



FREE RESOURCE · PRONUNCIATION

The schwa sound /ə/

The schwa /ə/ is a short, weak, relaxed vowel, like the first sound in about or the last sound in teacher. It is the most common vowel sound in English. It appears only in syllables that are not stressed, and it can be spelled with any vowel letter.

What to know

What the schwa sound is

The schwa is written /ə/ in the phonemic alphabet. It is the sound you make when your mouth is completely relaxed and you say a very short 'uh'. It has no strong colour. It is not /æ/ or /e/ or /ɒ/. It is neutral.

- about /ə'baʊt/ · banana /bə'nɑ:nə/
- teacher /'ti:tʃə/ · sofa /'səʊfə/
- problem /'prɒbləm/ · important /ɪm'pɔ:tənt/

Why it matters

English has strong syllables and weak syllables, and the weak ones are said quickly and quietly. If you give every syllable a full vowel, your speech sounds heavy and robotic, and listeners can lose the strong syllables they need to find the meaning. The schwa is what makes the weak syllables weak.

Where you find it

You never hear a schwa in a stressed syllable. It lives in weak syllables, and weak syllables fall in three main places.

- Before the stress: about /ə'baʊt/, today /tə'deɪ/, support /sə'pɔ:t/, agree /ə'ɡri:/.
- After the stress: teacher /'ti:tʃə/, doctor /'dɒktə/, sofa /'səʊfə/, problem /'prɒbləm/.
- In small grammar words: to /tə/, of /əv/, and /ən/, a /ə/, for /fə/, the /ðə/ before a consonant.
- In endings and middle syllables: famous /'feɪməs/, important /ɪm'pɔ:tənt/, photographer /fə'tɒgrəfə/.

Spelling does not help

A schwa can be spelled with any vowel letter, and also with several letters together. That is why you cannot find it by looking at a word. You find it by knowing which syllable is stressed and then saying the others weakly.

- a: about, banana, woman.
- e: problem, open, taken.
- i: possible, family, terrible.
- o: today, second, lemon.
- u: support, album, success.

How to say it

Make the schwa short. A long schwa becomes a stressed vowel, like /ɜ:/ in bird, and the rhythm of the word is lost. Think of it as a tiny 'uh' that you barely notice.

How to make the sound

1. Let your mouth go loose and a little open, with your lips relaxed and not rounded.
2. Rest your tongue in the middle of your mouth, not high and not low.
3. Say a very short voiced 'uh'. Keep it quiet.
4. Compare with /ɜ:/ in bird: the schwa is shorter, quieter and never stressed.

Exercises

1. Which is the most common vowel sound in English?
 - a. /i:/
 - b. /ə/
 - c. /æ/
2. Which syllable is stressed in **banana**? ba · na · na
3. Which syllable is stressed in **important**? im · por · tant
4. How is the first vowel in *about* pronounced?
 - a. /æ/
 - b. /ɑ:/
 - c. /ə/
5. Which word has NO schwa?
 - a. sheep
 - b. doctor
 - c. teacher
6. Which stress pattern is natural? *He's a doctor at the hospital.*
 - a. He's a **DOC** tor at the **HOS** pi tal
 - b. **HE'S** a doc **TOR** at the hos **PI** tal
7. The last syllable of *doctor* in British English is pronounced with _____.
 - a. /ə/
 - b. /ɔ:/
8. Which word begins with a schwa? Type it: *about, table, sheep*
9. How is the word *a* normally said in *I bought a book*?
 - a. /eɪ/
 - b. /ə/
10. Which syllable of *problem* /'prɒbləm/ has the schwa?
 - a. The second
 - b. The first

Practise online, free: hear every example and check your answers at www.ielts-laboratory.co/free-resources/schwa-sound/practice/

IELTS tip. In the Speaking test, a natural rhythm with strong and weak syllables makes your answers easier to follow. Practise the schwa in the words you use most, such as 'important', 'different', 'family', 'problem' and 'because'. Use weak forms of small words, such as 'a cup of tea' /ə 'kʌp əv 'ti:/.

FOR TEACHERS · PRONUNCIATION

The schwa sound /ə/

AIM	Learners identify weak syllables and say them with a short, neutral /ə/ instead of a full vowel.
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 banana, teacher and photographer on the board. Learners tap the strong syllable and say the others as quickly as possible.

Lesson steps

1. Model the sound: relaxed jaw, middle tongue, short 'uh'. Learners say it in isolation, then in about, sofa and teacher.
2. Learners mark weak syllables in a list of twelve words, then compare with the IPA.
3. Drill phrases with weak small words: a cup of tea, a lot of time, to the doctor, fish and chips.
4. Pairs read a short paragraph and tick weak syllables that were said too long.

Extension

Learners record a 45-second description of their family and mark every schwa they used.

Answer key

1. b) /ə/. The schwa /ə/ appears in the weak syllables of a very large number of words, so it is the most common vowel sound.
2. ba**NA**na. ba-**NA**-na: the middle syllable is strong, and the first and last syllables are the schwa /ə/.
3. im**PORT**ant. im-**POR**-tant: the strong syllable is the second. The last syllable is a weak /ənt/.
4. c) /ə/. The first syllable of *about* is weak, so the vowel is the schwa: /ə'baʊt/.
5. a) sheep. *Sheep* has one strong syllable with /i:/. *Teacher* and *doctor* both end in a schwa.
6. a) He's a **DOC** tor at the **HOS** pi tal. The strong syllables are **DOC** and **HOS**. *Tor*, *pi* and *tal* are weak, and so are *a*, *at* and *the*.
7. a) /ə/. British English says /'dɒktə/. The ending -or is a weak syllable, so it is the schwa.
8. about. *About* starts /ə/. *Table* starts /teɪ/ and *sheep* starts /ʃi:/.
9. b) /ə/. In normal speech the word *a* is weak: /ə/. The strong form /eɪ/ is used only for emphasis.
10. a) The second. The first syllable *prob* is strong. The second, *lem*, is weak and uses the schwa.

Questions learners often ask

What does schwa mean? It is a word borrowed from Hebrew for a very short vowel. In English teaching it names the neutral vowel /ə/.

How do I know when to use a schwa? Find the strong syllable of the word first. Weak syllables are then usually said with a schwa, especially in small words like a, to, of and the.

Can a stressed syllable have a schwa? No. The schwa belongs only to weak syllables. A stressed syllable always has a full vowel.

Is the schwa the same as /ɜ:/? No. /ɜ:/ as in bird is long and can be stressed. The schwa is short and always weak.

Sources

- Roach, P. (2009). English Phonetics and Phonology: A Practical Course (4th ed.). Cambridge University Press.
- Cruttenden, A. (2014). Gimson's Pronunciation of English (8th ed.). Routledge.

Written by Will Salisbury · IELTS Laboratory · ielts-laboratory.co/free-resources/schwa-sound · Free to copy for classroom use.