

Minimal Pairs Cheat Sheet

Minimal pairs are two words that differ in one sound only.

That simple definition is all you need to know, but here are some details that might help you identify them.

1. Spelling plays no role since we are only interested in sounds. For example, “go” and “dough” are minimal pairs, but “cow” and “tow” are not.
2. The two words in a minimal pair must have different meanings. Remember that we can sometimes change the way we say a sound in a word, but we don’t change the meaning. For example, we can release the final /t/ in “cat” or we can hold it, but that wouldn’t change the meaning, so no minimal pair is created.
3. Minimal pairs must also have the same number of sounds. Notice how the following two words (see/seed) are **NOT** a minimal pair. These are sometimes called “near minimal”.

s	i	
s	i	d

On the other hand, “tree” and “three” are.

t	r	i
θ	r	i

4. There has to be exactly one sound different, so “sun” and “son” are not minimal pairs because there is no sound that is different and “food” and “foot” are not minimal pairs because 2 sounds are different.

f	u	d
f	ʊ	t

5. The different sound can be in any position in the word, so the following are all minimal pairs.

boot/suit

b	u	t
s	u	t

bit/bat

b	ɪ	t
b	æ	t

bird/burn

b	ɜ	d
b	ɜ	n

6. Words with just one phoneme can be minimal pairs, so “I” and “owe” are minimal pairs. There is no limit to the number of phonemes in a minimal pair, although they are harder to find the longer you go, so most of them tend to be in the 2-5 phoneme range.