

Talk a Lot

Learn the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA)

How to Pronounce the “th” Sounds in English

1. *What are the “th” sounds in English?*
2. *Why are they so difficult to pronounce?*
3. *So, how can I pronounce the “th” sounds in English?*

1. What are the “th” sounds in English?

“th” is a **digraph** – two letters together that represent one sound. “th” can also be called a consonant cluster – two consonants together in the spelling of a word. A “th” digraph can come at the beginning of a word, e.g. “**think**” and “**though**”, in the middle of a word, e.g. “**author**” and “**clothe**”, or at the end of a word, e.g. “**wealth**” and “**with**”. Or in a combination of positions, e.g. “**thousandth**”.

“th” represents either of two different phonemes (single sounds) in English. It can be either: /θ/ in “**thick**” and “**thin**”, or /ð/ in “**this**” and “**that**”.

The /θ/ sound is **unvoiced**. This means that when I make this sound, no sound is heard from my vocal cords. There is no vibration in my throat because my vocal cords do not vibrate. Try putting your fingers over your throat when you make this sound. You shouldn’t be able to feel your vocal cords vibrating.

The /ð/ sound is **voiced**. This means that when I make this sound, a sound is heard from my vocal cords. There is vibration in my throat. Try putting your fingers over your throat when you make this sound. You should feel your vocal cords vibrating gently.

“th” very occasionally represents a /t/ sound, especially in proper nouns, e.g. **Thames**, **Thailand**, **Esther**, **Thandie**, **Theresa**, **Thompson**, **thyme**, **apartheid**.

English words that have the /θ/ sound are generally **content words**. For example, nouns (like “**thief**”, “**thumb**”, “**tooth**”, and “**wealth**”), verbs (like “**thank**”, “**think**”, and “**throw**”), adjectives (like “**thirsty**”, “**thermal**”, and “**thoughtful**”), adverbs (like “**thoroughly**”, “**thankfully**”, and “**threateningly**”), and numbers (like “**three**”). Most ordinal numbers contain the /θ/ sound, for example, “**fourth**”, “**fifth**”, and “**sixth**”.

English words that have the /ð/ sound are generally **function words**. For example, pronouns (like “**their**”, “**theirs**”, “**them**”, and “**themselves**”), determiners (like “**this**”, “**that**”, “**these**”, and “**those**”), conjunctions (like “**whether**” and “**though**”), prepositions (like “**with**” and “**without**”), and time words (like “**then**”, and “**thereafter**”). All comparative phrases contain the /ð/ sound, thanks to the word “**than**” being included after the comparative adjective, e.g. “**stronger than**”.

As you can see, many very common words in English contain one or other of these sounds. A good example is the definite article “**the**”, which is so ubiquitous (“Article before a noun!”) that it can be heard in almost every sentence in English.

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If you don't believe me about how common words with “th” sounds are, try the following exercise: take any page of a novel or text book, count the number of lines, then count how many lines *don't* have a word with “th” in the spelling. When I tried it, with a few different pages from a biography that I was reading, I found, on average, that only eight out of thirty-seven lines on a page would be without a “th” word. The most common “th” word was, of course, “the”.

If we study word frequency lists we can see how common “th” words are in everyday spoken and written English. In an analysis of the Oxford English Corpus of over a billion words, carried out by Oxford Online¹, we can find twelve “th” words in the top 100 most frequently used English words:

1. the	39. their
8. that	70. other
15. with	71. than
21. this	72. then
26. they	79. think
38. there	96. these

Of these twelve words, eleven have the /ð/ sound, and only “think” (shown in bold) has the /θ/ sound. We can safely say, then, that the voiced /ð/ sound is far more common than the unvoiced /θ/ sound.

The Dolch Basic Sight Vocabulary is a list of 220 English words that appear frequently in written material. Out of the 220 Dolch words (plus ninety-five Dolch nouns), there are twenty-one “th” words. Fifteen of them have the /ð/ sound, and only six have the /θ/ sound (shown in bold, below). This further underlines the importance of being able to pronounce the “th” sounds correctly, and /ð/ in particular.

