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 kilometre 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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