

ENGLISH DICTION: TREATMENT OF R IN THE NON-RHOTIC ACCENT

r r ɹ ə ɹ̥

Articulating the letter r

In the non-rhotic accent, use these three guidelines to determine when r should be pronounced as a consonant:

- a) Always pronounce r before a vowel sound. *red, very*
- b) Never pronounce r before a consonant sound. *hard*
- c) Never pronounce r before a pause, or break. *never*

When r is not sung as a consonant...

—EITHER —

1) it creates a diphthong or triphthong by reducing to schwa

In addition to the diphthongs [ɔɪ] [aɪ] and [aʊ], and the “built-in” diphthongs of closed e [eɪ] and closed o [oʊ], there are four more diphthongs and several triphthongs involving the letter r in the non-rhotic accent. If r is not followed by a vowel sound, it reduces to schwa in the following diphthongs and triphthongs:

vocalic r diphthongs

[ɪə] as in *here*

[ʊə] as in *sure*

[ɛə] as in *there*

[ɔə] as in *more* *

NotE that **open** [ɪ] [ʊ] [ɛ] [ɔ] comprise the nucleus of these diphthongs.

vocalic r triphthongs

[aɪə] as in *fire*

[aʊə] as in *hour*

(others are possible)

* The [ɔə] diphthong is found only in the sequence **o + Vowel + r** and in the spelling **ore** :

four [fɔə]

door [dɔə]

poured [pɔəd]

floors [flɔəz]

shore [ʃɔə]

oar [ɔə]

bored [bɔəd]

hoard [hɔəd]

— OR —

2) it is dropped completely

If r is not followed by a vowel sound, it disappears altogether when preceded by [ɑ], [ɜ] / [ə], and [ɔ] when not part of the above sequences:

are [ɑ]

never [nevə]

arm [ɑm]

answered [ansəd]

her [hɜ]

for [fɔ]

hurt [hɜt]

horse [hɔs]

Linking *r*

A dropped *r* will regain consonant articulation at the end of a word that is followed by an initial vowel in the next word. This is called linking *r*:

are out [ɑː aʊt] *never* as [nevəɹ əz]
her own [hɜː əʊn] *for* us [fɔː əs]

An *r* that is reduced to schwa at the end of a word followed by an initial vowel in the next word will retain that schwa, **and** a linking *r* will be added:

here is [hɪəɹ ɪz] *there* in [ðɛəɹ ɪn] *fire* at [faɪəɹ æt]
sure on [ʃʊəɹ ɒn] *more* if [mɔːəɹ ɪf] *hour* of [aʊəɹ ɒv]

Note that if a break is intended between such sequences of words, no linking *r* is made. Most often, a glottal stop will precede the initial vowel sound of the next word:

“*There, in the box.*” [ðɛə ʔɪn ðə bɒks]

When *r* is sung as a consonant...

the singer must decide which articulation is appropriate.

Flipped [ɾ] and rolled [r]

Until about the 1920s, the flipped and rolled variants of *r* were the norm in RP. This is now often referred to as “Historic RP”, and can be used in English repertoire up to the early-twentieth century. A flipped [ɾ] is more usual than a rolled [r]:

“*we’re all terribly sorry*” [wɪəɾ əl tɛrɪbəlɪ sɔːrɪ]

The *r* may be rolled in English when it begins a word, or is in combination with another consonant (with the exception of the combinations *tr* and *dr*, which historically gained burred *r* much earlier):

“*he’s so frightfully rude*” [hɪz sɔː frɑɪtfoʊlɪ ruːd]

It is advisable to roll *r* sparingly, where heightened expressivity calls for it. Excessive rolling of *r* in English can sound Scottish, foreign, or even pompous.

Burred [ɹ]

Gradually, burred *r* found its way into British English. Use the burred *r* in modern British repertoire, (i.e. after about 1920). Keep articulation light; never allow the tongue to curl backward into what is known as retroflex *r*.

“*We’re all terribly sorry he’s so frightfully rude!*” [wɪəɹ əl tɛrɪbəlɪ sɔːrɪ hɪz sɔː frɑɪtfoʊlɪ ruːd].

It is not at all uncommon within a piece to mix modern burred *r* with the more old-fashioned flipped and rolled variants:

“*We’re all terribly sorry he’s so frightfully rude!*” [wɪəɹ əl tɛrɪbəlɪ sɔːrɪ hɪz sɔː frɑɪtfoʊlɪ ruːd].

This is especially possible in twentieth-century repertoire.