[In no particular order:] The, that, there, they, this, with, them, then, their, these, those, together, brother, father, mother, **thank, thing, three, think, both, birthday.**

2. Why are they so difficult to pronounce?

These phonemes (sounds) simply don't exist in many languages, e.g. in Chinese, Vietnamese, and Polish. Whilst English native speakers learn them from their parents from before they are born, ESL students have to start from scratch, cold. Consider this example: I can't roll my r's, but a native speaker of Polish can do it effortlessly. They have learned to do it naturally, as a result of listening to and absorbing the sounds of the language that has surrounded them since before they were born. I have to learn to do it, or to “trick it”.

In many accents in English, e.g. teenagers' street language, English native speakers don't bother pronouncing “th”. They use substitute sounds, e.g. /f/ instead of /θ/ , and /v/ instead of /ð/. For example:

¹ Source: <http://www.askoxford.com/oc/mainpage/oc02/?view=uk> (accessed 25.10.09)

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fink	= think	fanks	= thanks
van	= than	vem	= them

In other versions of English around the world, people also substitute different sounds for /θ/ and /ð/, for example, some Irish speakers of English may use /t/ instead of /θ/ , and /d/ instead of /ð/, like this:

tink	= think	tanks	= thanks
dan	= than	dem	= them

Learners of English as a second language may automatically use substitute sounds to make these very common phonemes if /θ/ and /ð/ are not native to their first language. They may use one of the sound combinations above, or another set of substitute sounds: /s/ instead of /θ/ , and /z/ instead of /ð/, like this:

sink	= think	sanks	= thanks
zan	= than	zem	= them

We already know that /s/ and /z/ are among the easiest sounds to pronounce in English (see p.3.9). The other substitute sounds above – /f/ and /v/, and /t/ and /d/ – are also much easier to pronounce than /θ/ and /ð/, which is why they are used.

What do *you* do to solve the problem of “th”?

Vowel sounds are made when air passes freely from your lungs through your mouth and out into the air. **Consonant sounds** are made when you restrict the flow of air through your mouth by using your tongue (often against your teeth), and altering the position of your mouth and lips.

The different combinations of vowel and consonant sounds when put together produce words that have fixed meanings that are shared by a group of people, e.g. all the speakers of any particular language. Some consonant sounds are easier to make than others because the positions that our mouth and tongue have to form require less effort.

In the same way, some consonant sounds are more difficult to make than others because our mouth and tongue have to move more: **they have to work harder**. The two “th” sounds fall into this category. We have to move our tongue very quickly and put it out between our teeth, then put it back, just as quickly. We have to work! But if we use /f/, for example, instead of /θ/, e.g. “**f**anks” instead of “**th**anks”, our tongue can have a holiday, because our lips form the /f/ sound, and our tongue doesn’t need to move.

“th” can be even more difficult to pronounce as a final digraph in combination with other consonant sounds. Here elision often comes into play, as seen when using the Connected Speech Templates from Talk a Lot Book 3. Below are some examples of difficult words to pronounce (adjoining consonant sounds are boxed):

fi**th**, si**th**, thousand**th**, hea**th**, wea**th**, leng**th**, wid**th**, dep**th**, etc.

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Or we can just cheat and say “fith” (fifth), or “helf” (health), etc.

3. So, how can I pronounce the “th” sounds in English?

In one sentence: **put your tongue out between your teeth.** It can be learned. It is a physical action, like throwing a ball into a hoop (basketball), or mastering control of a bike, or learning to click your fingers...

Don’t block the flow of air through your teeth with your tongue. Allow some air to pass through above and below your tongue. Your teeth should be touching your tongue, but only very gently. Each time your tongue should be there for about one second, then return to its home position. (See image below.)



The author making a “th” sound. Note: his fingers are in his mouth only to show the position of his tongue. You don’t have to put your fingers in your mouth to make these sounds!

To make the /θ/ sound, don’t let your vocal cords vibrate. To make the /ð/ sound, do the same as for the /θ/ sound, but allow your vocal cords to vibrate.

