

## Speak Easy #010 – Your question about minimal pairs

### Episode description

Suzanne and Andrew share a great English pronunciation lesson about how to pronounce and hear the differences between some difficult minimal pairs. If you struggle to pronounce or hear English vowels, you won't want to miss this episode!!

### Material included in the study guide

- Transcript
- Practice exercises
- Bonus audio



## Transcript

Andrew: Hey, everybody. My name is Andrew.

Suzanne: And I'm Suzanne.

Andrew: And you're listening to Culips.

Hi, guys. Welcome back to episode #010 of Speak Easy, our pronunciation series. I am joined today by Culips' resident pronunciation expert, Suzanne.

Hey, Suzanne, how are you?

Suzanne: Hey, Andrew, I'm doing pretty good. How are you?

Andrew: I am doing very well myself, thank you. And, Suzanne, today we have one of my favourite kind of episodes, and this is when we get to answer a listener's question. We recently received a very interesting question from one of our listeners named Tatiana, who was confused about some words that sound very similar because they have similar vowel sounds.

Suzanne: Yes.

Andrew: When words have almost exactly the same sound overall, but there's one little tiny difference, we call this a minimal pair.

Suzanne: Yeah. So, for example, "pit" and "bit" are minimal pairs because they're very similar, but there's just one thing that's slightly different. So, exactly, a minimal pair is when a pair of words differ only by just one sound. Usually that sound is in the same position of the word, as well.

Andrew: Yes, exactly. So the words are almost exactly similar but, at the same point in both words, one sound is different. This is a minimal pair. And today we are going to take a look at some of the minimal pairs that Tatiana mentioned are difficult for her to hear. So that's the plan for today.

But just before we get into it in more depth Suzanne, I did wanna remind everyone that the best way to study along with today's episode is with the study guide and you can download it from our website Culips.com. You'll find the transcript in the study guide, and you'll find bonus practice exercises that you can use to study these minimal pairs that we'll look at today and we think it would be really helpful for you. Suzanne, you actually designed the study guide with love for all of our listeners, so if you wanna check it out guys, just visit Culips.com to download it.

OK, Sue, let's get into it. So what are some of these words that Tatiana had a problem with?

- Suzanne: So first we're just going to say them, so that you can see if you can perceive or hear the difference in the vowel sounds between each word that, you know, that sounds similar but there'll be one thing that's a little different. And then let's get into some nitty-gritty ones. We'll really look into it and see if we can figure out how to make them different and why they're different, OK?
- Andrew: Sounds good. So, Sue, why don't you read them for us?
- Suzanne: So the first pair is hustle and hassle.
- Andrew: Hustle and hassle.
- Suzanne: Yes.
- Andrew: Good.
- Suzanne: The second pair is reword and reward. The third pair is wander and wonder. Wander and wonder.
- Andrew: Wander, wonder. Wander, wonder.
- Suzanne: Good. The next one is stuff and staff.
- Andrew: Stuff, staff.
- Suzanne: Yes, the next one is very and vary.
- Andrew: Very, vary.
- Suzanne: Yeah.
- Andrew: That's a tough one. To me, they sound almost identical. When you say them, Suzanne, I hear a difference. When I say them, they sound the same. So maybe this is a slight issue in the accents that are different between us, too.
- Suzanne: Actually, what you're doing is Canadian rising. So Canada has a little bit different of an accent, where the tongue will actually go higher for certain sounds, especially vowels. And this is an example. So instead of saying very "vɛɪ" very, you're saying very, very "veə-i" so that "eə" is a little bit higher. That's all, the tongue is a bit higher up, in an arch.
- Andrew: It's my Canadianism coming out.
- Suzanne: Yeah, it's OK. That's all good. As long, I mean, most of these you kinda know what they are when they're in context, right? You wouldn't say it

varies and then think it's very. You wouldn't say it veries, varies, it's not a word, "veries," right?

Andrew: Right.

Suzanne: So you would know that it's the second one, that it's vary.

Andrew: Vary. Interestingly, when I say this word in its different forms like variation, then I think I hear the vowel that you use come out more. But in the shortened, vary, then it's a little less significant, a little less noticeable.

