

## ENGLISH DICTION: TREATMENT OF THE LETTER R

[ɹ] [r] [ɻ]

### When to sing *r*

In the non-rhotic accent, these three guidelines stipulate where *r* should be pronounced:

- 1) Always pronounce *r* before a vowel.     *red, very*
- 2) Never pronounce *r* before a consonant.     *hard*
- 3) Never pronounce *r* before a pause.     *never*

In the last rule, *r* is pronounced when leading to a word beginning with a vowel. In this case, it behaves as in the first rule. This is called a “linking *r*.”     *never is*

### Additional Diphthongs and Triphthongs Created by *r*

In addition to the three true English diphthongs [ɔɪ] [aɪ] and [aʊ], and the “built-in” diphthongs of closed *e* [eɪ] and closed *o* [oʊ], there are three diphthongs and several triphthongs created by the letter *r* in the non-rhotic accent. The reducing of *-r* to a schwa in a stressed syllable of a long vowel causes these new sounds:

#### vocalic *r* diphthongs

[ɪə]     as in “here”  
[ʊə]     as in “sure”  
[ɛə]     as in “there”  
[ɔə]     as in “door”

Notice that the *open* [ɪ] [ʊ] and [ɛ]  
and [ɔ] symbols comprise the nucleus  
(or main part) of the diphthong.

#### vocalic *r* triphthongs

[aɪə]     as in “fire”  
[aʊə]     as in “hour”  
(others are possible)

When these new diphthongs and triphthongs lead into words beginning with vowels, “linking *r*” is still added:

“here is”	[hɪər ɪz]	“fire at”	[faɪər æt]
“sure on”	[ʃʊər ɒn]	“hour up”	[aʊər ʌp]
“there in”	[ðɛər ɪn]		
“more of”	[mɔər ɒv]		

### When to used flipped, rolled, and burred *r*

The singer must decide if a pronounced *r* is to be flipped [ɹ], rolled [r] or burred [ɻ]. Until the 1920s, RP used only flipped and rolled *r*. This is now sometimes referred to as “Historic RP,” and can be used in English repertoire up to the early-twentieth century. A flipped *r* is usually preferable to rolled *r*. The *r* may be rolled in English only when it begins a word, or in combination with another consonant, and even then, only when the sentiment of the word in question demands it. Excessively rolling of *r* in English can sound Scottish, foreign, or even pompous.

Gradually, burred *r* found its way into British English. Use the burred *r* in modern British repertoire, (ie. after 1920), but with a light articulation —never what is known as retroflex *r*, where the tongue curls backward.