

Unit Nine The Schwa /ə/

The schwa is the most frequent vowel sound in English speech. It gives English a unique sound and rhythm, as well as being a major factor to an English accent when Anglophones speak other languages.

How to make the sound: make the schwa with your jaws slightly open, your lips relaxed, and your tongue in the same position as when you wake up (everyone uses the schwa upon waking!). Schwa is nearly always short.

Where is it found?

1. /ə/ can usually be found in function words which are unstressed in the sentence:

a, am, an, and, are, as, at, but, can, do, for, had, has, have, her, him, his, if, in, is, it, its, of, on, or, than, that, the, their, them, to, was, will, with, you, your.

2. /ə/ can be found in prefixes and suffixes as well:

in-, suc-, to-, ad-, be-, un-, -ible, -able, -ish, -ment, etcetera.

3. /ə/ can be found in content words as well:

able, according, account, action, affair, afraid, ago, agree, allow, alone, along, amount, animal, arrive, article, attempt, away, battle, beautiful, became, become, began, begin, believe, belong, broken, business, captain, certain, certainly, character, children, college, command, common, company, complete, condition, consider, contain, continue, control, decide, declare, degree, demand, desire, destroy, difference, different, direct, direction, discover, distance, double, enemy, England, enough, even, experience, family, famous, forest, garden, general, gentlemen, given, golden, happen, heaven, human, husband, hundred, idea, important, Indian, industry, interest, island, kitchen, listen, little, market, material, method, million, minute, moment, mountain, movement, nation, national, natural, necessary, notice, office, officer, often, open, opinion, people, period, pleasant, position, possible, practice, prepare, probably, problem, promise, public, purpose, question, reason, receive, regard, remain, remember, reply, report, require, result, return, season, second, service, settle, seven, several, single, special, station, success sudden, suddenly, supply, suppose, system, table, taken, thousand, today, together, tomorrow, travel, trouble, uncle, various, village, visit, woman, women.

Exercise One:

Find all the possible schwas in the following sentences. Then read them aloud.

1. It's five to two and we're late.
3. She can type 60 words per minute.
5. Pass the spoons and forks, please.
7. The President said that that was his policy.
9. Do you have to work late this evening?
11. I don't know, but we could ask them.
13. Where are my leather gloves?
15. There were seven or eight of them present.
17. The officers expressed several opinions.
19. Can you remember the directions there?
2. A table for four, please, around seven if possible.
4. George'll cut them into smaller pieces if you ask him.
6. I'm going to appeal this decision, you know.
8. You could've informed me about it.
10. Good-bye, see you later.
12. I thought it was really exciting.
14. Marilyn is taller than Charlotte.
16. Pierre is famous everywhere he goes.
18. The train services many villages around here.
20. There are a lot of mountains in British Columbia.

Exercise Two: Listen and Repeat

Repeat the phrases below. The underlined word will contain the schwa.

- | | | |
|-----------------------|---------------------------------|--------------------------|
| each <u>and</u> every | cold <u>as</u> ice | feel <u>at</u> ease |
| John <u>had</u> gone | That <u>would</u> be wonderful. | These <u>are</u> cheap. |
| three <u>or</u> four | Wait <u>for</u> your brother. | None <u>have</u> broken. |
| box <u>of</u> apples | cup <u>of</u> tea | we <u>can</u> stay |
| more <u>than</u> that | Get <u>some</u> sleep. | close <u>to</u> home |
| that <u>was</u> that | There <u>are</u> some. | ten <u>to</u> two. |

Exercise Three: Same or Different

You will hear two sentences or phrases. If they are the same, write S in the space provided; if they are different, write D.

1. _____ 2. _____ 3. _____ 4. _____ 5. _____

Exercise Four: Dictation

Listen to the sentences and write them.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____

Part Five: Questions for Answers Given

In this section, you will hear 5 answers. You will not hear the questions. Listen carefully to the answer, and then record the question in the space provided on your tape by using your drill/record button.

Example: _____? I'm fine, thanks.
(you record "How are you?" onto your tape BEFORE the answer.)

1. Did you...

2. Did you...

3.

4. Is _____ as cold as _____ ?

5.

Unit Nine Answer Key

Exercise 3: Same or Different?

1. He can tell. He can't tell. D
2. That'd be great. That'd be great. S
3. He saw each and every time. He saw each one every time. D
4. It's four to two. It's four-two-two. D
5. It's two to four. It's two to four. S

Exercise Four: Dictation

1. He can tell.
2. He can't tell.
3. It's four to two.
4. It's 4-2-2.
5. He saw each and every time.
6. He saw each one every time.

Exercise Five: Questions for Answers Given

1. Did you get some apples and oranges? Yes, I got some apples and oranges.
2. Did you think Sam would be late? No, I didn't think Sam would be late.
3. Can we do it? Yes, we can do it.
4. Is your drink as cold as ice? No, my drink isn't as cold as ice.
5. Is it ten to two? No, it's not ten to two.