A vowel, by definition, is a sound produced by the vibrations of the vocal cords without the friction or stoppage which characterizes consonants. The alphabetical vowels are A, E, I, O, and U, comprising about 40 per cent of the letters in all written words. Actually, A and I are diphthongs; one vowel sound immediately followed by another is pronounced ah-ee.

There are dozens of possible vowel sounds. These can be designated by the International Phonetic Alphabet, by diacritical marks, or by the so-called American Phonetic method in which vowel sounds are spelled out. The third method is used in this article.

Various dictionaries give from eight to twenty-one vowel sounds. Some differentiate between stressed and unstressed vowels, consonant-colored vowels, or normal and lengthened vowels. I believe ten sounds can well represent the vowels used in normal speech.

Long e: ee, as in sleek
Broad a: ah, as in not
Long o: oh, as in road
Round u: oo, as in mood
Broad o: aw, as in hawk

Flat a: a, as in cat
Short e: e, as in met
Short u: uh, as in hull
Short i: i, as in ill
Short u: uuh, as in book

With these vowel sounds, it is theoretically possible to construct 90 diphthongs. Aided by Philip Cohen, I have identified 38, including Deep South and East Texas dialects. Can readers add any more?

ee-ah hear (heah) oo-ee we
ee-oh yo oo-ah walk
ee-oo you oo-oh woe
ee-aw yacht oo-aw wok
ee-a yak oo-a wagon
ee-e yet oo-e wet
ee-uh fear (feuh) oo-uh swim
ee-i yip oo-i will
ee-uhh your oo-uhh wool
ah-ee ice a-ee bay
ah-oh dog (dahog) a-ah and
ah-e lard (lahed) a-oh how
ah-uhh loud a-e varied (vaad)
ah-ee boy e-oh go (gao)
ah-oo down e-uh yeah
ah-uh for (jouh) uh-e worried (wuahed)
oh-ee boy uuh-uuh sure (shuah)
oh-uh four (jouh) uuh-uuh third (thoid)
oh-uhh bowed uh-uhh house