

# Accent Optimization 101



*I can safely say this is  
one of the best  
investments of my time  
I've ever made.*

*—Vincent Meunier*

THE · ACCENT · OPTIMIZATION · SYSTEM

# Accent Optimization 101

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# Welcome!

This is Lisa Scott, and I am so excited that you are joining me on a journey to improve your American accent!

You're probably excited and just a little nervous at the prospect of working on your speech over the next few weeks and months, but I promise you it will be worth it!

Over the years, as I have helped hundreds of people overcome communication obstacles, I realized that one of my gifts is helping people identify the core problem in their struggle to communicate and coming up with a plan to solve it.

You may feel overwhelmed by your struggles with your accent and you're not even sure what you can do about it, but I can help you figure out exactly where the communication breakdowns are occurring and create a plan with you to prevent them from happening in the future.

This is what my *Accent Optimization* plan is all about. We combine your accent reduction goals with my ability to break those goals down into manageable steps and create your ideal plan of action.

Of course, the more you put into it, the more you get out of it, so it will require regular practice time.

It's going to be a wonderful journey to clearer speech, and I can't wait to hear your confident voice along the way.

To your best speech,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Lisa".



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## WHY DO YOU SPEAK ENGLISH WITH AN ACCENT?

You've spent years studying English, and maybe already lived in the United States for quite a while. You've taken ESL classes, you've read books, listened to recordings, and yet you still have an accent. You've probably wondered if you would ever discover the "magic pill" that would make your accent disappear. And you may have wondered why you speak English with an accent. *Why is it so hard to speak English like a native speaker?*

It's because every language has its own set of pronunciation rules, and accents occur when we apply the rules of our native language to the language we are learning. So, for example, if you are an Asian speaker learning English, your native tongue may not distinguish between the sounds **r**, **w**, and **l**. Then, when you speak English, you use those sounds interchangeably, even though they are three distinct sounds in English.

Hispanic speakers often have difficulty hearing the difference between the short **i** and long **e** vowel sounds, so if you are Hispanic, you might pronounce words like "sheep" and "ship" exactly the same. Italian and Portuguese speakers put a schwa sound after a consonant in the middle of the word. When they apply this rule to English words, they add an unnecessary sound that results in words like "plat uh form" for "platform" and "board uh room" for "boardroom."

Think carefully about the rules you may be subconsciously applying from your native language to English. Listen to yourself when you speak and try to imitate the pronunciation of the American English speakers around you. Ask others how to pronounce words that you are unsure how to pronounce. Watch the TV news reporters and try to pronounce words the way they do. The closer your speech sounds to that standard American accent, the more easily people will be able to understand you.

So, why do you speak English with an accent? Because you haven't learned the pronunciation rules of English and how they differ from the rules in your native language.



And how do you lose an accent? Not by spending lots of time practicing all the sounds in English pronunciation, hoping that you learn what you need.

You do it by learning which rules you are missing, and practicing the sounds that are a problem for you. The more you practice, the more you improve. And before long, you'll be saying, "I did it! I was able to lose my accent!"

## CAN YOU REALLY LOSE YOUR ACCENT?

When people ask me, “Can I really lose my accent?”, they are really asking one of two questions. Either they want to know, “Can I really speak English so people can understand me?” or they want to know, “Do I have to give up my heritage in order to be understood?”

Let’s address the first question first.

### **Can I really speak English so people can understand me?**

Yes. Absolutely! You can speak English like an American if you really want to. Since you are reading this book, you have already decided to work with me to reduce your accent. You have in this notebook some of the most important sounds and rules that you need to work on to make your English more understandable. Let me assure you that the more you practice, the better results you will see. Your frustration levels will go down as you find it easier to communicate. Your speech will be clearer, you will be more confident when you talk, and people will understand you better. As you learn the rules of the English language and apply them in your everyday conversations, your accent will decrease and your ability to speak English clearly will increase.

Now for the second question.

### **Do I have to give up my heritage in order to be understood?**

No. Absolutely not. No one is asking you to forget your heritage or pretend you are someone you are not. When we say that you will lose your accent, we are really talking about changing those parts of your pronunciation that make your English difficult for others to understand. After completing accent reduction classes, most people will speak with more of an American accent, but will still have traces of their native accent in their everyday speech. Our



goal is not to eliminate the accent completely, but to change the parts of it that make it difficult to understand. Ultimately, the goal should be to have the best of both worlds: an accent that sets you apart as a native of your homeland while still being completely understandable in English.

