

HARD WORDS

If the Schwa Sound were a Letter 1

We know that there is no dedicated letter in the English alphabet to represent the schwa sound, despite it being the most common sound in English. What would a text look like if such a letter did exist? In the following text – from *Great Expectations* (1861) by Charles Dickens, via gutenberg.org – the schwa sound is represented by the symbol @:

Th@ marsh@s w@ just @ long black horizont@l line then, @s I stopped t@ look aft@ him; @nd th@ riv@ w@s just @noth@ horizont@l line, not nearly so broad nor yet so black; @nd th@ sky w@s just @ row @f long angry red lines @nd dense black lines int@mixed. On the edge @f th@ riv@ I c@d faintly make out the only two black things in all th@ prospect th@t seemed t@ be standing upright; one @f these w@s th@ beac@n by which th@ sail@s steered,—like @n unhooped cask @pon @ pole,— @n ugly thing when y@ w@ near it; the oth@, @ gibb@t, with s@me chains hanging t@ it which h@d once held @ pir@te. Th@ man w@s limping on t@wards this latt@, @s if he w@ th@ pir@te come t@ life, @nd come down, @nd going back t@ hook himself up @gain. It gave me @ terrib@le turn when I thought so; @nd @s I saw th@ catt@le lifting their heads t@ gaze aft@ him, I wond@d wheth@ they thought so too. I looked all round f@ th@ horrib@le young man, @nd c@d see no signs @f him. But now I w@s fright@ned @gain, @nd ran home without stopping.

The marshes were just a long black horizontal line then, as I stopped to look after him; and the river was just another horizontal line, not nearly so broad nor yet so black; and the sky was just a row of long angry red lines and dense black lines intermixed. On the edge of the river I could faintly make out the only two black things in all the prospect that seemed to be standing upright; one of these was the beacon by which the sailors steered,—like an unhooped cask upon a pole,—an ugly thing when you were near it; the other, a gibbet, with some chains hanging to it which had once held a pirate. The man was limping on towards this latter, as if he were the pirate come to life, and come down, and going back to hook himself up again. It gave me a terrible turn when I thought so; and as I saw the cattle lifting their heads to gaze after him, I wondered whether they thought so too. I looked all round for the horrible young man, and could see no signs of him. But now I was frightened again, and ran home without stopping.

The text has 807 letters and the @ appears 82 times, so around 10% of the letters are the schwa sound. The schwa appears in function words, suffixes, prefixes, mid-word, and mid-consonant:

55 Function Words:	16 Suffixes:	5 Prefixes:	3 Mid-Word:	3 Mid-Consonants:
11 – the	8 – -er	3 – a-	1 – -e-	2 – b / l
8 – and	2 – -al	1 – to-	1 – -er-	1 – t / l
6 – a	2 – -ate	1 – u-	1 – -ere-	
6 – to	1 – -es			
6 – was	1 – -et			
4 – of	1 – -on			
3 – as	1 – -or			
2 – could				
2 – on				
2 – were				
1 – for				
1 – had				
1 – some				
1 – that				
1 – you				

Tip: take a little time to note the places in a text where the schwa is likely to appear. In function words – with the most common here being ‘the’ + ‘and’ – in suffixes, with ‘-er’ by far the most common, then to a much lesser degree in prefixes, mid-word, and mid-consonant. Learn the spellings that represent schwa sounds. Remember that a schwa can be embedded in ‘bl’, ‘tl’, and other con. + l endings.