

Vowels and Diphthongs in Spanish: Pronunciation and Stress

There are 5 vowels in Spanish:

a *e* *o* *i* *u*

Please note: Spanish vowels are all short. They sound like the vowels in these English words:

[a] = but [e] = egg [o] = hot [i] = Italy [u] = foot

Examples: gato (cat); que (what); hora (hour); vino (wine) **u**va (grapes)



(listen to audio1.mp3)

a, e and o are “strong” vowels, meaning that they normally carry the stress in a word

i and u are “weak” vowels, meaning that they normally are not stressed in a word.


Strong vowels

When two strong vowels are together they are always pronounced separately and make two syllables¹:

leo (le-o) cae (ca-e) fea (fe-a) paella (pa-e-lla) coevo (co-e-vo)



(listen to audio2.mp3)

(the stress on the above words falls according to normal stress rules – [see online document](#) on *rules of accentuation*) 

Diphthongs (strong vowel + weak vowel)

When a strong vowel and a weak vowel are together, they combine to form a **dyphthong**: two vowels sounded together in one syllable. The stress always **falls** on the **strong** vowel and if an accent is needed it goes on the strong vowel *a, e, or o*:

<u>a</u> ire	ace <u>i</u> te	<u>e</u> uro	<u>o</u> iga	
adi <u>o</u> s	habl <u>a</u> is	com <u>e</u> is	<u>A</u> ustria	
ba <u>i</u> le	ci <u>e</u> rro	pu <u>e</u> sto	pe <u>i</u> ne	ca <u>a</u> usa



(listen to audio3.mp3)

¹ **Bold** type is used in this document to highlight the vowel groups (two vowels together)
Underline type is used to highlight the vowel that carries the stress.

When weak vowels are stressed

If the weak vowel *i* or *u* needs to be stressed it carries a written accent and becomes a separate syllable:

país (pa-ís) *comía* (co-mí-a) *policía* (po-li-cí-a) *día* (dí-a)
frío (frí-o) *continúe* (con-ti-nú-e) *leído* (le-í-do)




(listen to audio4.mp3)

Weak vowels together

When the two weak vowels are together (*iu* or *ui*), they form one syllable with the stress falling on the second vowel:

viudo *fui* *ruido* *destruido*

If two strong vowels are together they never combine to form one syllable and remain as separate syllables, the stress falling according to general rules as illustrated in the [online document](#) on rules of accentuation in Spanish. 

maestro = ma / e / stro

contraer = con / tra / er

creer = cre / er



(listen to audio5.mp3)

Some more examples of strong + weak vowel combinations (diphthongs):

The diphthongs **ia**, **ie**, **io** (the sound of **i** in these groups of vowels is approximately the same as English *y* in *yet*)

Francia asiático tienes bien nación tapioca

the diphthong **ai** (ay²):

aire, baile, hay

the diphthong **ei** (ey):

seis, peine, carey

the diphthong **oi** (oy):

Loira, voy, estoy

the diphthong **au**:

auto, Laura, causa

the diphthong **eu**:

deuda, Eugenio, Europa



(listen to audio6.mp3)

(Prepared by Cesare Popoli. Sound files recorded by Cesare Popoli & Angela Bettington)

² The sounds ay, ey and oy are not diphthongs but they still sound the same as ai, ei and oi.