

Overcoming the Evils of the Schwa

When it comes to reading and spelling, the schwa is a little bit nasty. Teachers need to watch out for it.

For those who haven't met it before, the schwa is a very quick, unstressed, "nothing" vowel sound that occurs in many words. It gives spoken English its rhythm so it's important, but it's still mean.



In the **Speech Sound Set** (by *Pelican Talk*), the schwa is represented by *Emilio Remote*. It's the sound he makes as he sits on the couch, too bothered to utter very much more than a lazy "ugh". It occurs in every word that is three syllables and over. It's the first sound in "eleven" and the first vowel sound in "banana."

But the schwa often occurs in two syllable words as well. It's in "remote" and "control".

And before we go on to why the schwa is a little bit evil (it's the second vowel sound in "evil", by the way), let me tell you one more thing...

The schwa is often in single syllable words.

Yes, the schwa pops up in words like WAS, IS and AND but only when we're speaking in sentences. Take a listen to how you would say this sentence:

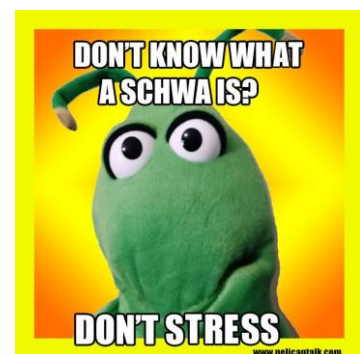
"THE DOG THOUGHT HE WAS A CAT."

We change the vowel sounds in THE, WAS, and A to the schwa sound as in a sentence such as this, they are unstressed.

Hopefully now you can recognise a schwa. I made you a little meme below to reinforce the point and on page 3 is a test, so that you can go and assess your colleagues and then impress them with your knowledge (maybe look at the answers first).

The evil part of the schwa is this: In the International Phonetic Alphabet, this quick little vowel sound is represented using an upside down e (see *the Evil Schwa above*) but in English spelling, it can be written using pretty much ANY combination of letters that ordinarily make a vowel sound. It can be written with a, e, i, o, u, ar, y, ua, or , er and so on. You get the idea.

This is why it messes with spelling and reading when students come to long words. This is why it is evil and nasty.



No longer can phonetic spellers and readers "get away with it" when it comes to multisyllabic words, thanks to the schwa. Those students who rely on "sounding-out" will need to expand in how they tackle words. (But alas, sounding-out is a vital step in learning to read and spell. It is something that needs to be mastered first or nothing else will follow easily or accurately).



Overcoming the Evils of the Schwa

When multisyllabic words become more common in the world of reading and spelling (Year Two and beyond), the schwa needs to be addressed. A student can - and should - be taught what the schwa is and how to use the following strategies.

READING WITH THE SCHWA

Try it and See

When we first tackle a long word, whether it be aloud or in silent reading, we might sound out each syllable using an even stress pattern. This makes us sound robotic, but quickly, if our vocabulary is strong, we should recognise the word that it's meant to be, and correct our pronunciation. The next time we see the word, we might remember where to place the evil schwa.

For example, first we might read MOUNTAINOUS as MOUNT- AIN- OUSE, or even MOUNTAIN- OUSE, recognise what it is meant to be, then correct it to MOUNT- ~~AIN~~- OUSE.

If we don't know the word – if it's not in our vocabulary - we may choose an incorrect spot to place the schwa. For example, I remember the first time I was asked to read the word PLETHORA aloud. I had no idea what it meant, so I had no idea how to say it. I pronounced it as PL- ~~ETH~~ - THOR – A and the teacher laughed at me. Now, I know it's PLETH- ~~OR~~ - RA.

Trial and error (along with feedback) is a normal part of learning and reinforces why listening to a student read aloud and engaging in rich verbal tasks are important into the senior years. Students need to HEAR how these long words are said. Try not to laugh.

Prefixes, Suffixes and the Schwa.

Usually, but not always, the prefixes and suffixes of multisyllabic words are pronounced using the schwa. The root (or base) of the word is usually stressed (no schwa). This means that students need to study MORPHOLOGY – base words, prefixes, suffixes and later roots.

Take a look at: destruction, remarkable, mistaken, dangerous, dreaded

Teach students how to recognise prefixes and suffixes in words they are reading and how to pronounce them.

SPELLING WITH THE SCHWA

Prefixes, Suffixes and the Schwa.

Again, students need to learn about MORPHOLOGY when it comes to spelling. This involves learning to recognise words that contain prefixes and suffixes. Don't forget to model authentic pronunciation of each prefix and suffix in your explicit teaching. DE- and RE- are rarely pronounced DEE and REE. -IST (dentist) and -OUS (famous) are not pronounced IST and OUSE. Most prefixes and suffixes contain the schwa sound, so use it when you teach them. Check out [Five Parts To Suffix and Prefix Teaching](#) on Pelican Talk's FREE page of the website.



Overcoming the Evils of the Schwa

Say It How You Say It, Say It How You Spell It.

This strategy will only work if students have mastered sounding out and are aware of common spelling options for vowels. The strategy works like this:

To learn the spelling of “VENOMOUS” a student looks at the word and says the word first how it is pronounced and then pronounces it as it is spelt “VEN – OM - OUSE”.

Read to Spell

These tips above should help tackle the spelling of syllables containing the schwa but READING LOTS is vital. Students who see words in their reading – that they have in their expressive vocabulary - will begin to develop a memory of the spelling.

ABOVE ALL – FOR READING AND SPELLING – TALK ABOUT THE SCHWA WITH STUDENTS, DEVELOP AN AWARENESS AND MAKE IT FUN! (FEEL FREE TO USE THE EMILIO REMOTE PICTURE TO “ILLUSTRATE” THE SOUND).

HOW GOOD IS YOUR SCHWA-DETECTOR?

A TEST FOR THOSE TEACHING YEAR 2 AND BEYOND.

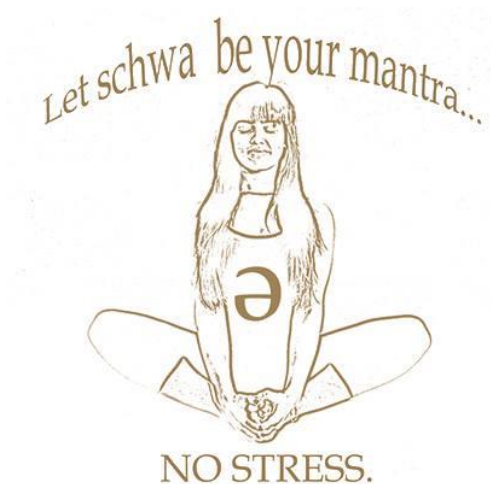
Find the schwa/s in each of the following words. Write the letter/s that spell the sound in each word.

. Note: Teachers with accents may vary with their answers. Email me with any queries!

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Examples: DEMANDING - e MOUNTAIN - ai DIVISION – i, io

1. Evil
2. Station
3. Underlined
4. Perilous
5. Remainder
6. Surprise
7. Soldiers
8. Teachers
9. Pirate
10. Opportunity
11. Suppose
12. Dramatic
13. Syllabic
14. Carnival



Answers: 1. I 2. IO 3. ER 4. I, OU 5. E 6. UR 7. IER 8. ER 9. A_E 10. OR 11. U 12. A 13. Y 14. I, A

