

FREE RESOURCE · COMMON ENGLISH WORDS

Common English words 1 to 10

The most common English words, in order of how often they are used, begin with the, be, and, of, to, a, in, have, it and you. These ten are small grammar words with little meaning on their own, yet they appear in almost every sentence you will speak or write in IELTS. Knowing how they work makes your English clearer and easier to follow.

The words

WORD	SOUND	MEANING	EXAMPLE
the determiner	/ðə/	Used before a noun when you and the listener both know which one you mean. Before a vowel sound it is said /ði/ (the answer).	<i>The library in my city opens at eight, so I study there before class.</i>
be verb	/bi:/	A very common verb that links a subject to a description, an identity or a place. Its forms are am, is, are, was, were, been and being.	<i>Many people in big cities are worried about the cost of housing.</i>
and conjunction	/ænd/	Joins two words, phrases or sentences of the same kind. It adds one idea to another. In fast speech it is often said /ən/.	<i>Cycling is cheap and healthy, and it reduces traffic.</i>
of preposition	/ɒv/	Shows that something belongs to, comes from or is part of something else. Also used after words of quantity, like a lot of or a group of.	<i>One of the biggest problems in my town is the lack of public transport.</i>
to preposition, particle	/tu:/	Shows direction towards a place. It also goes before the base form of a verb (to go, to study) to make the infinitive. In fast speech it is said /tə/.	<i>I travel to the campus by bus in order to save money.</i>
a determiner	/ə/	Used before a singular countable noun when it is one of many or you mention it for the first time. Before a vowel sound use an. When stressed it is said /eɪ/.	<i>My brother works as a nurse in a hospital near our home.</i>
in preposition	/ɪn/	Shows that something is inside a place, an area or a period of time, or is in a state or situation.	<i>In my opinion, children learn languages more quickly than adults.</i>
have verb	/hæv/	Means to own, hold or experience something. It is also a helper verb used to make perfect tenses (I have finished).	<i>Many students have a part-time job while they study.</i>
it pronoun	/ɪt/	Replaces a thing, an idea or a situation that is already known. It is also an empty subject in sentences about weather, time and opinions (It is raining).	<i>It is important to sleep well before an exam.</i>
you pronoun	/ju:/	Means the person or people you are speaking to. In general statements it can also mean people in general.	<i>If you live in a big city, you often spend a lot of time travelling.</i>

Exercises

1. She is _____ youngest child in her family.
 - a. a
 - b. the
 - c. an
2. Two of my friends _____ studying abroad.
 - a. is
 - b. are
 - c. be
3. Find the mistake and write the right form: (1) My sister (2) can (3) to swim (4) very well.
4. Which word ends with a /v/ sound?
 - a. if
 - b. of
 - c. off
5. Put the words in order (one or more words are not needed): to / is / are / well. / important / sleep / It
6. Correct this: *I am agree with you.*
7. We usually visit my grandparents _____ August.
 - a. on
 - b. at
 - c. in
8. Which stress pattern is natural? *I have a lot of work to do.*
 - a. I **HAVE A** lot **OF** work **TO** do
 - b. I have a **LOT** of **WORK** to **DO**
9. Find the mistake and write the right form: (1) In my opinion, (2) a information (3) is useful (4) for students.

Listening items (1) are online only and are not included in this list.

Practise online, free: hear every example and check your answers at www.ielts-laboratory.co/free-resources/common-english-words-1-10/practice/

IELTS tip. In Speaking, use the small words naturally and quickly; clear grammar words make a longer answer easier to follow. In Writing, a missing the or a wrong preposition is one of the commonest small slips, so check them when you reread.

FOR TEACHERS · COMMON ENGLISH WORDS

Common English words 1 to 10

AIM	Students understand, pronounce and use the common English words the, be, and, of, to, a, in, have, it, you, and avoid the typical mistakes noted for each word.
TIME	20 minutes
LEVEL	B1 to B2 (IELTS 5 to 6.5)
MATERIALS	This worksheet, one copy per learner; the free online practice for the audio

Warm-up

Write the ten words on the board in random order. Students say which ones they use most often in English and what they think each word does in a sentence.

Lesson steps

1. Present the ten words with their British IPA. Model each word, then students repeat chorally and in pairs, paying attention to weak forms and stress.
2. Students read the example sentences aloud, cover them, and make a new sentence about their own life with each word.
3. Ask students to describe their home town in four sentences, using the, a, in and of at least once each.
4. Run the quiz as a class. For each wrong answer, ask the student to read the watch-out note and explain the rule in their own words.

Extension

Give students a short text with all articles removed. They restore the, a and an, then explain each choice.

Answer key

1. b) the. 'Youngest' points to one known child, so we use the.
2. b) are. Two friends is plural, so the verb is are.
3. Part 3: *to swim* → **swim**. After can we use the base verb with no to.
4. b) of. Of is said /ɒv/. Off ends with /f/.
5. It is important to sleep well. It is an empty subject, then is, then the adjective and to + verb.
6. I agree with you. Agree is already a verb, so it does not need am.
7. c) in. Use in with months.
8. b) I have a **LOT** of **WORK** to **DO**. Content words (lot, work, do) are stressed; small words like a, of and to are weak.
9. Part 2: *a information* → **information**. Information is uncountable, so it has no a or an and no plural.

Questions learners often ask

Why are these called the most common English words? They come from the New General Service List, which ranks words by how often they appear in a very large collection of English texts. The, be, and, of, to, a, in, have, it and you head that list.

Do I need to learn small words like the and of? Yes. They are in nearly every sentence, so using them correctly makes your speaking and writing sound clear and natural.

Why is the said /ðə/ and sometimes /ði/? Before a consonant sound it is /ðə/ (the book). Before a vowel sound it is /ði/ (the apple).

Sources

- Browne, C., Culligan, B. & Phillips, J. (2013). The New General Service List (NGSL) 1.2. newgeneralservicelist.com. CC BY-SA 4.0.
- Swan, M. (2016). Practical English Usage (4th ed.). Oxford University Press.
- Wells, J. C. (2008). Longman Pronunciation Dictionary (3rd ed.). Pearson Longman.

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