Suzanne: Yeah, and I think that that's because Canadians tend to clip words, say them faster than Americans do. So Americans are gonna really elongate and sort of like make vowels longer and a little bit more stressed. So I might say vary and really, like, get my mouth around that whole diphthong, whereas Canadians might say vary, vary, like a quicker vowel. And that's cool, that's OK. The context will really help us know what you're trying to say. So let's just get through the last three of these pairs.

Andrew: So the next set is?

Suzanne: Yeah, so the next set is bold, bold, which is, like, you know, like a bold colour or bald, bald. So you have "bo" and "ba," bold and bald.

Andrew: Bold, bald. Bold, bald.

Suzanne: Yeah, that can be a little tricky, but it's really, you have to be more precise with that "O" sound, bold and bald.

Andrew: Bold, bald. Yeah.

Suzanne: Then our next one is taxes, like we pay taxes, and taxi. So we have taxes, it's an "ə" sound or an "I" sound, whichever you choose to do.

Andrew: Kind of shorter vowel sound.

Suzanne: Yeah, some people make it a schwa or "ə" and some people make it an "I." I tend to make it an "I." Whenever you have an "Iz" sound, "Iz," I usually say "Iz," taxes.

Andrew: Taxes, me as well.

Suzanne: Yeah, that's more North American. And if you're in the UK, it's also correct, but it's just a different sound. They might say taxes, taxes ('tæksəz), so it's gonna be an "UH" sound. So, taxis, that last syllable is an "EE" (/i/) sound, right? Taxi, "EE."

Andrew: Taxi, taxi, talking about, like, taxicabs, right? Taxis.

- Suzanne: Taxis. And then our last one is warrior and worrier. So when I say it, for me they're actually homonyms, so they sound the same. They just mean two different things.
- Andrew: Right, so a warrior is someone that fights, right? A warrior, like a soldier. And a worrier is someone who worries a lot, who frets a lot. And, Suzanne, you just mentioned when I say these, I actually say them differently, right? Warrior, worrier. Warrior, worrier. And that's my Canadian accent coming out again. But for you, when you say them with your American accent, they are homophones, they are same sound.
- Suzanne: Yes, so it's really, it's really—again, they're very different meanings, they have very different meanings, so you're gonna know what we're talking about in context, right?
- Andrew: Almost opposite meanings when you think about it. A warrior is somebody in battle, who's very brave, and a worrier would be, maybe be somebody who stays home and frets.
- Suzanne: Totally, totally different. And then our listener Tatiana also wrote in son, S-O-N and sun, S-U-N, but those are also homonyms or homophone sounds. So they are actually pronounced exactly the same and mean two different things, right? One is a boy.
- Andrew: A male child.
- Suzanne: Yup.
- Andrew: Yup.
- Suzanne: And one is the burning star in the sky that keeps us warm, the sun.
- Andrew: And alive, yes.
- Suzanne: Yes, exactly.
- Andrew: Shout out to the sun.
- Suzanne: What's up, sun? Grow my plants. Yes, exactly, so those are actually supposed to be the same, son/sun.
- Andrew: Yup, those are exactly the same for every variation of English.
- Suzanne: Exactly, exactly. Doesn't matter where you're from, it always sounds the same. So we're just going to leave that one out.

- Andrew: Great. So we have several examples of different minimal pairs here, and, Suzanne, now I think it would be great if we took an in-depth look at these pairs and talk about them a little bit more in great detail.
- So the first set is hustle/hassle. So I hear that the vowel is different in these two.
- Suzanne: Right, right. When you say the words, what do you feel you're doing with your mouth that's different in each word when you say them?
- Andrew: Let me say them again here, hustle/hassle, hustle/hassle. So when I say hassle, I notice that my jaw opens wider.
- Suzanne: Right, yes. Right. So you're allowing more space into your mouth when you say that "æ" sound.
- Andrew: "UH"(/ʌ/) "AH" (/æ/). Yeah, exactly, I can really notice that my mouth is opening more. Hustle/hassle.
- Suzanne: And what's happening with your lips when you say the "AH" sound? Are they relaxed down? Are they retracted? Are they a little smiling?
- Andrew: Interesting. Hustle/hassle feels like I'm almost turning them inwards, so they're more retracted.
- Suzanne: Yeah, so they're kind of—when we say retracted, we kind of mean that they're smiling a little bit, right? They're kind of, there's a bit more of a pull of the muscles that are pulling them back and opening your mouth, "hæ" "hæ" hassle.
- Andrew: They're definitely tighter. Hustle, the lips are totally relaxed and hassle, yeah, there's some tension on my lips.
- Suzanne: Yeah, we would call this a retraction or a slight smile, 'cause even though your jaw is open, your lips are, if you closed your, if you say "HA" and then closed your jaw, guess what you'd have?
- Andrew: I would be smiling.
- Suzanne: You'd be smiling, exactly.
- Andrew: Right.
- Suzanne: So that is what we would call, use a bit of a smile, drop your jaw more and you'll have the right sound for hassle. Hassle. With "Huh" (hʌ) hustle, this is a more mid-vowel, whereas "Hæ" is a more forward vowel. That just means the tongue is arching more forward for the "æ" and more mid for the "ʌ" and you're relaxing your jaw to be not so open and your lips are not smiling at

