vowel pairs

Here are the main vowel pairs that trip up intermediate learners, grouped by contrast:

Short /ɪ/ vs Long /iː/ (ship / sheep) sit / seat — bit / beat — fit / feet — hill / heel — fill / feel — dip / deep — lip / leap — bin / bean — tin / teen — knit / neat — chip / cheap — live / leave — list / least — rid / read — wick / week

Short /ʊ/ vs Long /uː/ (full / fool) pull / pool — look / Luke — could / cooed — wood / wooed — foot / food — bull / bool — soot / suit — stood / stewed

Short /æ/ vs Long /eɪ/ (bad / bade) man / mane — pan / pain — ran / rain — cap / cape — mad / made — hat / hate — tap / tape — glad / grade — back / bake — lack / lake

Short /ɒ/ vs Long /oʊ/ (cot / coat) hop / hope — not / note — rod / road — cop / cope — stock / stoke — mop / mope — bod / bode — cod / code

Short /ɛ/ vs Long /iː/ (bed / bead) met / meat — set / seat — pet / peat — red / read — led / lead — net / neat — ten / teen — men / mean

Short /ʌ/ vs Long /ɑː/ (cut / cart) but / bart — gun / barn — bun / barn — cup / carp — shut / sharp — luck / lark — stuck / stark

The tricky middle ones — these catch even advanced learners:

/ɪ/ vs /ɛ/ (bit / bet) sit / set — bin / ben — pit / pet — knit / net — fill / fell — tin / ten — pin / pen — bid / bed — hid / head — lid / led

/æ/ vs /ɛ/ (bad / bed) pan / pen — band / bend — man / men — sand / send — land / lend — hand / hend — bag / beg — lad / led

/ɔː/ vs /oʊ/ (caught / coat) law / low — saw / sow — paw / po — jaw / joe — dawn / done — hall / hole — ball / bowl — call / coal — tall / toll — wall / wole — fall / foal — salt / solt

Why these matter specifically

The pairs that cause the most real-world miscommunication for most learners are:

- *ship / sheep* — very common words, very embarrassing mix-up - *bit / beat* — changes meaning completely in most sentences - *live / leave* — “I live here” vs “I leave here” — totally different - *pull / pool* — directions, sports, everyday life - *bad / bed* — comes up constantly

How to drill them

Don't just read the list. For each pair, do three things: listen to a native say both back to back, record yourself saying them, compare. Your ear will catch what your mouth is doing wrong faster than any explanation will.

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