Schwa Accent Reduction

The symbol for the neutral schwa vowel sound is an upside down e. It is part of the International Phonetic Alphabet.

What is the neutral schwa vowel sound?

The neutral schwa vowel sound is the most frequently used vowel in English. Not producing the neutral schwa vowel sound is in part what gives those whose second language is English an accent or pronunciation that is different from those whose first language is English. Producing or not producing neutral schwa vowel sounds affects the quality of one’s pronunciation and how natural one sounds when speaking English. Therefore, it is very important that ESL speakers who are concerned about their pronunciation and accent learn to use this sound.

How do you pronounce the neutral schwa vowel sound?

The neutral schwa vowel sound is produced without tightening the throat and vocal cords, which is not the case for the other vowel sounds. To produce the neutral schwa vowel sound, your throat must be relaxed and the air passage must remain open. Your mouth will remain open slightly, as well, in order to produce this sound.

What does the neutral schwa vowel sound like?

The pitch of the neutral schwa vowel sound is low, and it is barely audible. It goes by so fast when someone is speaking that you may not even notice it’s there. For example, the indefinite article “a” is often - or almost always - pronounced as a neutral schwa vowel sound. Therefore, the untrained ear may not recognize the difference between these two sentences when spoken very quickly: 1) That’s a good book. 2) That’s good book. The neutral schwa vowel almost sounds like nothing. It’s something like a low-volume, low-pitch, very short grumble or grunt.

Schwa Part 2

The reason that schwa is so difficult is that it is not difficult at all. Effort is not required to produce schwa, and that’s why it requires so much practice for some people. Here’s another way to say it: The problem and difficulty with schwa is that it requires no effort. Therefore, schwa is so easy to pronounce that it's difficult to pronounce.

It's difficult to master because it requires no effort. It's also difficult to master because, with the exception of function word weak forms, it's not easy to know which syllables are schwa in content words. It > seems < to be unpredictable.

Additionally, schwa is difficult because where it may occur in content words, especially content words of three or more syllables, is not always easily predictable. However, sometimes it is predictable. Words that end with “ion” are examples of this. When the last syllable of a word is “ion”, that syllable is the neutral vowel sound, schwa. The vowel in some prefixes and suffixes is schwa. Examples are: con, com, re, de, pre, pre, ment, and less.