## COULD YOUR ACCENT COST YOU A PROMOTION?

If you are like most people, probably one of the biggest reasons that you decided to work on reducing your accent is that you are tired of being asked to repeat yourself. It's frustrating to be misunderstood when you know exactly what you're trying to say, isn't it?

And while I know it is frustrating to you on a personal level, what about the impact of your communication skills on your job success?

Have you ever thought about how much your accent could cost you? Even if you are one of the best in your line of work, your accent could still be keeping you from being a top performer.

You may be surprised to learn that only 10% of job success is based on knowledge and skills. The other **90%** is based on networking and communication skills.

That means that the way you talk and communicate with others really does matter, and your job skills alone may not be enough for you to excel at your job.

So, you can see that focusing on your speaking skills is a wise investment. Whether you are an engineer or a doctor, an architect or a software developer, your job will involve some amount of communication in English. And if that English pronunciation is not clear enough for your co-workers or clients to understand you easily, it could cost you a lot of money. It could result in lost promotions, fewer job offers, and less earning potential.

**But we're going to change that.**

The money you've invested in accent reduction classes will quickly be recouped in just one small raise or promotion that you otherwise would not have been



offered. Your bank account and your self-confidence will get a big boost.

You want the payoff that will come by investing in your English skills, and I know you will commit the time and energy needed to see that improvement!

In the next section, we'll talk about how to figure out your best learning style so you can use the most efficient means *for you* to master your new skills.

You don't want to lose that next job promotion, and you are going to see great gains as you work on improving your American accent.

## WHAT IS THE BEST WAY TO PRACTICE?

Believe it or not, there actually is a right and wrong way to practice your American pronunciation. At least, there is if you want to see the best results. Research has shown that you will improve more by listening and repeating than by reading and repeating. Reading and listening use different parts of your brain, and you will see much better results if you practice by listening only.

So, here is how I want you to use your practice materials.

First, only practice sounds that we have already discussed in class, unless you are absolutely sure that you can pronounce the sound correctly. Incorrect practice is worse than no practice at all because you are reinforcing a bad habit, which will then take longer to change.

Choose a sound that we have worked on in class, listen to the audio, and repeat after me. Pause it and repeat it as often as you need to in order to get the sound correct. Use the written handouts only as a guide to be sure that you know what the words are, and to take any notes you need to remind yourself of certain pronunciations. Close your book or cover it before turning the audio back on. It is important that you *not* read the words as you are listening and practicing.

Once you have practiced a sound for several days in a row, you will want to use that sound in everyday conversations. How will you remember to do that?

Since we all have different learning styles, we'll do an experiment to figure out which approach works best for you. In the next section, I'll explain how you can use your senses to remind you to use your new sounds.

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# NOTES

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## HOW USING YOUR 5 SENSES CAN IMPROVE YOUR PRONUNCIATION

You've been working very hard to improve your spoken English, practicing those new sounds whenever you have the chance, but it's hard to remember to use your new English pronunciation in everyday conversation. What can you do to remind yourself to use your new skills when talking with friends or discussing a project at work?

It's really a matter of developing a new habit, and it works much the same as any new habit you might try to learn, like making your bed in the morning or unloading the dishwasher before bed. The hard part at this point is not figuring out *how* to do it, but consistently remembering to do it every day.

Research has shown that it takes 21 days to develop a new habit, so if you want to improve your spoken English in everyday life, you need to remind yourself to use the new pronunciation for at least 21 days. Of course, you will feel overwhelmed if you try to remember every sound you've learned all at once.

So, here is my recommendation. **Pick one sound to focus on at a time.**

Now, you need to figure out the best way to remind yourself to use that new sound. We're going to discuss how to use your senses to do just that.

Unless you have a disability, you use the five senses of seeing, hearing, touching, tasting, and smelling every day. You probably prefer one sense over another, but you may not know which one helps you remember the best.

We're going to do some experiments to find out. I will show you how to use each of your senses as a cue to remind you to use your new and improved spoken English in daily conversations. We'll try things like looking at brightly-colored paper, listening to





a bell, touching a rock, tasting sour candy, and smelling perfume.

How do you think you could use these activities to remind you to use better English pronunciation?

Keep reading for some easy ideas you can try at home or at work.

