- strum
- but

And 'u' followed by a double consonant also usually has a short sound:

- butter
- crumble
- strumming

But 'u' followed by a consonant and a vowel usually has a long sound:

- futile
- cute
- mule

Exercise. Pronounce these words, and say if the 'u' is *short* or *long*:

- cub
- cube
- funny
- fun
- future
- lucky
- udder
- uncle

The letter 'u' at the beginning of a word also has two possible sounds, short or long:

<u>Short sound</u>	<u>Long sound</u>
umbrella	university
under	useful
up	utility
utter	universe
ulcer	union

When using the indefinite article (*a/an*) with a word beginning with 'u', we must use 'an' if the 'u' has a short sound, and 'a' if the 'u' has a long sound, because a long 'u' has the sound of a consonant ('y'):

Short sound

an umbrella

an underpass

an up-and-coming businessman

Long sound

a university

a useful tool

a utility

The rules of pronunciation in English have many exceptions! So, the best way to speak correctly is to remember how to pronounce every individual word!

Note:

A 'u' is sometimes pronounced as a 'schwa'. Examples: *survive*, *difficult*.

Suggested video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A8zWWp0akUU> (4 mins)