

Rule for English Aspiration:

Voiceless stops are aspirated when they occur as the only thing in the onset of a stressed syllable.

In other words:

Voiceless stops ([p], [t], and [k]) are aspirated ([p^h], [t^h], and [k^h]) when they occur **immediately** before (no sound in between) a stressed vowel, and there is no [s] in front of the voiceless stop.

So, they are not aspirated after [s], if they occur before an unstressed vowel, or if there is a liquid or glide between the stop and the vowel (and then the liquid/glide is considered voiceless = [ɾ])

Examples (with narrow transcription):

Aspirated	IPA		Not aspirated	IPA
pot	[p ^h at]		spot	[spat]
top	[t ^h ap]		stop	[stap]
cot	[k ^h at]		Scot	[skat]
oppose	[əp ^h ówz]		plop	[p _l ap]
Tacoma	[tək ^h ówmə]		prop	[pr _ɔ ap]
potato	[pət ^h éjrow]		twist	[tw _ɪ st]
cat	[k ^h æt]		cube	[k _j ub]
tame	[t ^h ejm]		hippy	[hípi]
kite	[k ^h ajt]		lucky	[l _l ki]