

Keys to Spelling: Sounds and Syllables



A Spelling Workbook for English Language Learners

Beginning to Intermediate Level

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To the Student

Keys to Spelling: Sounds and Syllables was written to help you relate English vowel sounds to their spellings. Each lesson will focus on one vowel sound and include the following practices.

Test Yourself. Find out how much you know before you begin with an informal self-test.

Distinguish the Sound. Practice hearing the keyword sound as a unique sound. A native speaker or an online dictionary will be needed to give you accurate sound samples.

Identify the Sound. Circle the pictures of words that have the keyword vowel sound.

Observe Common Spelling Patterns. Recognize the grouping of words in each pattern box. Review the pronunciation of each word in the pattern. Learn why a particular spelling is used. Notice (1) where the keyword sound occurs in the word, (2) how surrounding letters affect the spelling, and (3) whether other silent letters such as *e*, *g*, or *h*, are part of the spelling.

Note Less Common Spelling Patterns. Understand that of 80% or more of the word spellings in English follow common patterns. A few others follow less common patterns. And curiously, the words with the most uncommon spellings are the words most often used (*e.g.*, *was*, *does*, *goes*, *says*, *woman*, *the*, *again*, *Wednesday*, *tomorrow*, *tonight*, *February*, *walk*).

Other words that do not follow predictable spelling patterns are:

- words of foreign origin from Arabic, Greek, Latin, German, Dutch, Chinese and African languages (*e.g.*, *alcohol*, *chemistry*, *government*, *night*, *sugar*, *jazz*, *banana*, *typhoon*).
- words borrowed with English adapted pronunciation (*e.g.*, *matinee*, *yankee*, *snoop*, *lasso*, *ranch*, *bureau*, *ketchup*)
- words whose spelling remained the same but the pronunciation changed over time (*e.g.*, *again*, *great*, *done*, *gone*, *love*, *who*, *blood*, *to*, *book*, *people*, *sword*).

Take a moment to read word histories and origins. Spellings will make more sense and be easier to remember. Printed and online dictionaries include this information. (dictionary.com)

Spell the Word. Apply what you learned about the spelling patterns. Decide which spelling to use by observing (1) where the sound occurs in the word, and (2) what the surrounding letters are. *Some words will be new to you.* Take the opportunity to learn new words from their use in context. Make note of new vocabulary words in the end-of-the-lesson word list.

Complete the Sentence or Paragraph. Practice completing the spellings for words in larger contexts. Check your ability to apply general rules for the use of a particular spelling pattern.

Find the Sound. Read a paragraph and identify words with the keyword sound.

Find and Correct. Read and edit incorrectly spelled words in the paragraph.

Write. Apply your grammar and vocabulary skills to writing a short description of a picture.

Test Yourself. Check your progress—what you know after completing the lesson.

Continue Learning. Do all fifteen lessons—including the final lesson

Commonly Misspelled Words. Keep a list of difficult-to-spell or new vocabulary words as you proceed.

To the Teacher

This workbook was written to fill gaps in learning materials. Basic skills such as spelling and handwriting are often expected of language learners but are not specifically taught to them. These practices were originally developed to help speakers of languages with other sound systems and scripts (Arabic, Vietnamese, Chinese) but may also be useful for native speakers who need some additional help in relating how a word sounds to how a word is spelled.

Before beginning these lessons, introduce **Stressed vs. Unstressed Syllables**. Lessons 1–13 focus on vowel sounds in stressed syllables. Lesson 14 focuses on unstressed syllables and "schwa" (uh/ih) with some strategies for spelling these "relaxed", mid-mouth vowel sounds.

Pre and post tests are included to help students compare what they know before a lesson to what they have learned after a lesson. These are not intended to be used as formal assessments.

Hear It sections require a native speaker to model the pronunciation of minimal word pairs, in which only the vowel sound differs. Use these pairs to determine whether or not the student hears the keyword sound distinctly, different from other similar sounds. Minimal pairs are most effective when pronounced with even intonation as in [*sheep*→, *ship*→] *not* a sing-song effect [*sheep* ↗, *ship* ↘].

Spelling Patterns are presented as groupings of words spelled in predictable ways. Introduce common patterns before bringing up less common patterns and exceptions.

Fill-in practices are suitable for students who have limited knowledge of vocabulary.

