



FREE RESOURCE · PRONUNCIATION

Weak forms

Weak forms are the short, quiet pronunciations of small grammar words such as to /tə/, of /əv/, and /ən/, can /kən/ and was /wəz/. Speakers use them in normal sentences and use the strong form only for emphasis or at the end of a phrase. They give English its stress-timed rhythm.

What to know

What are weak forms?

Many small words in English have two pronunciations. The strong form is the full sound you hear when the word is said alone or with emphasis: to /tu:/, can /kæn/, of /ɒv/. The weak form is the quick, quiet version you hear in normal speech: to /tə/, can /kən/, of /əv/.

The common weak forms

The words with weak forms are grammar words: they carry little meaning of their own. The content words around them carry the message. Learn the list below in the sentence, not on its own.

- to: strong /tu:/ · to: weak /tə/ (I want to go.)
- of: strong /ɒv/ · of: weak /əv/ (a cup of tea)
- and: strong /ænd/ · and: weak /ən/ (fish and chips)

When to use the strong form

The strong form is not wrong. It has special uses, and you need to know them. If you use a strong form everywhere, your speech sounds slow and heavy. If you use a weak form in the wrong place, it can sound strange.

- At the end of a phrase: 'What are you looking for?' /fɔ:/, 'Where are you from?' /frɒm/.
- For emphasis or contrast: 'I said FOR, not FROM.'
- In a short answer: 'Can you swim?' 'Yes, I can.' /kæn/.
- On its own: 'The word of is spelled o-f.'

Why weak forms matter: English rhythm

English is often described as stress-timed. This means the strong syllables come at fairly regular beats, and the weak syllables are squeezed in between them. In real speech the timing is not perfect, but the idea helps. A sentence with few small words and a sentence with many take a similar time between the strong beats.

More weak forms to learn

Once the first group is easy, add these. They appear in almost every sentence you say in the Speaking test, so each one you learn is used again and again.

- them /ðəm/ or /əm/: I told them. (I told-əm.)
- you /jə/: What do you want? (What də-yə want?)
- would /wəd/: He would like tea.

- that /ðət/ as a conjunction: I think that it is late.
- some /səm/: Would you like some tea?

How to make the sound

1. Relax your jaw and tongue for the schwa /ə/. Do not round your lips.
2. Say the strong word loud and clear, then say the weak word quickly and quietly: 'CUP of TEA'.
3. Link the weak word to the word before it: cup-əv-tea.
4. Keep a steady beat on the strong words as you speed up.

Exercises

1. Which stress pattern is natural? *I want to go to the bank.*
 - a. I **WANT** to **GO** to the **BANK**
 - b. I want **TO** go **TO THE** bank
2. How is *of* usually said in *a cup of tea*?
 - a. /əv/
 - b. /ɒv/
3. How is *can* said in *I can swim*?
 - a. /kæn/
 - b. /kən/
4. In which sentence is *can* said with the strong form /kæn/?
 - a. Yes, I can.
 - b. I can see it.
 - c. Can you help me?
5. How is *was* usually said in *He was late*?
 - a. /wɒz/
 - b. /wəz/
6. How is *them* usually said in *I told them yesterday*?
 - a. /ðəm/ or a shorter /əm/
 - b. /ðem/, with a full vowel
7. In *What are you looking for?* the word *for* at the end is _____.
 - a. strong, /fɔ:/
 - b. weak, /fə/
8. How many strong beats are in *He lives near the station*? Write a number.
9. In *a cup of tea*, which words are weak?
 - a. a and tea
 - b. cup and tea
 - c. a and of

10. Which stress pattern is natural? *She is working at a school.*

a. She is **WORK** ing at a **SCHOOL**

b. **SHE IS** work **ING AT A** school

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

IELTS tip. In IELTS Speaking, strong and weak forms help you sound fluent and natural without speaking fast. Keep the key words clear and say the small words lightly. In IELTS Listening, expect speakers to use weak forms, so 'a cup of tea' may sound like 'a cuppa tea'.

FOR TEACHERS · PRONUNCIATION

Weak forms

AIM	Learners use weak forms of common grammar words in connected speech and keep strong forms for emphasis and phrase-final position.
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 'a cup of tea' on the board. Learners say it slowly, then at natural speed, and notice what changes.

Lesson steps

1. Present six weak forms (to, of, and, can, was, for) with their strong forms and one example sentence each.
2. Learners tap the beat while saying sentences of increasing length, with the weak forms squeezed between the beats.
3. Practise the exceptions: short answers, phrase-final prepositions and emphasis.
4. In pairs, learners write a six-word sentence with two weak forms. The partner reads it aloud and the writer ticks each weak form.

Extension

Dictate a short passage at natural speed. Learners write what they hear, then compare with the written version to see which words they missed.

Answer key

1. a) I **WANT** to **GO** to the **BANK**. The content words **WANT**, **GO** and **BANK** carry the beats. *I*, *to* and *the* are small words and stay weak.
2. a) /əv/. In a normal phrase *of* is weak: /əv/. The strong form /ɒv/ is rare.
3. b) /kən/. *Can* in a statement is weak: /kən/. The strong /kæn/ is used in a short answer such as 'Yes, I can.'
4. a) Yes, I can. At the end of a short answer, *can* takes the strong form. In the other two sentences it is followed by more words and is weak.
5. b) /wəz/. *Was* is a small grammar word, so it is weak: /wəz/.
6. a) /ðəm/ or a shorter /əm/. *Them* is a pronoun in the middle of a phrase, so it is weak: /ðəm/ or /əm/. The strong form /ðem/ is for emphasis.
7. a) strong, /fɔː/. A grammar word at the end of a phrase takes its strong form.
8. 2. The beats are **LIVES** and **STATION**. *He*, *near* and *the* are weak.

9. c) a and of. *A* and *of* are small grammar words. *Cup* and *tea* are content words and carry the beats.

10. a) She is **WORK** ing at a **SCHOOL**. The beats are **WORK** and **SCHOOL**. *She, is, at* and *a* are weak.

Questions learners often ask

What is a weak form? A short, quiet pronunciation of a small word, usually with the schwa /ə/, like /tə/ for to.

Which words have weak forms? Mostly grammar words: articles, prepositions, auxiliary verbs, pronouns and conjunctions, such as a, the, to, of, and, can, was and have.

Is it rude or lazy to use weak forms? No. They are the normal pronunciation in connected speech. Using only strong forms sounds slow and unnatural.

What is stress-timing? The idea that English strong syllables come at fairly regular beats, with weak syllables squeezed in between them.

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.

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