

Phonetic Transcription

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A phonetic transcription looks quite unlike a regular ('orthographic') transcription. The transcriber notes the way the spoken words are pronounced, using a special alphabet of phonetic symbols. The most common is the international phonetic alphabet (IPA).

You have probably seen IPA symbols in dictionaries. Printed between a word and its definition, you'll find something like this:

'ɔ:.di.əʊ

This is a phonetic spelling of "audio." Like many English-language words, it is not obvious how to say "audio" if you are not a native speaker. But, when transcribed phonetically, each sound in the word is represented by a symbol. Non-English speakers who know how to read IPA can read back a phonetic transcription with the correct English pronunciation, even if they don't know the meaning. In fact, IPA works for every spoken language, not just English.

Here is an [example](#) of what the phonetic transcription of a full sentence looks like:

hi 'hæd_ɪz 'fɑ:ðəz_ɪəz_ | _ənd_ɪz 'mʌðəz_ 'əʊpən 'hɑ:t |

Can't make head nor tail of it? Here's the orthographic transcription of the same sentence:

"He had his father's ears and his mother's open heart."

As you can see, they are very different texts that have very different uses.

Phonetic vs. Phonemic Transcription

'Narrow' phonetic transcription notes the words a speaker says as a [series of sounds](#). Every sound has its own symbol. This can lead to a very complex transcription document. There is a simpler way to transcribe these sounds: phonemic ('broad') transcription.

With phonemic transcription, two similar sounds may share the same symbol if the difference between the sounds does not change the word's meaning. Thus, [a phonemic transcription is less nuanced than a phonetic one](#).

A broad transcription can be a useful compromise between a narrow transcription and an orthographic one. However, it might not have as much detail as some specialists need.

Do I Need a Phonetic Transcription?

Phonetic transcription is a niche requirement. For most purposes, regular transcription will do.

In fact, phonetic transcription can muddle things for a reader. If you just want a transcribed text to study without confusing symbols, good quality regular transcription will do the trick.

So, when might you want to use a phonetic transcription service?

- If you need an accurate written record of how your foreign language or linguistics lecturer pronounces her words.
- If you intend to read parts of the text aloud, but it includes unfamiliar words or a foreign language.
- If you are using the document for forensic, pathological, or sociophonetic analysis.
- If the audio is dense with unfamiliar industry-specific terms and you will benefit from learning to say them.

Unless you have specialist requirements, phonetic transcription is an unnecessary expense that can compromise your text's clarity. Most online dictionaries include a playback option to demonstrate how a word is said. So, if the text contains only a few odd words, it makes sense to use a non-phonetic transcription service. You can always run a quick internet search to find how to pronounce an unfamiliar word.

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For more information see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e6NiCWR-2g4> (YouTube Video)