all. They're just hanging there, at your face. Like just neutral, so it's "Huh" "Huh" (hʌ), just like you're saying "the" or "cup" or, I don't know, "dumb-dumb" I don't know, I couldn't think of a word. So this is "Huh" (hʌ), hustle. OK?

Andrew: OK, and just in case some of our listeners are not familiar with the meaning of these two words, I suppose we should explain them. Something that is a hassle is something that's annoying and bothersome and something that you don't really want to do, right? Like going to the dentist could be a hassle, right?

Suzanne: Yeah.

Andrew: It's annoying.

Suzanne: Or like the post office.

Andrew: Or going to the post office, yeah, something just gets in the way of your regular schedule. And hustle means to work quickly or to move quickly, right? We hear this a lot. Like a coach, a basketball coach, might yell at his players to hustle, show me some hustle. Show me some quick movement, some actions, some vigour.

Suzanne: Yeah, you could use it, too, like I've been hustling or, you know, I had to hustle all over the city today, like run here and run there and run all over the place, right?

Andrew: Yeah, to be, we even use hustle to mean like to be a good business person, right? If you've been hustling, maybe you hear this used in rap songs a lot, right? Like hustling means selling something, selling rap albums or other things.

Suzanne: Yeah, totally.

Andrew: All right, Sue, let's keep going on with the next set that we'll look at for today, and that is reword and reward. Reword/reward. So reword means to write something using different words, right? If you don't like the original wording of the sentence that you wrote, then you could change the words, and this is to reword. And reward, this is if you win a prize or maybe you find somebody's lost cat, they will give you a reward, right?

Suzanne: The vowels in these two words are a little bit more complex, because reword is a vowel that is always paired with an "UR" (/ɜ:/), it's the "ɜ" vowel. Like in the word word or bird or stir, it's an "ɜ" vowel. It's kind of a weird, it's one of the strangest vowels that we have in phonetics and in the English language, but it is a vowel sound, but it is a pure vowel sound. Because we're not moving, our mouth stays still and it is, it makes a pure sound,



“UR” that’s for reword, and then for the second word, we actually have a diphthong as the vowel sound.

Andrew: OK, and can you just quickly explain what a diphthong is?

Suzanne: Yeah, so a diphthong is actually when two vowels come together to make one vowel sound. And we have a bunch of those in English, for example, pay “EH” (/ɛ/) and “EE” (/i/), pay. We have time, “I” (/aɪ/), right? “AH” (/ɑ/) and “EE” (/i/) time, right?

Andrew: Yes. OK, so it’s when you’re transitioning between kind of two vowel sounds, right?

Suzanne: Totally, yes. Pay is “E” “ɛ” right? “E” “ɛ” and “EE” (/i/) is “ɛɪ” yeah. So in reward, we have what we call a diphthong of “R” so we have four diphthongs of “R” in English. We have “hear” “ear” “air” “or” and “are.” So in this one, we’re using the “or” reward, right? The “or” (/ɔə/) sound. Why are they called diphthongs of “R”? Well, it’s just because, when you’re making an “R” sound a little extra vowel happens, an “UH” sound. We go “AWUhR” (/ɔə/) reward, right? So in this case, we’re moving our lips as we say this vowel, which is different than the first word that we’re looking at. First one, we don’t, it’s a pure vowel, our lips and our mouth stay still, so it’s reword. And in the second one, we are moving our lips and we’re gonna move our lips really forward, really, really round them forward like you’re saying “OO,” we go reward.