Practise in front of a mirror. Open up your mouth, as I have done in the picture above, to see what’s going on. Or video yourself with a camera or phone. Practise with a friend. Help each other. Check what position the other person’s tongue, mouth, and lips are in when they are:

- a) making a “th” sound correctly
- b) *not* making a “th” sound correctly

Practise with some of these exercises:

a) Take a deep breath in, then a long slow breath out, making a “th” sound, either /θ/ or /ð/ Repeat several time, then start to shorten the length of each breath out. As you do this you will be able to practise positioning your tongue correctly in order to make the “th” sounds.

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b) Try saying /θ/ then /t/ then /ð/ then /θ/ again, and then repeat it, for example:

/θ/ /t/ /ð/ /t/ /θ/ /t/ /ð/ /t/ /θ/
th t th t th t th t th... etc.

c) Read lists of “th” words out loud one after another (see the word lists on pp.18.72-18.74), for example:

/θ/ faith, thanks, wealth, three, both, thought, teeth, throughout

/ð/ this, that, then, there, though, this, those, these

Say each word quickly, then slowly. Try varying the speed.

d) ...or you could read groups of ordinal numbers out loud, for example:

fourth, fifth, sixth, thirty third, thirty seventh, thirty eighth... etc.

Again, vary the speed at which you read them.

e) Choose a word and read it out loud very slowly, **sounding out** each phoneme – each individual sound. Use the phonetic spelling of the word to help you, e.g. “think” = /θ ɪ ŋ k/, and “that” = /ð æ t/ ... and so on.

f) Practise reading out loud tongue twisters – either to practise a particular phoneme, e.g. /θ/

- Thrifty thirty-three year-old thrill seekers threatened pathetic lethargic therapists.
- Three thick thieves from Thetford threw a party on Thursday.
- Theo thanked Thora for enthusiastically thinking up a frothy mathematical method.

Or /ð/ ...

- Heather and Rutherford breathed blithely and clothed themselves with feather bathing suits.
- The rhythm within withered further, though Smithers’s other swarthy northern brother writhed without.
- The Carruthers brothers tithed either their farthings or their father’s clothes.
- Arthur Worthington’s mother and father loathed withholding smooth scythes and seethed with oaths together.

...or mixed sounds: /θ/ and /ð/ together, for example:

- This is the third thing that Keith thought was thankless.

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- A thousand thirsty tourists threatened to take out their teeth.
- Theresa tried to help both uncouth youths through the thickly-strewn undergrowth.
- The three things that Theo thought, though thoroughly truthful, were totally thoughtless.

Don't worry about the exact meaning of every word in the tongue twisters, but simply practise making the sounds! You could make up your own tongue twisters using the words from different word groups on pp.18.72-18.74. You could use either just one sound on its own or both sounds together.

Final thought:

Practice makes perfect! The following paradox applies to learning the “th” sounds:

*“Nobody is born able to make these sounds,
but everybody is born able to make these sounds.”*

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List of Words Using the Unvoiced “th” Sound in English /θ/

Nouns:

anthem
atheism
atheist
athlete
authenticity
author
authority
bath
bathroom
birth
birthday
breadth
breath
broth
brothel
cathedral
death
depth
earth
enthusiasm
epithet
ether
ethics
faith
froth
growth
health
hearth
length
lethargy
lithium
mammoth
mathematics
method
methyl
month
moth
mouth
myth
north
panther
path

pith
python
sheath
sleuth
sloth
smith
south
stealth
strength
sympathy
teeth
thane
thanks
thaw
theatre
theft
theme
theme park
theologian
theology
theory
therapy
thesaurus
thicket
thief
thigh
thing
thirst
thong
thorn
thought
thread
threat
thrift
thrill
throat
throne
throng
throw
throw in
thug
thumb
thump
thunder

tooth
truth
undergrowth
wealth
width
worth
wrath
wreath
youth
zenith

Verbs:

enthuse
froth
lengthen
thank
thatch
thaw
think
thread
threaten
thrill
thrive
throng
throw
throw away
throw out
throw up
thud
thump