Some or many of the words will be new to the students. Encourage students to guess meanings from context whenever possible. Some words will include definitions; others will need to be looked up in a dictionary. Encourage your students to be active participants in their learning, and to keep a list of new and difficult-to-spell words. Students can make note and keep track of words with difficult-to-remember spellings in the word lists at the end of the lessons.

Writing practices are suitable for students who are more advanced and able to express themselves well enough to describe pictures in sentences.

A **Word List** for the keyword sound is located at the end of each lesson. Encourage students to make note of words that are personally challenging to spell. These words can be added later to the "Commonly Misspelled Word List" in Lesson 15.

Answers are provided at the end of each lesson so that students can check their own work. This workbook can be used in class or as supplemental (self-study) material.

Online Dictionaries (with audio pronunciation and word origins)

Dictionary: www.dictionary.com

Longman Dictionary Online: www.ldoceonline.com

Merriam-Webster: www.merriam-webster.com

International Phonetic Alphabet Keyboard

Online resource: westonruter.github.io/ipa-chart/keyboard/

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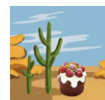
Lesson 13 /aʊ/ ow as in **cow**



Lesson 14 /ə/ "uh" and /ɪ/ "ih"



Lesson 15 Commonly Misspelled



Sound Symbols for Stressed Vowels

LONG VOWELS

/eɪ/ **cake** 

← a →

a →

/i/ **tea** 

← e →

/aɪ/ **pie** 

← i →

/oʊ/ **home** 

← o →

/u/ **blue** 

← u →

DIPHTHONGS

/ɔɪ/ **toys** 

SHORT VOWELS

/æ/ **cat** 

/ɑ/ **mama** 

/ɛ/ **bed** 


/ɪ/ **pig** 

/ɒ/-/ɔ/ **hotdog** 

u → /ʊ/ **book** 

/ʌ/ **sun** 

UNSTRESSED SYLLABLES

/ə/ **ḅa·na·na** 
/bə'næn ə/

/ər/ **wa·ter** 
/'wɔ tər/

Stressed vs. Unstressed Syllables

The stress we place on syllables in words creates rhythm and affects meaning in English.

The vowel of a **stressed syllable** has a slightly longer length and is pronounced more precisely.

The vowel of an **unstressed syllable** has a shorter length and is pronounced less precisely. The pronunciation of vowels in unstressed syllables is often described as "reduced" or "relaxed" and is represented as "uh" /ə/ *schwa* (mid-central-mouth) or "ih" /ɪ/ (mid-high-mouth).

English writing does not mark stress. In this text, syllable stress will be marked as follows:

Stressed syllables will be marked in **bold** text [**ba**na**na**].

An **unstressed syllable** will be underlined [banana] when it is the focus of the lesson. (L14)

Syllable division will be marked with a dot • [ba·na·na].

Compound word division will be marked with a hyphen - [pine-ap·ple].

Phonetic notation will be used as needed /bə'næ nə/ *International Phonetic Alphabet* (IPA).

Three levels of stress are represented in this text:

- **unstressed** (weak) marks an unstressed syllable in a word, or a word carrying minor importance or meaning in a phrase or sentence.
- **secondary stress** (stronger) marks a stressed syllable in the word.
- **primary stress** (strongest) marks a word that has importance or emphasis placed on it.

The stress we place on syllables in words creates an alternating rhythm (↗ ↘ ↗ ↘).

ap·ple	ba·na·na	pine-ap·ple	a·vo·ca·do	com·mu·ni·ca·tion
/'æp·əl/	/bə'næ·nə/	/'paɪ·,næp·əl/	/,æv ə'kɑ doʊ/	/kə'mju ni'keɪʃən /
● ●	● ● ●	● ● ●	● ● ● ●	● ● ● ● ●

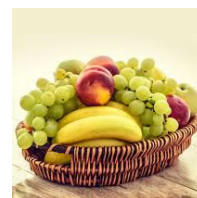
The stress we place on a syllable in a word can affect meaning—change the word form. Compare **pre**-sent (n.) to pre-**sent** (v.) and **ob**-ject (n.) to ob-**ject** (v.)

The stress we place on a word in a sentence is emphasis, which draws attention to the importance of the word.

Normal stress — speaker does not place special emphasis on a word.

Take an **apple** from the **basket** in the **kitchen**.

● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ●



Emphasis — speaker places importance on or draws focus to a particular word.

Take an **apple** from the **basket** not a peach.

● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ●

Take an **apple** from the **basket** not the bowl.

● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ●

See Lesson 14 "schwa" for practice with the spelling of vowels in unstressed syllables.