

Classical American Speech - Chief Characteristics

Adapted from Patricia Fletcher's Classically Speaking: Dialects for Actors, and used with permission.

I highly recommend Fletcher's thorough and "user friendly" text and CD for Neutral American, Classical American, and Standard British (RP) dialects.

The Classical American dialect lies in between Neutral American and Standard British (Received Pronunciation, or RP). It is also referred to as Stage Standard, Eastern Standard, and Edith Skinner's "Good Speech." It is used to lend a sense of heightened speech, without sounding British to the American ear. It may be used to suggest upper class, well-educated characters; characters from another time and place (apart from contemporary America); and for plays in translation, such as Chekhov, Ibsen, Moliere, and Lorca.

Use the following characteristics:

- Clean, pure sounds, overall
- Slightly less r coloring
- ε as in get, ready, whenever, retinue
- Aspirated medial t as in flutter, not I, utterly
- Use ɒ, (which sounds in between ɑ and ɔ) as in honest, hot, honorable, what
- Use liquid ju after t, d, and n
- æ is pure, with a relaxed tongue, (no tension or nasality). As in back, that, amble
- Softened, relaxed ʌə as in hour, power
- Softened, relaxed ɪə as in fire, tired, crier
- Open, pure ɑ as in how, now, round, about
- ɪ before r as in berate, erratic, heroic, mirror, spirit
- ɔ before r as in glories, story, chorus
- ʌ before r as in furrowed, currency, nourishing
- Pure vowels in polysyllabics (ary, berry, ory) as in promontory, necessary, blackberries
- Slightly shorter I in unstressed word endings, as in lazy, philosophy, shrewdly, happily

Practice Text

1. For slightly less r coloring

Infirm of purpose! Macbeth: II, ii, 49

Words, words, words. Hamlet: II, ii, 192

I have no further with you. Coriolanus: II, iii, 173

Surrender, musketeers! Cyrano de Bergerac

Where's my serpent of Old Nile? Antony and Cleopatra: I, v, 25

I do not much dislike the matter, but
The manner of his speech. Antony and Cleopatra: II, ii, 111

2. Lightly aspirated medial t

Methinks nobody should be sad but I. King John: IV, i, 13

It is the law, not I, condemn your brother. Measure For Measure: II, ii, 80

Yes, I hear people talk of that, but it is utterly impossible.
Ibsen: The Master Builder

3. n (honest)

Who's that knocking on the floor? Chekhov: Three Sisters

For Brutus is an honorable man. Julius Ceasar: III, ii, 82

Why, what a candy deal of courtesy
This fawning greyhound then did proffer me! 1 Henry IV: I, iii, 251

4. Liquid ju

Women, you see --- in certain matters, they have a deucedly keen intuition.
Ibsen: The Master Builder

Like sweet bells, jangled, out of tune and harsh. Hamlet: III, i, 158

The old fantastical duke of dark corners. Measure For Measure: IV, iii, 156

5. æ before m, n, g, ŋ, ŋk

But I can't understand how you can have made it go far enough for two.
Ibsen: Hedda Gabler

By heaven, I rather would have been his hangman. Othello: I, i, 34

You speak a language that I understand not. The Winter's Tale: II, ii, 80

6. au (now)

How now, you secret, black, and midnight hags! Macbeth: IV, i, 48

Flout 'em and scout 'em and scout 'em and flout 'em. The Tempest: III, ii, 121

7. ε

Verify everything, Jerry.

Sheridan, what's a gerund?

Terrence is a veritable cherub.

The secretary committed an error.

8. ʌ before r

Are there currants in curry?

They worried about murrains in Surrey.

Are there surrogate mothers in this borough?

Young Doug burrowed a tunnel under Durham just for fun.

9. ɔ before r as in glories, story, chorus

We're victorious!

What's the quorum?

That's a lovely Oriental rug.

What a glorious performance.

Victoria is a notorious Taurus.

There is a lack of decorum at Shoreham.

10. n (honest) before r

What a horrible holiday!

Orangeade is popular in Potsdam.

It's too hot to play golf in Florida.

Historical dramas are Oliver's favorite.

Is it immoral to quarantine quarrelling warriors?