



Ready, Set, Go

Success for All

An e-Newsletter linking people and resources to support quality practices in the education of all students



TEACHING SCHWA: THE MOST COMMON VOWEL SOUND IN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE

Perhaps you have heard the saying, "Be like the schwa; it is never stressed." Schwa is the phenomenon that occurs when a vowel loses its contrast in an unstressed syllable. Sometimes it is referred to as the vowel being "emptied" for this reason. It is a mid-central, lax vowel. It is neither short nor long. Schwa is considered a neutral vowel with the least articulatory effort, yet it is one of the most frequent vowel sounds in the English language.

Schwa can be spelled with any vowel grapheme and presents as the sounds /uh/ or /i/. It is the relaxed sound in many words that begin with the letter "a" like about, above, or along and make the sound /uh/. It can also be the /i/ sound like the letter "e" in basket. Schwa never occurs in monosyllabic words with the exceptions of the articles "a" or "the", because single syllable words are accented in speech.

Any vowel can be reduced to schwa when they occur in the unstressed syllable. Schwa is the unexpected sound a vowel makes in an unstressed syllable. In English, this often varies by regional dialect. Listen for the schwa as you read the examples:

(a) above, (e) basket, (i) edible, (o) random, (u) focus, (y) Pennsylvania, (ia) parliament, (ie) ancient, (ea) sergeant, (ei) decaffeinated, (oi) porpoise, (ou) nervous, (iou) precious

These words illustrate how the schwa is an allophonic variation, phonemes which are pronounced differently depending on the sounds around them. Because the schwa can be made with any number of vowel graphemes, spelling must be taught through understanding the word's morphology (related words) or through memorization.

Get Ready: What is the schwa and why is it important?

Schwa is a quick, relaxed, neutral vowel pronunciation very close to a 'short u' /ʌ/. An example of the schwa can be heard in the beginning and ending sounds in the word Alaska. It is an important sound in English for two reasons. First, it is the most common vowel sound so to speak naturally, you need to be able to pronounce it properly when reading. Secondly, it is important to teach the occurrence of schwa in multisyllabic words, because it is responsible for common misspellings, as the word's spelling does not fully match its pronunciation. This is often because as affixes are added to base words the accent (pronunciation) shifts. In words with affixes, correct spelling can be derived from the morphemes within the word. However, because it is pronounced differently, this impacts our ability to spell the word phonetically. One way to teach the schwa is to help students recognize that although it cannot be sounded out for spelling purposes, morphology can be used to explain the correct spelling of the words. The schwa may pose difficulty for English Learners (EL) who are not only learning word recognition and spelling, but also pronunciation. Examples include: competition/compete and narrative/narrate. When the schwa is not related to the word's morphemes, it must be memorized. Examples include: again, lemon, and problem.

Video

- [The Schwa Sound Pronunciation](#)

Websites

- [What is Schwa and How to Teach it \(Phonics Hero\)](#)
- [All about Schwa \(Learning Press\)](#)

Books

- Moats, L. C. (2020). *Speech to print: Language Essentials for Teachers*. (pp. 44-45, 74, 90, 119, 149-150). Brookes Publishing Company.
- Hegland, S. S. (2021). *Beneath the Surface of Words: What English Spelling Reveals and Why It Matters*. Learning About Spelling.

Get Set

to learn how instruction in schwa patterns can increase students' ability to read and spell multisyllabic words.

Introduce the schwa once students are reading and writing multisyllabic words. Helping students learn the vowel sound of schwa is no easy task. You can recognize students are having difficulty by analyzing the errors in spelling patterns of multisyllabic words. One way to help students learn how to remedy spelling errors is to provide exercises where they generate related words. The related words help students identify the correct spelling when the schwa vowel is present in its accented form. See the resources below for even more great ideas to incorporate into your lesson plans.

Article

- [Teaching the Schwa Sound in Unaccented Syllables](#)

Videos

- [Teaching the Schwa \(PATTAN\)](#)
- [How to Teach Schwa](#)

Website

- [How to Teach Schwa Vowels \(Literacy Nest\)](#)

Book

- Eide, D. (2012). *Uncovering the logic of English: A common-sense approach to reading, spelling, and literacy*. Pedia Learning Inc.

Go explore these resources to incorporate explicit instruction in the application of schwa into your structured literacy routines.

Use word lists and exercises to help your students identify schwa in common words. Try a lesson plan from Lyn Stone's book *Spelling for life*. Play short video clips that help reinforce your instruction of the concept of schwa.

Videos

- [English Decoded - The Schwa](#)
- [English Schwa Sound - Listen, Record & Practice to Improve Your Schwa \(speechactive.com\)](#)

Websites

- [Two-to-Four-Syllable Words with Short Vowels and Schwa \(Reading Rockets\)](#)
- [The Schwa Explained and How to Teach](#)

Books

- Moats, L. C. (2020). *Speech to print: Language Essentials for Teachers*. Brookes Publishing Company.
- Stone, L. (2021). *Spelling for Life: Uncovering the Simplicity and Science of Spelling*. (pp. 141-150). Routledge.

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