
BBC LEARNING ENGLISH

5 days to improve your pronunciation

Day 3: Schwa



Schwa is the most common sound in the English language.

It occurs only in unstressed syllables and getting it correct helps spoken English to sound more natural and fluent.

Any vowel letter can be pronounced as schwa and the pronunciation of a vowel letter can change depending on whether the syllable in which it occurs is stressed or not.

The phonemic symbol for schwa is:

/ə/

Following are two exercises to help you learn about and practise schwa. The audio examples from the exercises can also be downloaded from www.bbclearningenglish.com

Exercise 1

Look at the words below and decide where in the word the schwa sound occurs.

Underline and/or write the schwa symbol over the correct part of the word.

The first one has been done for you.

Hint: One word has two examples of schwa. All the others have only one.

/ə/

d o c t o r

b a n a n a

t o m o r r o w

d i f f i c u l t

s u m m e r

l e v e l

p r o t e c t

s u r v i v e

p u p i l

t h e a t r e

m e a s u r e

w i z a r d

Exercise 2

In this exercise, look at these sentences and decide where the schwa sound occurs. It may occur more than once in each sentence. The minimum number of schwas in a sentence is 1, the maximum 7.

/ə/

1. It's for you.
2. It takes a lot of time
3. How about a cup of tea?
4. What are you doing tonight?
5. What time will you arrive at the party?
6. I was going to tell you.
7. The leisure centre is closed for a private function
8. The airport is not far from the capital city.
9. The book is about pronunciation.
10. We need more financial support.
11. You need to pay attention all the time.
12. It is a very thorough report.

Answers
Exercise 1

/ə/
doctor

/ə/
tomorrow

/ə/
summer

/ə/
protect

/ə/
pupil

/ə/
measure

/ə/ */ə/*
bananaa

/ə/
difficult

/ə/
level

/ə/
survive

/ə/
theatre

/ə/
wizard

Answers
Exercise 2

1. It's for you. /ə/
2. It takes a lot of time. /ə/ /ə/
3. How about a cup of tea? /ə/ /ə/ /ə/
4. What are you doing tonight? /ə/ /ə/
5. What time will you arrive at the party? /ə/ /ə/ /ə/
6. I was going to tell you. /ə/ /ə/
7. The leisure centre is closed for a private function. /ə/ /ə/ /ə/ /ə/ /ə/ /ə/ /ə/
8. The airport is not far from the capital city. /ə/ /ə/ /ə/
9. The book is about pronunciation. /ə/ /ə/ /ə/ /ə/
10. We need more financial support. /ə/ /ə/
11. You need to pay attention all the time. /ə/ /ə/ /ə/
12. It is a very thorough report. /ə/ /ə/