

The most common sound in English

Transcript

Louise: This is: The most common sound in English, with Louise and Barney.

Barney: Louise, do you know what the most common sound is in English?

Louise: It's a very short little vowel sound, Barney. It's pronounced 'uh'.

Barney: 'UH'! Really?

Louise: Yes, really. Here's its symbol on the pronunciation chart: 'uh'.

Barney: 'Uh'.

Louise: It's so common that it has a special name. We call it the schwa.

Barney: The schwa. OK, so why is it so common?

Louise: Well, to understand that, let's look at word stress again. Every English word with more than one syllable uses word stress as part of its pronunciation. This means usually one syllable is longer, louder and higher. So, all the others are shorter, quieter and lower.

Barney: OK, I know that. But where does the schwa fit in?

Louise: Ah. The shorter, quieter and lower syllables use 'weak' sounds. The schwa is the most common weak sound in English.

Barney: Can you give me an example?

Louise: OK. Let's start with our favourite word: station. It has two syllables. Listen carefully: sta.tion.

Barney: Sta.tion.

Louise: The stress is on the first syllable, so the second syllable has a weak sound. Listen again: sta.tion.

Barney: Sta. tion. I see. So, 'tion' has the schwa sound in the middle.

Louise: Yes, that's right.

Barney: Does it always come at the end of words?

Louise: No. It can be anywhere in a word but it must be an unstressed syllable. So, it was the last syllable in station but it's the first syllable in 'about'



- Barney: 'About'
- Louise: and the middle syllable in 'internet'.
- Barney: 'Internet'. OK. Are there any rules?
- Louise: Well, some common endings have this sound.
- Barney: Endings?
- Louise: Yes. Endings like the 'bull' sound at the end of 'table',
- Barney: 'Table'.
- Louise: The 'uh' sound at the end of 'learner'
- Barney: 'Learner'
- Louise: And the 'munt' sound at the end of 'Monument'.
- Barney: 'Monument'. Right, that seems easy. But I'm sure it's more complicated than that, isn't it?
- Louise: A little bit. If we make a word plural, it doesn't change the word stress.
- Barney: So, 'table' becomes 'tables' and 'learner' becomes 'learners'.
- Louise: That's right: 'tables' and 'learners'. But, sometimes in English, we add endings that move the word stress. For example, if we change 'monument' to an adjective, we get 'monumental'.
- Barney: 'Monumental'.
- Louise: Now, the word stress is in the middle and the sound is 'ment' instead of 'munt'. Listen to both words: monument, monumental.
- Barney: Monument, monumental. OK. So, does that mean it's important to check the pronunciation in a dictionary, then?
- Louise: Yes, it's always better to check in a dictionary.
- Barney: Can you give me some more examples of words with a schwa?
- Louise: OK, 'forget',
- Barney: 'Forget'
- Louise: 'teachers'
- Barney: 'Teachers'
- Louise: and 'London'.

Barney: 'London'. OK.

Louise: In fact, some words have more than one schwa.

Barney: Really?

Louise: Yes. For example, 'information',

Barney: 'Information'.

Louise: available'

Barney: 'Available'.

Louise: and 'government'.

Barney: 'Government'. Right. So, I now know how the schwa is used in English.

Louise: Well, we've seen how it's used in individual words and that's a good start. But, the schwa is used a lot with helper verbs such as: can and we'll look at that another time.

Barney: OK. That's great. Thanks, Louise.

Louise: You're very welcome. So, remember, a good way to improve your pronunciation of sounds is to record yourself on your smartphone. Try recording some of the words we've used here.

station	/ 'steɪ.ʃən/
about	/ə' baʊt/
internet	/ 'ɪn.tə.net/
table(s)	/ 'teɪ.bəl(z)/
learner(s)	/ 'lɜː.nər(z)/
monument	/ 'mɒn.jʊ.mənt/
monumental	/ ,mɒn.jʊ'men.təl/
forget	/fə' get/
teachers	/ 'tiː.tʃəz/
London	/ 'lʌn.dən/
information	/ ,ɪn.fə'meɪ.ʃən/
available	/ə'veɪ.lə.bəl/
government	/ 'gʌv. ən.mənt/



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