

## 2.2 Vowels in Unstressed Syllables

For the most part, the vowels in unstressed syllables are uniformly represented in any given word root and in the inflectional suffixes. (Diphthongal nuclei do not occur in unstressed syllables.) The fact that some variation does occur in spelling of the unstressed vowels (within single texts) together with the increasing frequency of this kind of spelling variation in the later texts indicate that the neutral vowel /ə/ was developing within the language as an alternative to any simple vowel. (The symbol ə is called 'schwa.')

The subsequent history of English, of course, confirms this inference.

For the learning of Old English it is better to regard the vowels in unstressed syllables as identical phonetically to vowels with the same spelling in stressed syllables. They must have been virtually identical in the earlier period of West Saxon Old English, as the consistency of spelling them implies, and many of the texts of the tenth and early eleventh centuries were written under the conservative influence of the earlier models for the writing of English. But particularly, if the second syllable of **winde** and **winda** or of **gōde** and **gōda** (and countless others) are committed to one's audile memory as undifferentiated [ə], on the model of Modern English, it will be much more difficult to learn some fundamental inflectional distinctions that were in fact maintained throughout most of the period of Old English.