

HARD WORDS

If the Schwa Sound were a Letter 2

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 *Howards End* (1910) by E. M. Forster, via gutenberg.org – the schwa sound is represented by the symbol @:

Dear@st Meg,

I @m having @ glorious time. I like th@m all. Mrs. Wilcox, if quiet@ th@n in Germ@ny, is sweet@ th@n ev@, @nd I nev@ saw anything like h@ steady @nselfishn@ss, @nd th@ best @f it is th@t the oth@s do not take @dvantage @f her. They @ th@ very happiest, jolliest fam@ly th@t y@ c@n imagine. I do really feel th@t we @ making friends. Th@ fun @f it is th@t they think me @ nood@le, @nd say so--@t least Mr. Wilcox does--@nd when th@t happ@ns, @nd one doesn@t mind, it's @ pretty sure test, isn@t it? He says th@ most horrid things @bout women's suffrage so nicely, @nd when I said I believed in equal@ty he just fold@d his arms @nd gave me such @ setting down @s I've nev@ had. Meg, shall we ev@ learn t@ talk less? I nev@ felt so @shamed @f myself in my life. I c@dn@t point t@ @ time when men h@d been equ@l, nor ev@n t@ @ time when th@ wish t@ be equ@l h@d made th@m happier in oth@ ways. I c@dn@t say @ word. I h@d just picked up th@ not@n th@t equal@ty is good fr@m s@me book--prob@bly fr@m poetry, @ you. Anyhow, it's been knocked into piec@s, @nd, like all peop@le who @ really strong, Mr. Wilcox did it without hurting me.

Dearest Meg,

I am having a glorious time. I like them all. Mrs. Wilcox, if quieter than in Germany, is sweeter than ever, and I never saw anything like her steady unselfishness, and the best of it is that the others do not take advantage of her. They are the very happiest, jolliest family that you can imagine. I do really feel that we are making friends. The fun of it is that they think me a noodle, and say so--at least Mr. Wilcox does--and when that happens, and one doesn't mind, it's a pretty sure test, isn't it? He says the most horrid things about women's suffrage so nicely, and when I said I believed in equality he just folded his arms and gave me such a setting down as I've never had. Meg, shall we ever learn to talk less? I never felt so ashamed of myself in my life. I couldn't point to a time when men had been equal, nor even to a time when the wish to be equal had made them happier in other ways. I couldn't say a word. I had just picked up the notion that equality is good from some book--probably from poetry, or you. Anyhow, it's been knocked into pieces, and, like all people who are really strong, Mr. Wilcox did it without hurting me.

The text has 890 letters and the @ appears 90 times, so around 10% of the letters are the schwa sound. The schwa appears in function words, suffixes, prefixes, and mid-consonant:

57 Function Words:	23 Suffixes:	4 Prefixes:	0 Mid-Word:	6 Mid-Consonants:
8 – and	9 – -er	2 – a-		4 – n / t (n't)
7 – a	2 – -en	1 – ad-		1 – d / l
6 – that	2 – -ity	1 – un-		1 – p / l
6 – the	2 – -ual			
4 – of	1 – -ably			
4 – to	1 – -any			
3 – are	1 – -ed			
3 – had	1 – -es			
2 – could-	1 – -est			
2 – from	1 – -ily			
2 – than	1 – -ness			
2 – them	1 – -tion			
1 – am				
1 – as				
1 – at				
1 – can				
1 – her				
1 – or				
1 – some				
1 – you				

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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 ‘and’ + ‘a’ – 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 ‘dl’, ‘pl’, and other con. + l endings, as well as in the ‘n’t’ spelling in negative auxiliary verbs.