

## Spelling tips 6 – The Indeterminate Vowel Sound

There is a sound in English for which there is no letter and this causes enormous confusion. It is the indeterminate sound, pronounced 'uh' and known to linguists as the schwa. It has no letter equivalent because it is a reduction in speech that happens to many vowels. When they occur in an unstressed position they often become 'uh'.

So, for example, lots of endings of words with more than one syllable are reduced in this way. The final *-er* in *butter*; the final *-or* in *doctor*, and *-our* in *colour*; the final *-ous* in *famous*; the final *-al* in *rival*. But it is not just final syllables that are reduced. It can happen to any unstressed syllable anywhere.

The solution in learning to spell has often been to give the word an artificial kind of pronunciation that gives every vowel its full quality. So instead of saying *reg-yuh-late* we tuck away a memory of *reg-yooh-late* to remind us that there is a *u* in the middle.

But strategies vary. Some are based on spelling rather than pronunciation. It may help you to remember that *adequate* has the word *equate* in it. If your offering has been equated with someone else's, then it is adequate.

Here are some more words with tricky 'uh' sounds and some ways to remember the correct spelling:

**allergy:** The middle vowel sound is spelt *er*. This will be easier to remember if you think about the pronunciation of the adjective **allergic** where you can hear the 'er' sound.

**aqueduct:** There is an *e* spelling for the middle vowel sound. The spelling of **aqueduct** will be easier if you see that it is made up of *aqua* (the Latin word for 'water'), with its final *a* changed to an *e*, and *duct* (something for carrying a liquid). You have *ducts* in your eyes which do just that -- carry water in the form of tears.

**artichoke:** The middle vowel sound is spelt *i*. You can think of this as joining together two familiar words, *art* and *choke*, even though these are not related to the meaning of **artichoke**.

**castanets:** The middle vowel sound is spelt with an *a*. Remember that it has a complete word either side of it -- *cast* and *nets* -- though these don't have anything to do with the meaning of **castanets**.

**contradict:** The middle vowel sound is spelt as an *a*. It might help if you see that **contradict** is made up of *contra* (the Latin word for 'against' which is used in English as a prefix) and *dict* (which is a form of the Latin word for 'speak' or 'say').

**cosmopolitan:** The second vowel sound is spelt as an *o*. This will be easier to remember if you think of the word *cosmos* (meaning 'the world' or 'the universe') and can see that **cosmopolitan** begins with a shortened form of this word. Also remember that the last part is spelt *an* (not *en*).

**discipline:** Remember that the end is spelt *ine*. You might think of the word *line* -- after all, **discipline** is meant to keep you in line!

**exasperate:** The vowel sound between the *p* and the *r* is spelt with an *e*. Remembering this is the most **exasperating** thing about this word. Rap it out as *ex + as + per + ate*.

**kilogram:** The middle vowel sound is spelt *o*. Learn the prefix *kilo-* (which means 'thousand') and you will be able to spell not only **kilogram** but other words which include it, such as *kilometre*.

**kindergarten:** The middle vowel sound is spelt *er*. This is because this part of the word is *kinder*, the German word for 'children'. Added to it is *garten*, the German word for 'garden'. Don't get confused and put a *d* in place of the *t*.

**marzipan:** The middle vowel sound is spelt *i* (you will notice it makes the word *zip* inside the word **marzipan**).

**microscope:** The middle vowel sound is spelt *o*. It will help if you see that this is part of the prefix *micro-*. This prefix has two meanings -- 'very small' or 'magnifying or increasing' -- but it is the second meaning that is used here. The stem of the word, *scope*, is used in the names of instruments used for viewing, like this word and others like *telescope*. Both of the word parts come from Greek.

**vinegar:** The middle vowel sound is spelt *e*. You can remember this by thinking of a *vine* -- after all, **vinegar** comes from grapes which grow on a *vine*.

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