How to Do a British Accent

BY [ANNA FRANKL-DUVAL](https://www.backstage.com/magazine/author/anna-frankl-duval/) | LAST UPDATED: JANUARY 20, 2023

There are many different accents in the U.K., but even great actors sometimes make the mistake of mixing them together. Exposure to a range of these regional accents can make learning an authentic British dialect much harder, often resulting in something that can sound inconsistent and fake. Practicing just a few techniques can make your British accent consistent and convincing.

The Standard British accent is one of the most common dialects in the South of England. It’s a more modern, slightly relaxed version of Received Pronunciation (RP), which you might well have been taught at drama school. Here’s how to do it.

1. Drop your jaw

This is the foundation of speaking with a good Standard British accent. You’ll need to drop your jaw about twice as much as when you’re doing a General American accent. It’s going to feel unnatural at first, partly because it’s a completely new movement. A lot of us have a ton of tension in our jaws, which doesn’t help. I would definitely recommend incorporating some exercises that ease jaw tightness into your dialect practice routine.

2. Bring your lip corners forward

Much like dropping your jaw, this technique contributes to the darker timbre of the dialect. The British accent tends to be narrower and longer, while American accents tend to be wider and shallower. That’s reflected in the shapes your mouth makes in each accent. Again, this technique will feel extreme. I always tell my students that the shape they need to make for this sound is almost like a kissing face. Doing it right will make a big difference to the pronunciation of the “aw” sound such as in the words law, draw, and floor.

3. Take out the Rs

In most accents, Brits take the “r” sounds out of words and replace them with an “ah,” “eh” or “uh” sound, depending on the vowel that precedes the “r.” Whenever this happens, extend that preceding vowel. This rule only applies at the end of words or syllables when the next word or syllable begins with a consonant.

For example, the “r” in hardly would be replaced with “ah” so it would be pronounced “hah-dly,” whereas the “r” in Harry would be pronounced “Ha-ry.”

If the “r” sound is at the end of a word or syllable which is followed by one that begins with a vowel, it *is*pronounced and is used as a link between words. The words almost blend into each other. For example: “Where are you?” should be said “wheh-rah-you?”

4. The liquid U

In a British accent, a liquid “u” sound, as said in the word you, is used in places where an American accent would pronounce “oo.” Common examples are words such as stupid (to be pronounced “stew-pid” rather than “stoo-pid”) and duty (“dew-ty” instead of “doo-ty”).

5. Pay more attention to consonants

In a Standard British accent, consonants should be pronounced a little more than in an American accent. This change particularly applies to “t” sounds. For example, the word battle should be said “bat-ul” rather than “ba-dul.” This rule should also be applied to the suffix “-ing,” where the “g” on the suffix should be pronounced fully but subtly. A word of caution: don’t take this too far. Hitting consonants too hard makes everything sound very choppy and very quickly makes an accent sound fake.

6. “A” versus “Ah."

This is a very important sound change—but unfortunately, it’s inconsistent. There is no rule determining when an “a” sound is pronounced in the same way as it would be in a General American accent and when it’s a darker “ah” sound, but using the wrong one can instantly spoil an accent. Luckily, you can look up the “Ask–Dance” list to see which words use which sounds. It should be noted that there will be a slight difference in the way the “a” sounds in this British accent. That comes naturally from the dropping of the jaw. The “a” versus “ah” sound also varies widely based on where in the U.K. an accent is from. Referring to that list will help you stick closely to a Standard British accent.