

DIPHTHONGS, CLUSTERS AND SYLLABLES

A diphthong is a combination of a vowel and a glide. If the glide is distinct enough to be heard, the vowel + glide is treated as a sequence of two vowels. If the glide is not prominent, the vowel + glide is treated as a diphthong.

A diphthong consisting of an on-glide and a vowel glide is a rising diphthong; a vowel followed by an off-glide is a falling diphthong. These terms refer to the position of the glide in relation to the vowel. The diphthongs with a central off-glide are called retracting diphthongs eg 'cow' [kaʊ]; diphthongs with a front off-glide are called fronting diphthongs eg 'maid' [maɪ].

Sequences of consonants are called consonant clusters. In 'straight' [straɪt] there is a consonant cluster [str] in the beginning followed by a diphthong [aɪ] and a final consonant [t].

The vowel or diphthong is the nucleus or peak of a syllable. The consonant before the peak is called the onset and the consonant after is called the coda. The onset and coda are optional. In 'I' [aɪ] there is no onset or coda. In words like [pi:oi] and [fa:oi] the vowels fall into two separate syllables [pi:] [oi:] the vowel combinations are to be treated as sequences and not as diphthongs.

If the syllable ends with a vowel, it is called an open vowel syllable. If it ends with a consonant, it is called a closed syllable. In some languages like English the consonants [l], [m], [n], and [r] function as peaks and they are known as syllabic consonants.