## Sticky Notes, Sticky Notes, I See You Everywhere!

You've been working hard to improve your spoken English, hoping that soon you will speak with more of an American accent. But there is so much to remember—pronunciation patterns, word stress, intonation, grammar—it's enough to make you want to give up!

But don't despair! There are some simple tips and tricks you can use to boost your memory and build your new English speaking habits more quickly.

We've already talked about using our senses to help us create new habits, and now we will focus on the sense of sight.

Have you ever made a list of tasks you needed to complete? Did you find that just looking at the list helped you remember to get those things done? That was using your sense of sight to remind yourself to do something different - to finish a task on the list rather than whatever else came to mind at the moment.

Have you ever used a sticky note to write yourself a message, and then stuck it somewhere that you knew you would see it? That was using your sense of sight to remind yourself to take action on whatever was written on the sticky note.

But how can that help me with my American accent, you may be thinking. You can't improve spoken English just by looking at a sticky note . . . or can you?

No, if you write on one sticky note "speak with an American accent" and stick it on your desk, it probably won't have a great impact. But, remember when I mentioned before about focusing on one goal at a time?

Let's suppose you are working on the *th* sound, as in *think* or *thank you*. I want



you to take at least 10 brightly colored sticky notes and write on each of them one word or picture that makes you think of the *th* sound. You might write *think* on all 10, or 10 different words that start with *th*, or a picture of a *thumbprint*. It doesn't really matter what you choose, as long as it reminds you to say the *th* sound correctly.

Now, I want you to put those sticky notes all over your house where you will see them as you go through your daily routines. Put one on the bathroom mirror, one on the bedroom door, one on the refrigerator, one near the TV, one in your office, and so on. There is no magic place to put them; the best places are the ones you visit most frequently. Every time you see that sticky note, it will trigger a response in your brain of "Oh yeah, I need to remember to say *th*."

If you have the freedom at work to put several notes up around your office, that is even better.

The more times you look at them in a day and practice, the more quickly the new sound will become part of your everyday speech. After a couple of weeks, if you find that the notes are blending into the background but you don't feel like you've completely mastered the sound yet, then get a different color of sticky note, make them again, and put them in slightly different places. That will trigger in your brain the response that something is different and once again, you will pay attention to the notes and they will be a reminder to improve your spoken English.

If you find that this technique works for you, then you can repeat it every few weeks with a new sound or grammar point. Of course, you can use this sticky note technique for any new habit you want to establish, even if it has nothing to do with speaking English. You could even make a family game of it, with each family member having a different colored sticky note and a different habit. Challenge each other daily to remember to use your new skills!

Maybe you are one of those people who just doesn't see visual

details, and you could walk right past a flashing neon sign without seeing it. If that is you, I still want you to give this a try. Be sure to get the neon, brightly colored sticky notes and not the pale yellow ones. If you can still walk past them without seeing them, maybe visual cues are not the best way for you to remember new things. And that's okay, because we are all created differently and I'm going to teach you several other ways to remind yourself of your new skills.



## Beep! Beep! Time to Practice!

If you want to improve your American pronunciation, you know you need to practice. The more you listen and speak, the more you improve. But you've got to remember to use your new pronunciation skills when carrying on conversations every day.

Google calendar can help. And so can your watch. You can use your sense of hearing as a reminder to speak more clearly. How can that help, you wonder?

Just look at these examples:

Beep! Beep! Beep! You reach over and turn off the alarm that has just awakened you, and you get out of bed. You've just used your sense of hearing to help you accomplish the task of waking up at a certain time.



Ding! Ding! The oven timer goes off, reminding you to take your dinner out of the oven before it burns. Your sense of hearing has helped you get dinner cooked correctly, before your sense of smell had the chance to tell you that it had already burnt.

Buzzers, timers, and alarms are part of our everyday life these days, but have you ever thought about using your sense of hearing as a reminder to help you improve your spoken English?

Of course, you use your hearing to listen to other speakers of English and to listen to yourself as you practice sounds and words. But, how could listening to the beep, buzz, or ring of alarms and timers be helpful?

Because what your mind dwells on is what it does well.

If you focus on your pronunciation, you will improve your spoken English. If hearing an alarm or beep reminds you to focus on your speech, you will improve if you hear the alarm often enough.

I want you to try an experiment to see if this technique is helpful to you.