Adjectives:

authentic
earthy
enthusiastic
ethnic
faithful
frothy
Gothic
healthy
lengthy

lethal
lethargic
mythical
pathetic
pithy
ruthless
stealthy
thankful
thatched
theoretical
therapeutic
thermal
thick
thin
thirsty
thorough
thoughtful
threatening
thrifty
thrilling
thriving
throwaway
truthful
uncouth
wealthy
wrathful

Adverbs:

authentically
earthily
enthusiastically
faithfully
frothily
healthily
lethally
lethargically
pathetically
pithily
stealthily
thankfully
theoretically
therapeutically
thickly

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List of Words Using the Unvoiced "th" Sound in English /θ/

thinly
thirstily
thoroughly
thoughtfully
threateningly
thriftily
thrillingly
truthfully
wrathfully

Pronouns:

anything
both
everything
nothing
something

Function Words:

forth
through

Cardinal Numbers:

thirteen
thousand
three

Ordinal Numbers:

third
fourth
fifth
sixth
seventh
eighth
ninth
tenth
eleventh

twelfth
thirteenth
fourteenth
fifteenth
sixteenth
seventeenth
eighteenth
nineteenth
twentieth
thirtieth
fortieth
fiftieth
sixtieth
seventieth
eightieth
ninetieth
hundredth
thousandth
millionth
billionth

Proper Nouns:

Female First Names:

Agatha
Bertha
Beth
Catherine
Cathy
Dorothea
Dorothy
Ethel
Judith
Kath
Kathleen
Ruth
Thelma
Thora

Male First Names:

Arthur

Ethan
Jonathan
Matthew
Seth
Theo

Surnames:

Hathaway
Luther
Smith
Steerforth
Thackeray
Thatcher

Place Names:

Athens
Grantham
Southampton
Thetford
Thurso

Miscellaneous:

Goths
Macbeth
Othello
Thanksgiving
Thor
Thursday

Some Curiosities:

When "th" spelling produces /t/ sound:

apartheid
Esther
Thailand
Thames
Thandie
Theresa

Thompson
thyme

"th" was a common suffix on Old English verbs:

eateth
goeth
saith
watcheth

etc.

When "th" is spelled but not pronounced:

asthma

In compound nouns "th" can occur in the spelling accidentally when two words meet together. The "th" phonemes are not pronounced:

hothouse
kighthood
lightheaded
lighthouse
pothead
sweetheart

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List of Words Using the Voiced “th” Sound in English /ð/

Nouns:

algorithm
bathing suit
booth
bother
brethren
brother
clothes
farthing
father
feather
heather
lathe
leather
logarithm
mother
rhythm
scythe
smithereens
swathe
teething
tether
tithe
weather
wherewithal
zither

Verbs:

bathe
breathe
clothe
dither
loathe
mither
scathe
scythe
seethe
sheathe
slither
soothe
teethe

tithe
wither
withhold
withstand
wreathe
writhe

Adjectives:

blithe
lithe
northern
smooth
southern
swarthy
worthy

Adverbs:

blithely
farther
further
nevertheless
nonetheless
rather (than)
smoothly
then
there
thereafter
therefore
together
worthily

Pronouns:

their
theirs
them
themselves
they

Contractions:

they're
they've

Articles:

the

Determiners:

either
neither
other
that
these
this
those

Prepositions:

with
within
without

Conjunctions:

although
than (e.g. “better
than me”)
though
whether

Proper Nouns:

Carruthers
Heather
Netherlands
Northern
Lights

Rutherford
Smithers
Southern...
Wetherspoon
Worthington

Archaisms:

hither
thee
thence
thereafter
therein
thereupon
thine
thither
thou
thus
thy
whither

Nouns with /θ/ Sound where the Plural Form Uses /ð/:

baths
mouths
oaths
paths
truths
youths

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100 Common Words Using the “th” Sounds in English: /θ/ and /ð/

