



The Three American T Sounds

The T sound has **three pronunciation variations** depending on the context. However, most IPA dictionaries don't differentiate between the three T sounds! You will most likely always see the /t/ symbol used in the IPA transcription, but that's not always correct.

T Pronunciation #1: True T or Released T /t/

This T sound is probably the one that you learned to pronounce. It is made by touching the tongue tip to the roof of the mouth, just behind the front teeth (the bumpy ridge called the alveolar ridge). Air builds behind the tongue, and then a puff of air is released as the tongue comes down.

You use this T sound at the beginning of a word or syllable or within a t-cluster (two or more consonants that are together), like in *tie*, *atomic*, and *institution*.

T Pronunciation #2: Flap /ɾ/

The flap is one of the sounds that makes American English different from other versions of English, and Americans use the flap frequently. It will improve your American accent *greatly* to learn about the flap!

The flap is similar to a light D sound. You make a flap by lightly "flapping" the tongue tip to the roof of the mouth, just behind the front teeth (the bumpy ridge called the alveolar ridge). The flap is *very* quick - if you put too much time into the flap, then you will make an actual D sound. One important note: The flap is the same as the R sound in other languages, like in Spanish, in which a speaker will use a flap in the word *caro* /karo/ (meaning *expensive*).

The flap is used in words like *water*, *total*, and *ladder*. We can also use the flap between words in a sentence, like in *I hit it*. The flap can be used for both the /t/ and /d/ sounds.

Note: Cambridge Dictionary uses this symbol /t_/ for the flap.

Luckily, there are rules for when we use the flap /ɾ/:

Rule #1: When /t/ or /d/ occur between vowels and in an unstressed syllable, they become the alveolar flap



- Example : *Italy* /^l ɪ rəli/, uses a flap vs. *Italian* /ɪ^l tæljɪn/, uses a released T

Rule #2: Initial T and final T are never flaps at the single word level...but in a sentence, they *can* be flaps (speaker's choice), especially if the T comes between two vowel sounds

- Example: *Put it down!* That first T is a flap because the T comes between the /ʊ/ in *put* and /ɪ/ in *it*.

Rule #3: When T or D occur after the letter "r" and before a vowel, they become the flap

- Example: *dirty*, *hardy*, *party* all have the flap

T Pronunciation #3: Glottal Stop /ʔ/

The glottal stop /ʔ/ (also known as glottal T) is made at the level of the vocal cords. Say the words "uh oh" - you should feel that the stop portion of these words is made within the throat. That feeling is coming from your vocal cords, closing together to stop the airflow.

The glottal stop is used in words like *rotten*, *cotton*, and *atmosphere*.

There are a couple of rules that dictate when we may use a glottal stop:

Rule #1: The T in the middle of a word becomes a glottal stop /ʔ/ when it comes before a final syllable ending with N

- Example: *rotten*, *satin*, *forgotten*

Rule #2: At the sentence level, we may use a glottal stop when a word ends in T, and especially when the next word begins with a stop consonant (but it can happen in other contexts).

- Example: *Put it down!* The T in *it* is a glottal stop. Notice how the next word *down* begins with a stop consonant.
- Example: *My cat took a catnap.* Both the T in *cat* and the T in *catnap* are glottal stops, but notice how the T in *catnap* is followed by an N sound.



Practice Words:

True T or Released T

time	two	October	trust	street
YouTube	history	control	return	tree

Flap /r/

water	butter	completed	committee	party
meeting	city	hit a ball	put a smile	it is mine

Glottal Stop /ʔ/

cotton	KitKat	network	written	forgotten
that dog	hat trick	put down	pit bull	witness

Thanks for reading! Make sure you watch the videos that go along with this resource ([The Top 5 Problematic Sounds In American English: The "T" Sound](#) and [The American T in Sentences](#)) and contact me if you have any questions! Happy studying!

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