Choose one sound that you are trying to learn really well. Make a list of 10-20 words that include that sound and keep it with you. Use a watch or a phone with an alarm or a timer, or use Google calendar reminders if you are at your desk all day. Set your timer to ring or beep at 30 minute intervals during the day. Don't forget to plan around meetings, as you don't want your alarm interrupting your boss's presentation!

Each time the alarm sounds, practice 5-10 words from your list, out loud but quietly if you work in a cubicle. Even if you can't practice aloud, think about the words and the correct pronunciation of the sound. This activity brings this new sound to the forefront of your brain, so when you are conversing with co-workers or family and that sound appears in a word, you are much more aware of it and more likely to produce it correctly.

Experiment with different sounds and different intervals of time between alarms. Within a very short time, you should see a significant improvement in your ability to remember to use your new pronunciation skills.

## What's That in My Pocket?

When most people think of ways to improve their accent, they think of listening to audio recordings, reciting practice words and sentences, and conversing with others. Rarely do they think of using their sense of touch as part of their practice routine. Rubbing smooth stones, twisting a bracelet, or moving a watch may not seem to have anything to do with improving your American accent, but for some people, those activities can provide just the incentive needed to make the necessary practice a natural part of their day.

Everyone needs reminders of some sort when learning a new habit, and each of our five senses can provide different ways of cueing, or reminding us, to do something new. We can see a note reminding us, or listen to a phone message, or perhaps touch something that triggers our brain to engage in the new behavior.

You may not think about using your sense of touch as a way to improve your spoken English, but I would suggest that you give the following activities a try. You may be surprised at what you learn about how your brain remembers best!

Choose a day that is an ordinary day, and choose just one sound to practice. Make a list of 10-20 words that have your target sound in them, and either memorize them or keep the list with you.

Find a small smooth stone that you like the feel of to keep in your pocket for the day. If you don't have pockets, wear your watch on the opposite wrist or wear a stretchy bracelet that you're not accustomed to. The idea is to have something unfamiliar touching you during the day so that you will notice its presence, but not be too uncomfortable. (This rules out





wearing your belt too tight or wearing an itchy sweater, as those are too much of an irritation!)

Every time you feel the stone in your pocket, or stretch the bracelet, or think about moving your watch back to the other wrist, use that momentary interruption in your day to practice a few of your words out loud.

As you continue to practice throughout the day, you will find that almost without trying, you are thinking more about your target sound and using it correctly in more situations.

You may find that you like wearing your watch on the other hand or carrying that stone because those simple reminders begin to make a big difference in your pronunciation.

Experiment with different items in your pocket or jewelry on your wrist until you find the item that you feel works best at reminding you to practice and improve your American pronunciation.

## Mmm . . . What Smells So Good?

You've been working hard on your American accent, but all the pronunciation patterns and words stress rules are beginning to feel a bit overwhelming. You've tried making lists and listening to recordings, but the hard part is just remembering to use what you know in everyday conversations. You've tried using reminder notes and alarms, and even carrying a smooth stone in your pocket to touch and remind you to use your new speech patterns.

But none of it is helping. You may be one of the people whose memory is triggered best by the sense of smell.

Have you ever walked into a room and smelled something cooking, and you immediately thought back to your mother fixing a favorite food when you were a child? Or perhaps you were walking through a store and caught a whiff of someone's cologne - the same one your ex-boyfriend or girlfriend used to wear. That stirred up some memories, didn't it?



Our sense of smell triggers our memory more powerfully than any of our other senses. So, we're going to take this incredible capacity to remember and use it to help us master that tricky English pronunciation.

First, I want you to pick out a scent that you like, but that is unfamiliar to you. In other words, the fragrance that you wear every day won't work, because your brain is accustomed to it and you already have memories associated with it. You can choose an essential oil, such as vanilla or peppermint, or a scented lotion that you like. Or, you can use this as a great excuse to purchase that designer fragrance you've really been wanting. The important thing is that you find the smell pleasing and that it is new to you so that it doesn't evoke other memories.

Choose one sound that you want to remember to practice and use in your daily conversations. Make a list of 10-20 words that have that sound in them, and either memorize the words or keep the list near you.

Now, get out your wonderful new designer fragrance, essential oil, or other pleasing scent and apply a dab of it to your wrists. Do not put any of it on your face or neck. This is important because if you do that, you will smell it constantly, your brain will acclimate to it, and within a short while, you won't notice it any longer. When that happens, the smell on your wrist won't seem unusual and it won't trigger your memory the way we want it to.