50 common words using the unvoiced “th” sound /θ/:

anything, athlete, author, bathroom, birthday, both, breath,
cathedral, death, depth, earth, enthusiasm, everything, faithful,
fifth, fourth, growth, health, length, mathematics, method, month,
mouth, north, nothing, something, south, strength, teeth,
Thanksgiving, theatre, theme park, thick, thief, thin, think, third,
thirst, thirteen, thousand, three, through, throw, thumb, Thursday,
tooth, truth, wealthy, width, youth

50 common words using the voiced “th” sound /ð/:

although, bathe, bathing suit, baths, bother, breathe, brother,
clothes, either, father, feather, further, heather, leather, mother,
mouths, Netherlands, nevertheless, northern, other, rather (than),
rhythm, smooth, southern, than, that, the, their, theirs, them,
themselves, then, there, thereafter, therefore, these, they, they're,
they've, this, those, though, together, weather, whether, with,
within, without, worthy, youths

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How Well do you Know the “th” Sounds in English? /θ/ and /ð/

Below are 100 common English words that contain a “th” sound. Look at each word and decide which of the two “th” sounds it contains. Write either /θ/ beside the word if the “th” sound is unvoiced, or /ð/ if the “th” sound is voiced. Tip: there are fifty of each!

although	month	they've
anything	mother	thick
athlete	mouth	thief
author	mouths	thin
bathe	Netherlands	think
bathing suit	nevertheless	third
bathroom	north	thirst
baths	northern	thirteen
birthday	nothing	this
both	other	those
bother	rather (than)	though
breath	rhythm	thousand
breathe	smooth	three
brother	something	through
cathedral	south	throw
clothes	southern	thumb
death	strength	Thursday
depth	teeth	together
earth	than	tooth
either	Thanksgiving	truth
enthusiasm	that	wealthy
everything	the	weather
faithful	theatre	whether
father	their	width
feather	theirs	with
fifth	them	within
fourth	theme park	without
further	themselves	worthy
growth	then	youth
health	there	youths
heather	thereafter	
leather	therefore	
length	these	
mathematics	they	
method	they're	

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How Well do you Know the “th” Sounds in English? /θ/ and /ð/ (Answer Page)

Below are 100 common English words that contain a “th” sound. Look at each word and decide which of the two “th” sounds it contains. Write either /θ/ beside the word if the “th” sound is unvoiced, or /ð/ if the “th” sound is voiced. Tip: there are fifty of each!

although /ð/	method /θ/	they /ð/
anything /θ/	month /θ/	they're /ð/
athlete /θ/	mother /ð/	they've /ð/
author /θ/	mouth /θ/	thick /θ/
bathe /ð/	mouths /ð/	thief /θ/
bathing suit /ð/	Netherlands /ð/	thin /θ/
bathroom /θ/	nevertheless /ð/	think /θ/
baths /ð/	north /θ/	third /θ/
birthday /θ/	northern /ð/	thirst /θ/
both /θ/	nothing /θ/	thirteen /θ/
bother /ð/	other /ð/	this /ð/
breath /θ/	rather (than) /ð/	those /ð/
breathe /ð/	rhythm /ð/	though /ð/
brother /ð/	smooth /ð/	thousand /θ/
cathedral /θ/	something /θ/	three /θ/
clothes /ð/	south /θ/	through /θ/
death /θ/	southern /ð/	throw /θ/
depth /θ/	strength /θ/	thumb /θ/
earth /θ/	teeth /θ/	Thursday /θ/
either /ð/	than /ð/	together /ð/
enthusiasm /θ/	Thanksgiving /θ/	tooth /θ/
everything /θ/	that /ð/	truth /θ/
faithful /θ/	the /ð/	wealthy /θ/
father /ð/	theatre /θ/	weather /ð/
feather /ð/	their /ð/	whether /ð/
fifth /θ/	theirs /ð/	width /θ/
fourth /θ/	them /ð/	with /ð/
further /ð/	theme park /θ/	within /ð/
growth /θ/	themselves /ð/	without /ð/
health /θ/	then /ð/	worthy /ð/
heather /ð/	there /ð/	youth /θ/
leather /ð/	thereafter /ð/	youths /ð/
length /θ/	therefore /ð/	
mathematics /θ/	these /ð/	