How to write pronouncers.

Or, a guide to roughly textually representing the pronunciation of words and names within standard North American English dialect (even though such a thing doesn’t really exist) without using the International Phonetic Alphabet or some other crazy thing that basically no one understands.

I. How to write vowels and diphthongs

a = “bat”
ah = “hot”
ay = “ate”
eh = “met”
ee = “meet”
y = “die”
ih = “it”
oh = “boat”
oo = “boot”
yoo = “muse”
ow = “out”
oy = “coin”
uh = “but”

II. How to write consonants

Most consonants are easy and need no explanation, but here are the particularly tricky ones.

zh = “Zsa Zsa Gabor”
ny + vowel sound = ñ, as in “niño,” which would be represented NEE-nyoh
Don’t use g for j sounds; g = “gun,” j = “jelly”
Don’t use s for z sounds; “phase” = fayz
Don’t use the letter c unless it’s a ch. Use k or s instead.
III. How to split apart syllables

Separate the syllables within a single multisyllabic word or name with a single hyphen, and nothing else. No spaces. Example: HY-fehn.

How do you know which sounds belong to which syllables? It can be surprisingly tricky to say where one syllable begins and the other ends. Is it TRIHK-ee, or TRIH-kee? The correct answer is the second one, and you can tell by simply saying the word out loud and sloooowwwwwing waaaayyyyy doowwwwn, stretching out every single syllable absurdly long. Whichever sound you naturally extend is probably the last sound of the syllable, with the exception of the final syllable, where there’s often a bonus consonant at the end. Sometimes it’s debatable which sound goes with which syllable, so don’t stress too much about this.

IV. How to indicate emphasis

A pronouncer is useless if it doesn’t indicate emphasis! Show the strong syllable in all caps. The surname Mendosa would be “mehn-DOH-zah.” All other letters in the pronouncer should be lowercase, including the first letter of the name. Don’t write “Mehn-DOH-zah” just because you normally capitalize the first letter of a name—it makes the pronouncer harder to read.

How do you know which syllable gets the emphasis? This is surprisingly tricky for some people, but there’s an easy method to know for sure: Try every permutation out loud, and you’ll know which one sounds right. Say, “MEHN-doh-zah, mehn-DOH-zah, mehn-doh-ZAH.” If you have trouble doing that, try pounding your fist on the syllable you’re intending to emphasize. You’ll hear immediately which version is the correct one.

If you’re dealing with a monosyllabic word, it doesn’t really matter what you do, but the original author of this document prefers lowercase.

V: How to cheat

You can often bypass all of the above by simply comparing the word/name in question with something more familiar. There are lots of ways to do this. Examples: Bass = like the fish, not the instrument; Pence = rhymes with fence; Mustaine = muh-“STAIN” (use quote marks around a real word you’re using in a pronouncer, as opposed to the normal generic representation of a sound).

VI: A note about verbal pronouncers
Rather than writing a textual pronouncer, sometimes it’s easier or more expedient to simply demonstrate it out loud. But be careful. When discussing how to pronounce a particular syllable within a word/name, people will usually emphasize that syllable, even if it’s not the syllable that actually gets the emphasis. This can create confusion. Scenario:

PERSON A: “So, is ‘espresso’ pronounced ‘ehk-SPREH-soh’?”
PERSON B: “No, not ‘EHK-spreh-soh.’ It’s ‘EH-spreh-soh.’”

In this scenario, Person B has emphasized the first syllable, because Person A was getting it wrong. But Person A could come away from this interaction believing erroneously that the first syllable should be emphasized generally.

So, when giving verbal pronouncers, always put the emphasis where you actually want it.