

A Sketch of the IPA Principles.

1. Contrastive Coverage. There should be separate characters for each distinctive sound. For each contrastive sound category in the languages of the world, there should be a transcription convention. I.e., if two sounds contrast in any language, there should be a difference in the transcription convention to indicate this difference. Another way of looking at this is that the phonemic categories of any language should be a sub-set of the transcription categories afforded by the IPA.

2. Universal Substance. Each character should be universal. That is, the symbol should be linked to a physical representation, such that no matter what language the transcription is for, the meaning of the transcription in terms of physical behavior is the same. Generally, symbols are thought to be shorthand descriptions of articulatory actions which create a speech sound.

3. Roman Character Base. Use Roman characters as much as possible. The agreement among the IPA is for transcriptions to look like Roman writing in general, using Roman characters arranged from left to right in time.

4. Commonly Accepted Conventions. The value of the character should reflect common usage. The meaning of the character (in physical terms) should be the substance expressed in a number of popular languages' orthographic conventions. Of course, the choice of popular languages depends on the nationality of the people inventing the system; though generally there are more common uses which got adopted in the IPA, rather than conventions peculiar to, say, English.

5. Character Similarity. The meaning of invented characters should be similar to the meaning of similar-looking Roman characters. So, for example, transcription characters of nasal sounds all look like Roman *n* with various extensions downward. Also, there is a tendency to try to make modifications be parallel. Thus, for example, a capital *N* indicates a uvular nasal. By analogy, a capital *G* indicates an uvular stop. Hence, capitalization tends to mean 'uvular'. Similarly, retroflex sounds are transcribed with symbols for alveolar sounds with descenders added bent to the right. So, the downward hook to the right means 'retroflex'.

6. Avoid Diacritics. In general, the IPA differs from Americanist transcription in that invented characters are new written symbols in the IPA, where the Americanist transcription system used Roman characters with added diacritical marks. This difference in approach has to do with the fact that the IPA was designed to be written, while the Americanist system was designed to be typed. What it means in practice is that the IPA requires memorization of more new symbols, while the symbols tend to be easier to read than characters with diacritics.