

# HARD WORDS

## What Happens in Weak Syllables?

**1.** We have identified the strong stressed vowel sound, which is our most important goal, so let's have a look at what happens in the other syllables in a word – the **weak syllables**. The short answer is that you will probably see **schwa sounds**, or a mix of schwa, **short i sound** (if the letter 'i' is in a weak syllable), or **short ii sound** (if the word ends with '-y' or '-ey'). There are no schwas in one-syllable content words, e.g. 'sheep', or two-syllable compound nouns, which are two one-syllable words put together and always stressed on the first, e.g. 'popcorn'.

**The schwa** is found in common suffixes like: -al, -er, -ful, -le, -less, -ness, -ous, -sion, -tain, -tion, -ure

**Short i** is found in common suffixes like: -age, -ic, -ing, -ism, -ist, -ive, -sis, -tis

**Short ii** is found in common suffixes like: -cy, -ey, -ie, -ies, -ly, -ry, -ty, -y

**Two of these sounds are found in 2-syllable suffixes:** -able, -ably, -ative, -ergy, -ible, -ical, -ity, -omy

**2.** The schwa sound [\[LINK\]](#) is the most common sound in English, but unfortunately there is no dedicated letter in the alphabet for the schwa. Apart from suffixes, it is also commonly found in weak-stressed function words, like 'the', 'a', 'for', and 'to' [\[LINK\]](#) [\[LINK\]](#). We have to use other vowel letters and combinations of vowel letters to represent the schwa. For example, in 'label' the letter 'e' is the schwa, while in 'again' the first letter 'a' is the schwa. There are many other two-syllable words with 'a' representing a schwa sound in the first [\[LINK\]](#). Any vowel letter can represent the schwa; there are also many combinations of letters that represent the schwa (Lesson 4). We can learn patterns, e.g. the vowel letters in suffixes are often schwas (see above), while 'er' and 'or' are usually schwas. Sometimes the schwa appears *between* two letters: when two consonant sounds meet the schwa is produced naturally, e.g. in the suffix '-able'. We can't say 'bl' without making a schwa sound in the middle.

**3.** If you **do not** use schwa sounds, perhaps because you do not know about them, then you are probably pronouncing **far too many strong vowel sounds** (Lesson 4). If you do this regularly, your listeners will have a hard time following you, because they need to be able to hear the strong vowel sounds in a sentence clearly – the sound spine [\[LINK\]](#).

**4.** In an analysis of the 80 words in this course (minus 13 one-syllable words and function word 'the'), 35 (53%) of the words have **only** schwa sounds in the weak syllables, while 4 (6%) have only ii, and 2 (3%) have only i. A reminder that the schwa sound is our **default vowel sound** in weak syllables.

**5.** At times we find a **strong vowel sound** (svs) in a weak syllable. For example, we hear the diphthong iy in common suffixes like: -eal, -ean, -eous, -ia, -ial, -iant, -iar, -ient, -ier, -ion, -ior, -ious, -ium

5 words from our course (7%) had only iy in the weak syllables, so not a large number. More interestingly, there were 7 words (11%) with other strong vowel sounds in the weak syllables. They are:

aeroplane (ei)  
automatic (or)

guarantee (a)  
hotel (eu)

menu (oo)  
restaurant (o)

unfortunately (u)

If you do come across a svs, do not put any stress on it. Pronounce it quickly and softly, like the other weak syllables. There can be only ONE strong stressed vowel sound per content word.

**6.** **Prefixes** are not usually stressed in English, and may well contain a schwa sound, especially in two-syllable words that are stressed on the second syllable, e.g. **amuse**, **control**, **perform**, **pronounce**, etc. [\[LINK\]](#) [\[LINK\]](#).