What is schwa?

The symbol for schwa is ə

Schwa:

- is the most common sound in English!
- is pronounced "uh"
- is used for weak, unstressed syllables only
- is a neutral vowel- any vowel (a, e, i, o, u, y) or combination of vowels can be pronounced as schwa
- is the most easily & naturally produced vowel
- helps give English its unique sound & rhythm as a stress-timed language
- makes your pronunciation sound more natural

How do we pronounce schwa? Video 1

- Relax and drop your jaw slightly
- Relax your lips and cheeks
- Relax your tongue and press it down a little
- Put the tip of your tongue behind your bottom front teeth
- You pronounce schwa more quickly & softly than other vowels

💡 TIP: When you wake up, your tongue is in the right position to pronounce schwa!
Note:
- Schwa only occurs in **unstressed** syllables.
- Stressed syllables are always pronounced with full vowels.
- Unstressed syllables can be schwa or full vowels.

**When do we use schwa?  Audio 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Common Uses of Schwa</th>
<th>Examples</th>
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</table>
| In many of the weak, unstressed syllables in content words (nouns, verbs, adjectives & adverbs) | O = full, stressed vowel  
O = full, unstressed vowel  
ə = schwa (reduced, unstressed vowel sound)  
ə O divorce (2 syllables)  
ə O advice (2 syllables)  
ə O syringe  
O ə o harmony (3 syllables)  
ə O ə ə responsible (4 syllables)  
ə ə ə O ə developmental (5 syllables) |
| In many prefixes & suffixes | ə O success  
ə O ə together  
ə O before  
ə ə ə incredible  
ə ə ə O ə education |
### Common Uses of Schwa

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Often in function words (articles, prepositions, auxiliary verbs, pronouns &amp; linking words)</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ə 0 ə &lt;br&gt;the student &lt;br&gt;ə 0 ə 0 ə &lt;br&gt;a cup of coffee &lt;br&gt;0 ə 0 ə &lt;br&gt;She was hungry. &lt;br&gt;0 ə ə 0 ə &lt;br&gt;Give them some paper. &lt;br&gt;0 ə 0 ə &lt;br&gt;black and white</td>
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### What are some common problems with schwa pronunciation? Audio 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Common Problems</th>
<th>Examples</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Schwa can be hard to hear as it is spoken quickly &amp; softly: you have to listen carefully for it &amp; use grammar to help you.</td>
<td>ə ə ə ə &lt;br&gt;I'll see you at 5 o'clock. &lt;br&gt;ə ə ə ə &lt;br&gt;What are you doing tonight?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-native English speakers tend to pronounce unstressed vowels as full vowels when they should be pronounced as schwa.</td>
<td>0 ə ə &lt;br&gt;CORRECT: chemical &lt;br&gt;0 00 &lt;br&gt;INCORRECT: chemical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The pronunciation of the same vowel can change from a full vowel to schwa or from schwa to a full vowel depending on the word form</td>
<td>0 ə &lt;br&gt;record (noun) &lt;br&gt;ə 0 &lt;br&gt;record (verb) &lt;br&gt;ə ə ə ə &lt;br&gt;responsibility (6 syllable noun) &lt;br&gt;ə 0 ə ə &lt;br&gt;responsible (4 syllable adjective)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- 2-syllable words- same spelling, different word form &amp; word stress &lt;br&gt;- Different forms of the same word</td>
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Now, try the exercises.