



Vowels and The Building Blocks of English

The vowels are tricky because your tongue has to be strong to coordinate the sounds. This video explains English vowels in the simplest, quickest way to improve your English pronunciation. English spelling is crazy because our words are collected from many languages. Many are derived from Greek and Latin. Even English speakers have trouble with spelling. The spelling of a word, can complicate the English pronunciation. Start listening carefully to mimic the sounds you hear.

I am going to simplify the important building blocks of English vowels and syllables. I'll give word examples to practice.

Definitions:

- **Vowels** (*a, e, i, o, u* and *y*) are important because every English word must have at least one vowel sound. Vowels can be *long, short* or a *diphthong* (2 sounds said simultaneously, *ow/ou, oi, i*).
- A **syllable** is a unit of sound (spoken language) that has **one vowel sound**. A word can consist of one syllable (*l, go, try, stay*) or it can have several syllables (*dic•tion•ar•y, 4 syllables*).
- **Each syllable** has **one and only one vowel sound**, regardless of how many actual vowels appear in the syllable. In English, a vowel can stand alone. It can make a syllable by itself.

3 Distinctive American English Vowel Sounds that give non-native speakers trouble. Let's start with these.

1. **SCHWA** ə "uh" Is the most common vowel sound in spoken English. Spelling does not help identify it. All five vowels (*a, e, i, o, u, y*) can be pronounced as the schwa "uh" sound. Examples: *about, item, edible, gallop, and circus*

"Uh" is a quick, **unstressed**, relaxed, neutral sound very close to the *short u* (*sun*). *Schwa* keeps the syllable count in the word, but replaces the original vowel sound with "uh".

The word *schwa* is from the Hebrew word *shewa*, meaning "no vowel" or literally "emptiness."

Wrong pronunciation of this 1 English sound can leave your speech strongly accented. Your brain "reflex" sees a vowel and automatically says it the way you learned it growing up with your alphabet.

How to make the *schwa* sound? Don't move your jaw, tongue or lips; just let the "uh" sound flow past your vocal chords.

3 Distinctive American English Vowel Sounds that give non-native speakers trouble.

CAPS are used for the stressed/higher note syllable

1. “uh” schwa - any unstressed vowel can sound like “uh” schwa

A	E	I	O	U	Y
<i>a</i>	the (thuh)	DE-ci-mal	BRO-ther	<i>u</i> -PON	sy-RINGE
<i>a</i> -GO	pre-SENT (verb)	BEAU-ti-ful	CAR-rot	<i>sup</i> -PLY	
<i>a</i> -BOUT	El-e-phant	CAP-i-tal	of-FEND	CIR-cus	
<i>a</i> -FRAID	TEL-e-phone	DIF-fi-cult	HAR-mo-ny	ME-di-um	
SO- <i>fa</i>	EL-e-va-tor	MED-i-cal			

2. ^uo – The short “^uo” sound in English is pronounced “ah.”

How to make the short “o” sound? Say “uh,” then drop your chin and say “ah” like *cop, stop, hot, problem, product*. This sound is spelled in different ways. I will read across.

on	off	not	pot	ball	tall
mom	talk	toss	dog	AW-ful	OF-fice
box	rock	sock	cop	PRO-duct	toss
OB-ject	PRO-ject	O-live	cough	O-scar	op-TOM-e-trist
AWE-some	ought	PRO-blem	PRO-gress	sauce	

3. ^uæ The short ^ua sound is a distinctive typical American sound, like a goat *baa baa sound*.

How to make the ^uæ sound? Say “ah” then move your lips into a smile. The sound comes out of the top of your face.

at	rat	hat	cat	sat	bag	gas
ask	back	laugh	math	AN-swer	AP-ple	A-gri-cul-ture
class	tack	calf (L is silent)	grass	AP-ple	AL-li-ga-tor	STRA-te-gy
pat	tax	fat	HAP-py	CAB-in	glass	half (L is silent)
am	pass	A-gile	stab	map	AC-cur-a-cy	VAL-ue

Ok, those are the 3 distinct American vowel sounds.

1. “uh” schwa
2. “ah” short ^uo
3. “æ” short ^ua

We will work on the others in the next lesson.