So, you have your list of words and your new fragrance on your wrists. As you go throughout your day, every time your hand moves near your face and you smell that wonderful aroma, recite a few of your practice words. If you are in the midst of a conversation, just use that reminder scent to encourage yourself to purposefully use one of your new words in the conversation and make a point of pronouncing it correctly.

Before long, smelling your fragrance will automatically trigger a response in your brain to pay attention to your English pronunciation. And soon, you will be getting compliments on both how you smell and how you speak as your new technique helps you improve your spoken English.

## **Yum! Improve Your American Accent by Eating Candy!**

You want to improve your American accent and you are trying to remember everything you've learned about pronunciation and intonation, but it's hard to break old habits. Even when you know the correct pronunciation of a sound, remembering to use it in conversation is another matter.

You've tried lots of different ways to remind yourself to use the correct speech, but they're just not working. Before you give up and think you'll just have to live with your accent the way it is, there is something else you can try.

### **Candy.**

Yes, I mean mints and lemon drops and sour candy. Not as a reward or incentive, but as a reminder. Let me explain what I mean.

We all use our senses every day to remind us to do different things. When we see a note, we're reminded to complete a task. When we hear an alarm, we know it's time to get out of bed or to be somewhere. Everyone has one sense that works better than others at cueing them to remember things.



One often overlooked sense is the sense of taste.

Now, of course, many of us greatly enjoy our sense of taste as we eat a delicious meal, but what I'm talking about here is using the sense of taste as a reminder.

How can you find out if your sense of taste will remind you to practice the skills you need to improve your spoken English? By conducting a simple experiment.

All you need is a list of 10-20 words that you are working on (all

with the same sound in them) and some strongly flavored candy - mints or lemon or other sour candy. It is important that you choose a candy that you do not eat regularly, because we want it to “wake up” your mouth and brain when you eat it, signaling your brain to pay attention to what is going on.

Keep the candy in a bowl on your desk, in your pocket or purse, or somewhere easily accessible so you can suck on it throughout the day.

Each time you reach for a piece of candy, recite a few of your practice words, paying careful attention to pronounce them correctly. Over the course of the day, your brain will learn that when it senses that taste, it's time to use your new English pronunciation.

If this seems to work well for you, experiment with several types of candy over a few days and see which one triggers the strongest memories. If the candy is too mild, you may just enjoy the taste too much and forget the practice, so be sure to use only strongly-flavored ones.

What a yummy way to improve your American accent!

## YOUR SPEECH VOLCANO

*I've been practicing for several weeks now, but I don't feel like my speech has improved. What's going on? Am I doing something wrong?*

Improving your American pronunciation may seem to be a long process, but sometimes it is much more like a volcano exploding. One day, nothing seems different. And the next day, suddenly, your whole world has changed.

We often think of volcanoes as being sudden and unexpected, but in reality, the pressure is building underground for a long time before anything is ever visible on the surface. There may be a few trickles or warning signs in the few days prior to the big explosion, but for the most part the red hot lava bursts onto the scene rather unexpectedly.

It reminds me of what often happens when you are working on reducing your accent. Thankfully, no one is harmed by burning lava! But, often there is a great deal of change going on just beneath the surface of your brain when you don't even realize it.

You see, repetition retrains the brain to do things a different way. So, you may be practicing your sounds daily, not sure if it's making any difference at all. Then, all of sudden, one day you wake up and you just hear the sounds differently. When you speak, you are more confident that the words are coming out correctly, and even other people notice that your speech is clearer.

Just like that. Boom!

You're on a whole new level with your American pronunciation.



You become more tuned into the subtle differences in your speech and the speech of others because you can finally really hear the differences. You don't have to wait for your speech coach to tell you if you pronounced the word right or wrong because you *know*. Now, you own the progress you are making as you internalize what you've learned in a whole new way.

And, just like the lava flowing down the mountainside, your new speech patterns are unstoppable. The more you speak, the more those new patterns become engrained in your brain. And the more easily they come out every time you speak, the more confident you become.

I want you to have the confidence that comes from this volcano-like brain change. All it takes is the knowledge of what pronunciation changes you need to make and some consistent practice.

Have you experienced your "speech volcano" yet?

If you are practicing daily, be patient because it is coming. One day very soon, you will see explosive growth in your American pronunciation. The words will come out easier, and the sentences will flow just like that lava going down the mountainside.

You will find yourself in the middle of your very own speech volcano, and you'll never want it to end!