

# calcu/ʊ/late and calcu/ə/late

## Vowels in unstressed syllables in content words

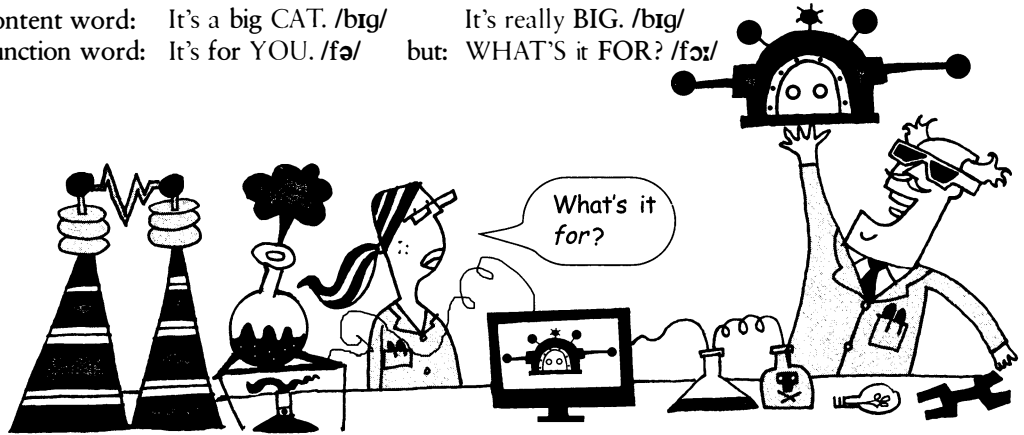
A

B30. Vowels in *stressed* syllables of a content word are usually pronounced in the same way whether they are made prominent or not (see also Unit 10):

A: Is she a DOCTOR? /dɒktə/  
 B: NO, her SISTEr's a doctor. /dɒktə/

The vowel in a one-syllable content word doesn't change its pronunciation, although the vowel in a one-syllable function word can (see Unit 21):

content word: It's a big CAT. /bɪg/      It's really BIG. /bɪg/  
 function word: It's for YOU. /fə/      but: WHAT'S it FOR? /fɔː/



B

B31

Important  
for listening

However, the vowels in *unstressed* syllables of a content word can vary a lot. In slow, careful speech the vowel may have its full form, but in normal speech these vowels are often reduced to /ə/ (or sometimes /ɪ/). For example, 'calendar' can be said /kælɪndə/ or /kæləndə/; the second vowel varies from /ɪ/ to /ə/. Here are some more words which have variable vowels in unstressed syllables.

/æ/ to /ə/	/ʊ/ to /ə/	/əʊ/ to /ə/	/ɒ/ to /ə/
accelerate	calculate	omit	comparison
accept	documentary	proclaim	complain
cassette	regular	microcosm	concise
/ɔː/ to /ə/	/aɪ/ to /ə/ or /ɪ/	/ɪ/ to /ə/	Notice also the common ending <i>-ity</i> : /ɪti/ to /əti/
forbid	director	begin	ability    scarcity
forever	dilemma	hopeless	density    security
corridor	financial	effective	



It is not essential to reduce these vowels in your own speech in order to be understood, although reduced vowels usually sound more natural and fluent.

C

B32

Important  
for listening

In some words, when an unstressed syllable *ending* in a vowel is followed by another unstressed syllable *beginning* with a vowel, the two syllables may merge into one. This only happens in normal speech; in slow, careful speech both syllables are said:

slow speech:      casual /kæʒ.ju.əl/ = three syllables  
 normal speech:    casual /kæʒ.jəl/ = two syllables

Other words like this include:

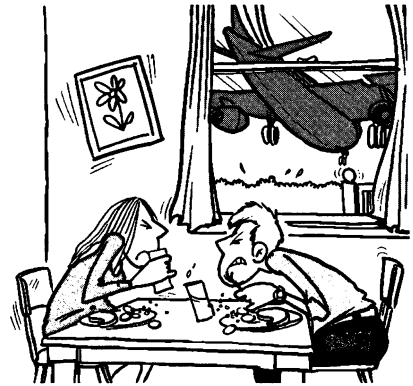
virtual, actual, adverbial, colonial, studious, obedient, ingredient, gradient

## Exercises

- 23.1** Listen and compare the pronunciation of these words, first said slowly and carefully, and then used in normal speech. In which words does the pronunciation of the highlighted vowel sound change (write C), and in which is there no change (write NC)? (Some of these words are given in B opposite.)

B33

EXAMPLES	diagram	I didn't understand the diagram. NC
	accept	I just couldn't accept their decision. C (accept /æ/ – accept /ə/)
1	musician	She's a musician in an orchestra.
2	director	He's a company director.
3	December	Her birthday's in December.
4	minute (= tiny)	The painting was minute.
5	ambulance	The ambulance came immediately.
6	cricket	I play cricket every weekend.
7	hotel	We stayed in a smart hotel.
8	vocabulary	I'm terrible at learning vocabulary.
9	Mongolia	She's from Mongolia.
10	corridor	Her office is across the corridor.
11	consent	He gave his consent.
12	airport	We live near the airport.



Now listen again and repeat, first the words alone and then the sentences with the words in context.

- 23.2** You will hear short definitions. After each definition, press 'pause', choose an answer from the box and say it aloud. (Use slow, careful speech.) When you press 'play' again you will hear the correct answer.

B34

adverbial      celebrity      colonial      curiosity      furious      gravity  
~~infinity~~      ingredient      majority      studios      virtual

EXAMPLE You hear Time that has no end.  
 You say infinity /ɪn'fɪnɪti/

- 23.3** Use the words from exercise 23.2 to complete these sentences.

EXAMPLE The graph goes from zero to infinity. (/ɪn'fɪnɪti/)

- I was late again and my boss was ..... with me.
- He was a ..... boy who was happiest when he was reading.
- Since he appeared on TV he's become a bit of a .....
- The country used to be an important ..... power.
- The ..... of people didn't bother to vote in the election.
- I want you to underline the ..... in each sentence.
- Honey's the main ..... in the sauce.
- Just out of ....., how old are your sisters?
- It seemed to defy the laws of .....
- Because of the snow, we were ..... prisoners in our own home.

B35

Now say the sentences aloud (with the words you have written pronounced as in normal speech). Then listen and check your answers.

**Follow up:** Think about how you pronounce the words listed in B opposite. Which of the vowels indicated for the unstressed syllable do you normally use?