

## 21 English Sounds and Words where Intonation Changes the Meaning

There are some short sounds and words in English that have different meanings depending on the intonation. They are often more eloquent than many words!

Short sounds and words (with translations):

positive / negative / neutral (neither positive nor negative)

sound / word:	rising ↗	flat →	falling ↘	rising-falling ↗↘
ah	1. I want to speak	2. An unexpected problem	3. I'm sorry / something's wrong	4. I understand at last
eh	5. What do you mean?	6. Listen / Come here	7. Don't do that	8. I'm consoling you
hey	9. Stop / Come back / Hi	10. Hi, I'm tired or feel down	11. I'm not happy about that	12. Wake up
oh	13. I'm interested	14. I'm annoyed	15. I'm disappointed	16. I understand at last
uh huh	17. Keep going – I'm listening	18. Still listening, but bored	19. I'm confirming sth	20. I get it / I understand
mmm	21. I'm interested	22. Pausing	23. I'm not sure about sth	24. It's delicious / It's good
no	25. I didn't know that	26. Refusal – no discussion	27. Standard negative reply	28. It's fine / I don't mind
right	29. I'm interested	30. My mind is elsewhere	31. I understand / before action	32. Sarcasm: I don't believe you
sure	33. Are you sure about this?	34. Hurry up – I'm impatient	35. OK, I will do it	36. Yes, I'm very happy to do it
yeah	37. D'you want a fight?	38. I'm not listening	39. OK, I understand	40. Sarcasm: I don't agree
yes	41. Tell me more / Can I help?	42. Please stop talking	43. I agree / I accept sth	44. I strongly agree / sarcasm
OK	45. Do you agree?	46. I'm frustrated / stop talking	47. I accept sth	48. I'm happy to agree
aah		49. I'm at the doctor's	50. I think sth is cute	51. I understand at last
uh uh		52. Leave me alone (warning)	53. No / negative	54. Strong negative answer
wow		55. I can't believe it	56. I'm impressed	57. It's incredible
ooh			58. What a shame / pity!	59. Something good/interesting
yay			60. Ironical use – I'm not happy	61. I'm surprised by good news
yum yum	62. To a baby/pet: want to eat?			63. It smells / tastes delicious
boo			64. I'm scaring you! (for fun)	65. It was a bad performance
ugh			66. I hate that / I'm disgusted	67. I'm very disgusted
ha ha			68. Sarcastic laughter	69. I'm laughing (maybe at you)

Other short sounds (with translations):

brrr		70. I feel cold / sth scary	
er	71. Pausing for thought		
ew			72. That's disgusting!
oof		73. What a shock / Disbelief	
ow			74. I'm hurt / It hurts
uh oh			75. Something has gone wrong
um	76. Pausing for thought		
whee			77. I'm enjoying sliding down
oops	78. I've had an accident		

Other common sounds with fixed meanings in English:

79. **clear throat**  
Get attention, e.g. I'm about to speak / I'm nervous / Stop doing that

80. **draw in breath**  
I'm worried that something bad is about to happen

81. **descending whistle**  
I'm shocked / in awe of something

82. **lick lips**  
I'm hungry / ready to eat

83. **singing** / 84. **humming**  
I'm happy / in a good mood

85. **speak through gritted teeth**  
I'm angry but trying not to show it – instead of shouting

86. **tutting (with tongue)**  
I'm not happy, but too polite to complain

87. **melodious whistling**  
I'm happy / in a good mood

88. **wolf whistle** / 89. **phwoar**  
You look attractive (sexist)

90. **yawn**  
I'm tired / bored / I want you to stop talking or go home