

# Kaua'i or Kawai'i?

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**K**aua'i is commonly mispronounced two different ways. The most common mispronunciation is to pronounce *Kaua'i* as if it was spelled like *Hawai'i*, but with a *K* instead of an *H*. The second way *Kaua'i* is mispronounced is to pronounce *Kaua'i* as if it was spelled like the two syllable word *Kawai*. I often think that the people who say *Kawai* think themselves superior for their pronunciation to the people who use the more common and popular *Kawai'i* pronunciation. They should not feel so smug, because both pronunciations are equally incorrect.

**Kaua'i ≠ Kawai'i**  
**Kaua'i ≠ Kawai**

**I**n both of the incorrect pronunciations, the vowel *u* is wrongly treated as though it were a *w* consonant. At least *Kawai* recognizes there is only one *i* in *Kaua'i*, but it disregards the 'okina between the *a* and *i*. However unique and strange, the 'okina is a real consonant in the Hawaiian language. The 'okina affects pronunciation so it should not be ignored in writing or speech. The 'okina is depicted as an upside down or inverted apostrophe.

'okina *lit.*, means "cutting off, separation"

**A**n 'okina separates the *a* and the *i* in *Kaua'i* and indicates that there is no *ai* diphthong. Hawaiian diphthongs are two vowels pronounced together, like the *ai* diphthong in the place names *Waikīkī* and *Hawai'i*.

**F**or various reasons, the 'okina is often omitted from the spelling of Hawaiian words

that have them. Although the omission of the 'okina may make understandable a mistake in pronunciation, it is not a justification for a change in pronunciation.

**S**o how is *Kaua'i* correctly pronounced? First, there is an *au* diphthong in *Kaua'i* that is not recognized in the *Kawai'i* and *Kawai* pronunciations. *Au* should be pronounced like the *au* diphthong in the word for the Hawaiian feast known as a *lū'au*. Also, remember to recognize the 'okina.

**L**et us separate the word *Kaua'i* into its syllables. The first example below is wrong, because it divides and separates the *au* diphthong as if by a phantom 'okina. This is one of the reasons why the first syllable gets mispronounced as *ka*. The second example below is correct, but somewhat incomplete, as we will see in the next paragraph.

Ka-ua-'i is wrong

**Kau-a-'i** is correct, but incomplete

**T**here is a spoken feature of the word *Kaua'i* that is missing in the depiction above and it is known as a *w*-glide. *W*-glides are natural occurrences of the spoken Hawaiian language. *W*-glides can follow *u* vowels. In the case of the word *Kaua'i*, a *w*-glide follows the first syllable and is added to the front end of the second syllable.

**Kau-(w)a-'i**

**K**aua'i is pronounced **KAU-WAH-ee** with stress on the capitalized syllables. Hawaiian pronunciation is actually very simple and straight forward, but problems with correct pronunciation arise, because some words have been corrupted in usage by lazy speakers.