

International Phonetic Association

Nonsense words

- **Sample nonsense words**

A set of six short nonsense words (typical word-length items made up of sounds from the International Phonetic Alphabet chart) will be dictated by the examiner. For example:

	Number of components
1 [k s t ẽ g ʒ u]	(7)
2 [ʁ e ɱ e b i b o v i tʃ']	(11)
3 [ɛ ʃ y ɳ œ p̄ϕ]	(6)
4 [r i ʒ œ ɬ]	(5)
5 [ç ø ʈ a ʎ ɔ s k ɾ]	(9)
6 [n d a x o ɓ ε r ʍ ?]	(10)

Total:	48

Note that you will **not** be told how many component sounds there are in each item, but the above set gives an idea of the range. Words can be as short as five or six component sounds, or as long as ten or eleven.

- **Commentary and instructions to candidates**

Candidates are instructed that the words are to be transcribed *phonetically*, using the symbols of the International Phonetic Alphabet. They are also told that all the vowels should be treated as Cardinal Vowels.

You will see from the above examples that diacritics can also be used. Typically, you are expected to identify the sorts of differences that often function contrastively in natural languages: aspirated (vs unaspirated) voiceless obstruents, especially plosives (e.g. **p^h**, **s^h**); nasalized (vs oral) vowels and approximants (e.g. **õ**, **ĩ**); the devoicing of sounds for which the IPA chart provides only voiced symbols (e.g. **ɳ**, **ɾ**); labialized sounds (e.g. **ɲ^w**, **s^w**);

velarized (vs non-velarized) sounds, especially the lateral **ɭ**; dental sounds for which no specific symbol is provided (e.g. **ʈ**, **ɳ**), etc.

Candidates are expected to record everything exactly as pronounced by the examiner.

Note *While it is possible to dictate a passage from a language unknown to the candidates, this is very rarely done. The usual practice is to dictate nonsense words.*

- **The dictation process**

The examiner dictates each word separately, ten times, with plenty of time between repetitions. There is no initial or final read-through of nonsense items.

Examiners will be sensitive to ambient noise, disturbances, interruptions and to the examination room environment (as affecting audibility and visibility). If necessary, they will offer a small number of additional repetitions.

- **Choice of symbols**

This exercise requires use of the symbols of the International Phonetic Alphabet, including Cardinal Vowels.

- **How are nonsense words evaluated?**

As with transcription and English dictation marking, the IPA employs negative marking, deducting marks for incorrect items.

Each component sound has one mark allocated. The rule of thumb is to deduct one point for a full error. Such errors may involve:

- omission of an essential segment such as the final **ʔ** of number 6, giving *[- **r u**] or the **g** from number 1 giving *[- **ẽ ʒ u**].
- insertion of an additional and incorrect segment, such as adding a vowel between the first two consonants of item 1, giving * [**k ə s t -**], etc.
- using the wrong symbol to represent a particular sound such as ***g** for **k** at the beginning of number 1 above, * [**g s t -**], or ***ɭ** for **ç** at the beginning of number 5 giving * [**ɭ ø -**], or **a** for **ɑ** in number 6 giving * [- **d a x -**], etc.

A small number of these errors, however, result in deduction of only half a point. Affecting certain consonants, these are known as **error of adjacent place**. This applies to consonants that occur at palatal and post-palatal places of articulation. Provided that both the voice and manner features of the sound are correct and

the place of articulation is different by only one position, only half a point is deducted. So, for example, if **ŋ** was transcribed instead of **ɲ** in number 3, or **x** instead of **ç** in number 5, these errors would only result in the loss of half a point. Similarly, a **height adjacency error** for vowels would lose only half a point. In this case, the lip position and the backness have to be correct and the height just one level out, as for example in transcribing **u** or **ɔ** for **o**, and/or **e** for **i**, and/or **i** or **ɛ** for **e** in number 2. In vowel glides such as **ɔe** in number 3, each element is awarded half a point and will be marked simply right or wrong.

The same division is applied to nasalized vowels – half a point is awarded for identifying the vowel quality and half a point for identifying that it is nasalized. Generally, this applies to vowels in an otherwise fully oral environment, such as **ẽ** in number 1 above. Presence or absence of nasalization of the vowels adjacent to nasal consonants, such as **y** and **ɔ** which are separated by **ɲ** in number 3 is not evaluated.

Good practice also plays a part in transcribing nonsense words from dictation. Because this is strictly phonetic, the words should be placed in square brackets, as per the sample above.

The 'nonsense' dictation contributes a maximum of 30 marks to a candidate's overall mark. In evaluating dictations, examiners rely on their experience and knowledge. Nonsense words are evaluated by two examiners independently who later meet to discuss their decisions and agree an appropriate mark. Given one point per sound, the above sample would be marked out of a 48 points and the final total weighted out of 30.

To ensure fairness, both examiners are present during this practical part of the examination. One conducts the exam while the other listens and makes notes.