R-Controlled Vowels Cheat Sheet

When a vowel is followed by r, the r changes the vowel sound: ar, or, er, ir, ur.

ar

/ar/ as in car

arm art bar barn car

ar says /ar/ (like a pirate: arr!). It can come at the start (arm), in the middle (farm) or at the end (car).

or

/or/ as in fork

born cord cork corn fork

or says /or/. At the end of a short word it can be 'or' (for, nor). Silent-e endings like store and more also make /or/.

er

/er/ as in fern

fern germ her herd herb

er says /er/. It is the most common spelling at the end of longer words (teacher, water, finger).

ir

/er/ as in bird

bird birth chirp dirt firm

ir says the same /er/ sound as er and ur. ir is usually found in the middle of a word (girl, shirt) and it is not common at the end.

ur

/er/ as in fur

blur burn burst churn curb

ur says the same /er/ sound as er and ir. ur often comes at the start of a word or before a final consonant (turn, burn, hurt).

Remember: er, ir and ur all say the same /er/ sound. Only the spelling is different.

Which Spelling? Helpful Hints

Hints that help most of the time, with the exceptions to watch for.

er, ir, ur sound the same

Fern (er), bird (ir) and fur (ur) all have the same /er/ sound. You cannot tell the spelling by ear, so learn the common words as whole spellings and check a dictionary when you are not sure.

er at the end of longer words

teacher, water, finger, letter, winter, sister. Words that name a person or thing that does something often end in er.

ir in the middle, ur at the start or end

girl, bird, shirt, dirt (ir) and turn, burn, hurt, fur, nurse (ur). ir rarely ends a word (sir is a short exception).

After w

or after w often says /er/: word, work, world, worm, worth. ar after w often says /or/: war, warm, warn, wart, swarm.

Silent e

Words like more and store end with a silent e after or. They still say /or/, so they belong with the or words.

Say it with the mouth

Say car, fork and bird slowly in a mirror. Notice your lips and tongue. Hear every sound at phonicademy.com/phonemes (ar, or, ur pages).