How to Do a Southern Accent

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Whether it’s Julia Garner’s foul-mouthed Missouri twang in “Ozark” or Dolly Parton’s soft yet (fittingly) steely drawl in “Steel Magnolias,” the Southern accent is as variable as it is recognizable. Here’s the down-South down-low about the pronunciation, inflection, and grammatical nuances that make for a convincing Southern accent.

* [Southern accent history and types](https://www.backstage.com/magazine/article/how-to-do-a-southern-accent-75899/#section0)
* [Southern accent pronunciation, inflection, and lexicon](https://www.backstage.com/magazine/article/how-to-do-a-southern-accent-75899/#section1)
* [How to practice a Southern accent for an audition](https://www.backstage.com/magazine/article/how-to-do-a-southern-accent-75899/#section2)

**Southern accent history and types**

The Southern accent is a regional dialect spoken across the Southern U.S., particularly in more rural regions. Although some name the Mason-Dixon Line as the geographical delineation of the Southern drawl, other (unofficial) defining factors include “y’all” versus “you all,” “red light” versus “traffic light,” “pen” versus “pin,” and even more nebulous elements such as the likelihood that a speaker is a fan of NASCAR or listens to country music.

In the antebellum South, dialects were a hodgepodge of British Isles, London, and early American settler English, as well as dialects used by enslaved persons. Post–Civil War, Southern American English became more cohesive—and this dialect was further unified throughout major sociopolitical events such as the World Wars and the growing divide between the city and country.

Today, the Southern accent is categorized primarily into the Southern drawl and the Southern twang.

* Southern drawl: Slow and even-keeled, “[like molasses just sort of spilling out of your mouth](https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1535367/characters/nm1159180),” the Southern drawl can be found in the lower Southern and coastal dialect, as well as the New Orleans dialect.
* Southern twang: As seen in midland and mountain dialects—think of Appalachia, the Florida panhandle, and some Texas talk—the Southern twang is faster and more nasal than its slow-moving cousin.

**Southern accent pronunciation, inflection, and lexicon**

* Slow it down: Although the Southern twang may not be quite as lackadaisical as the Southern drawl, it’s still slower than the “Gilmore Girls”–style staccato found in many Northern dialects. Much of the slowed-down nature of the Southern accent is due to elongated vowels. These tend to last around [159 milliseconds](http://dialectblog.com/2011/10/22/do-southerners-speak-slowly/) compared to the New York accent’s 133 milliseconds.
* Exaggerate your vowels: The elongated vowels of the Southern accent create exaggerated diphthongs—which is when two vowel sounds are combined into one syllable—even in words that aren’t traditionally diphthongs. For example, the hard “a” in “cat” is not a diphthong. But in the Southern lilt, “cat” becomes “cay-uht” and “tin” becomes “tee-yun.” To achieve your own best lilting belle, slow the vowels down and really pronounce both sides of the vowel.
* The long “i” becomes “ah”: In a Southern accent, the long “i” sound (pronounced “eye”) sounds more like “ahh.” For example, “tired” becomes “tah-d” and “bike” becomes “bah-k.”
* The soft “a” becomes “ay-uh”: The Southern accent also elongates the soft “a” (as in “can’t”) into “ay-uh.” So, “I just can’t” becomes “Ah just cay-uhnt.”
* Short “i” and “e” both sound like “ee-uh”: Since “pen” versus “pin” is one of the primary indicators of a Southern accent, remember to pronounce the vowel sounds in those words (and similar) like “pee-uhn.”
* “Or” at the end of a word becomes “oh-wah”: For example, pronounce the word “before” closer to “be-foh-wah.”
* Drop the “g” at the end of words: If a word ends with “g,” act as though it’s not there. You’re not “going,” you’re “goin’.” Instead of “fixing,” you’re “fixin’” to have some cornbread and grits.
* What’s done is “done”: For sentences conveying the past tense, add the word “done” in between the subject and verb. Say “We done went to the store,” instead of “We went to the store.” You might also use “done” instead of “did”: “I done what you asked” instead of “I did what you asked.”
* Sprinkle in Southern expressions: The South is [renowned](https://www.businessinsider.com/southern-sayings-2013-10) for its unique and highly recognizable sayings. Include full expressions such as “She was madder than a wet hen” (she was very angry), “You look rode hard and put up wet” (it looks like you had a bad day), and fan favorite, “Bless your heart” (often used to passive-aggressively call someone unintelligent). You can also sprinkle in shorter common sayings such as “well I’ll be,” “hush up,” “over yonder,” and “pretty as a peach.”
* Say “y’all” instead of “you all”: This should go without saying.

**How to practice a Southern accent for an audition**

1. Study Southern accents: Become acquainted with all things Southern to imbue your accent with authenticity. Watch films and TV shows showcasing Southern accents, such as “Big Fish,” “Fried Green Tomatoes,” “O Brother, Where Art Thou?,” “Dallas,” “True Blood,” and “Friday Night Lights.” If you know anybody with a strong drawl or twang, spend time listening to their inflection and speech patterns before your audition. The [International Dialects of English Archive](https://www.dialectsarchive.com/united-states-of-america) is also a helpful resource—simply search for Southern U.S. states and give them a listen. Remember to account for your character’s geographic location and cultural background when determining your accent; Ruth Langmore ain’t no Southern belle, after all.
2. Start slowly: When you first put it into practice, any new accent is going to sound wrong in your ears—especially one like a Southern accent, which really draws out its vowel sounds. Just go slowly and methodically; pretty soon, that unnatural “stay-uhnd” will click together and really sound like “stand” in a Southern accent.
3. Immerse yourself in the accent: Practice your Southern accent as often as possible—on friends, strangers, your dialect coach, and anyone who will listen. Pick a passage you know well—your favorite [audition monologue](https://www.backstage.com/magazine/article/best-audition-monologues-actors-57871/) or film quotes—and repeat it in the accent until it feels natural. In between practicing, listen to native speakers with headphones until you can pick up and identify even the subtlest changes.
4. Use the accent leading up to your audition: Put that practice to good use by using your accent all day before your audition. This will get you in the right mindset and prepare you for how your mouth, lips, and throat should feel during your audition.
5. Keep it up: Even if you’re hollerin’ when you’re supposed to be hootin’, or accidentally drawl when you’re supposed to twang, just hold your horses—casting directors will care more about consistency than perfection during your audition.