Andrew: Reward. Yeah, it’s totally true.

Suzanne: Yeah, so that’s why it’s a little bit complex, because you know those are not really common vowel sounds, but that’s what makes them different.

Andrew: OK, so one more time, just so our listeners can hear the difference, it’s reword/reward.

Suzanne: Yeah, so in reword, you’re not really moving, you’re just keeping your jaw still, you’re saying reword. And then the second one, we’re opening our jaw more and we’re pushing our lips forward like we’re about to say “OO” and we say reward, reward. So we go really forward, and we open our jaw.

Andrew: Well, Suzanne, that was a very detailed and nice explanation. Thank you very much.

Listeners, maybe you can tell that I’m also learning a lot of things from this Speak Easy series. Because you know I teach grammar, I teach vocabulary, I do a lot of teaching regarding English, but I don’t teach much pronunciation. And so, Suzanne, I always love listening to these episodes so I can level up my English pronunciation knowledge, too.





Suzanne: Anytime, Andrew.

Andrew: Well, Tatiana, thank you very much for your question. It was a really good one. And we don't have time today, Sue, to look at all of the distinctions that Tatiana asked us about, but, hey, maybe in the next episode we could take a look at some more of these minimal pairs.

Suzanne: Sounds good.

Andrew: All right. Well, thank you everyone for listening. Once again, our website is Culips.com. And if you'd like to follow us on social media, well, we're on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube. You name it, we're there. Just search for the Culips English Podcast and you can find us. And, finally, if you have a pronunciation question for Sue or something that you'd like us to talk about in a future upcoming Speak Easy episode, just send us an email to [contact@Culips.com](mailto:contact@Culips.com) and we'll try our best to make your question into an episode.

Suzanne: Yeah, that'll be fun.

Andrew: All right, we'll be back soon with another new episode, we'll talk to you then. Bye, everyone.

Suzanne: Bye.

## Practice exercises

*The audio for the practice exercises is included at the end of the ad-free version of this episode. To download this file, please visit the Culips Dashboard by going to [www.Culips.com](http://www.Culips.com) and logging in to your account.*

- Let's practice vowels that can sound the same by practicing perception. Perception is the best way for us to learn the differences between the characteristics of vowels. Once we can hear the differences, then we can produce them.**

Listen to the recording, and circle the word that has a DIFFERENT vowel from the other words in the stressed syllable.

1. HARD	HOARD	CAR	STAR
2. STEEP	FEET	TEAM	STEP
3. LEVER	FRIEND	FEVER	MEN
4. STRIP	STREP	STITCH	KNIT
5. LIPS	LEAPS	STEER	BEAN

- In each pair, pick out the sound that the question asks for. For example, if the question asks to choose the word with the /i/ (as in PIN) vowel, circle the word that contains that vowel. Listen to the recording for clarification.**

1. Which word contains the sound /æ/ as in SAT?	PAST	PASTE
2. /ɛ/ as in BED?	INVENT	INVERT
3. /ɜ/ as in WORD	CARB	CURB
4. /ɑ/ as in FATHER	BUNNY	BONNY
5. /l/ as in FIT	LIFT	LEFT

- Practice pronouncing the different minimal pairs. Listen to the recording and repeat. See if you can tell the difference and produce the sounds.**

1. HURRY	HAIRY	5. BILLOW	BELLOW
2. MERRY	MARY	6. SCRAM	SCREAM
3. CHIN	CHAIN	7. BARD	BIRD
4. PEAR	PIER	8. CAREY	CURRY

## Answers

1.

1. HARD	<u>HOARD</u>	CAR	STAR
2. STEEP	FEET	TEAM	<u>STEP</u>
3. LEVER	FRIEND	<u>FEVER</u>	MEN
4. STRIP	<u>STREP</u>	STITCH	KNIT
5. <u>LIPS</u>	LEAPS	STEER	BEAN

2.

1. Which word contains the sound /æ/ as in SAT?	<u>PAST</u>	PASTE
2. /ɛ/ as in BED?	<u>INVENT</u>	INVERT
3. /ɜ/ as in WORD	CARB	<u>CURB</u>
4. /ɑ/ as in FATHER	BUNNY	<u>BONNY</u>
5. /l/ as in FIT	<u>LIFT</u>	LEFT



## Episode credits

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