



Word Reductions: Function Words

Spoken English has a rhythm to it: Stressed syllables are said longer, louder, and with higher pitch, and unstressed syllables are shorter, softer, and at a lower pitch. It is this back-and-forth between stressed syllables and unstressed syllables that gives English its unique rhythm and flow.

When syllables are unstressed, English speakers will sometimes reduce the vowel pronunciation in that word. For example, the word *content* can be both a noun (like in, *My website has a lot of good content*) and an adjective (like in, *She was very content with her life*).

But *content* is pronounced differently in these two sentences. When *content* is a noun, the stress is on the first syllable, and that first syllable receives the full pronunciation: **CON**-tent /**kən**-tɛnt/.

When *content* is an adjective, the stress shifts to the second syllable, and that now unstressed first syllable is reduced to the schwa: con-**TENT** /kən-**tɛnt**/. This type of vowel reduction in unstressed syllables is very common in spoken English. But it doesn't only happen within syllables - it also happens with entire words.

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In normal English intonation, the types of words that are usually reduced are called **function words**. Function words carry the grammar in a sentence. Here's a chart that shows the most common categories of function words.

UNSTRESSED - function words (grammar)
Articles (a, an, the)
Conjunctions (and, but, so)
Prepositions (on, off, under)
Pronouns (I, you, him, her)
Helping verbs (am, be, do, can)



Practice Words:

Let's practice some common word reductions in sentences. (Note: When function words are said by themselves as a single word, native speakers will usually pronounce the full version of the word. Reductions happen once the function word is in a phrase or sentence.)

Sentence	Function Words	Stress Pattern	Word Reduction
I want to go.	I, to	i wanna GO. or i WANT to GO.	want to → "wanna" /wanə/ or to → "tuh" /tə/
Let's take a walk.	let's, a	let's TAKE a WALK.	a → "uh" /ə/
He can do it.	he, can, it	he can DO it.	can → "kn" /kn/
Give it to her.	it, her	GIVE it TO her.	it → "ut" /ət/ her → "er" /ə/
He would have helped if he could.	he, would, have, if, he, could	he woulda HELPED if he COULD.	would have → "wuda" /wʊdə/ he → "e" /i/

Thanks for reading! Make sure you watch the video that goes along with this resource ([Word Reductions in American English: Function Words](#)) and contact me if you have any questions! Happy studying!

Julie

julie@sandiegovoiceandaccent.com

Free, printable resource from San Diego Voice and Accent
julie@sandiegovoiceandaccent.com

530-713-3211

