

WORD STRESS

In this chapter you will learn the rules of stressing words within sentences. If you stress the right words your speech will have a natural rhythm and melody that is familiar to native speakers. The stress and reduction of words creates the music of English.

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If your sentences are difficult to understand, it could be that you are not stressing *any* words, or else that you are stressing the *wrong* words. If you are not emphasizing any words, your speech will sound flat and monotone, and the listener will not know where one word begins and another ends. If you are stressing the wrong words, your speech will sound very foreign. For example, saying "I'll see you later." and "Have a nice day." sounds foreign to the American ear. Try changing the word stress and say: "I'll see you **later**." and "Have a nice **day**." Native speakers will recognize a familiar speech pattern this time and will be more likely to understand what you said, even if you are speaking quickly. So, if you have a tendency to speak too fast, learning to speak with correct word stress will automatically force you to slow down.

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It's important to note that sometimes when the word stress changes, the meaning also changes. For example:

"I went to the white house."

OR

"I went to the White House."

The first example describes a house that is white, while the second one is name of the place where the US President lives. Let's now learn some rules of word stress.

Compound Nouns

Compound nouns are two individual words that carry one meaning. They are part of one unit and have become a set phrase. Usually a compound noun consists of two nouns such as *credit + card*. In compound nouns, the first word is stressed, and the two words are said together, with no pausing in between the words. (Note that compound nouns can be written either as a single word or as two separate words.)

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Compound Nouns for Practice

Stress the first word and pronounce the two words as one.

- | | | | |
|-------------------|---------------|-----------------|--------------|
| 1. parking lot | 5. book shelf | 9. credit card | 13. football |
| 2. parking ticket | 6. book cover | 10. post card | 14. baseball |
| 3. parking meter | 7. book store | 11. report card | 15. ballpark |
| 4. parking space | 8. bookmark | 12. green card | 16. ballroom |

More Compound Noun Practice

Stress the first word in these compound nouns *within* compound nouns.

- | | |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| 1. cell phone number | 5. basketball coach |
| 2. football game | 6. blood pressure medicine |
| 3. bedroom furniture | 7. website address |
| 4. high school girl | 8. parking lot attendant |



Words for Practice

These professions are all examples of compound nouns.

- | | |
|-----------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| 1. taxi driver | 6. research scientist |
| 2. computer programmer | 7. physician's assistant |
| 3. real estate salesperson | 8. math teacher |
| 4. airline pilot | 9. postal worker |
| 5. brain surgeon | 10. high school principal |

Practice Dialogue

Leaving for Vacation

- a. Hi Christine. Are you all packed?
b. I'm packing my **suitcase** right now.
- a. Did you remember to take everything?
b. Yes, I've got my **toothbrush**, **bathing** suit, **sun** block, **hair** dryer, **hairspray**, **airline** ticket, **running** shoes, **alarm** clock, and **credit** cards.
- a. Don't forget the **telephone** number of the hotel. And **reading** material for the **air**-plane. How are you getting to the **airport**?
b. The **taxicab** will take me.
- a. Do you have your **flight** information?
b. Yes, it's on the **airline** ticket and on the **boarding** pass. Uh oh. I forgot my **passport**!

Practice Paragraph

At the Computer Store

I went to the **computer** store to buy a new computer. I couldn't decide between a **laptop** and a **desktop**. The salesman was very helpful. He told me all about the **hard** drives and the **operating** systems. I decided to get a **laptop** even though it has a smaller **keyboard**. He recommended a good **webcam** and a **flash** drive. I ended up also getting some **software**, **headphones**, a **sound** card, and a **mouse** pad. I also got a **fax** machine, a few **video** games, and a **navigation** system for my car. But when I got to the **cash** register and gave them my **credit** card, they said I went over my **credit** limit. I was so embarrassed! I think I went **overboard**!





Proper Stress with Adjectives

When an adjective is followed by a noun, the noun is stressed.

nice **day**
big **house**

small **room**
long **time**

blue **eyes**
good **job**

old **man**
first **grade**

When two adjectives precede a noun, stress the *first* adjective *and* the noun. The noun gets the most stress.

big blue **bus**
really nice **day**
short black **hair**

nice old **man**
cute little **girl**
big brown **eyes**



Practice Sentences

1. He's got big blue eyes and short black hair.
2. The nice young man helped the little old lady.
3. The big blue bus passed the little white car.
4. The rich young man bought that big old house.



Word Pairs for Practice

Practice saying the word pairs while stressing the words in bold letters.

Compound Noun

1. swimming **pool**
2. drug **store**
3. newspaper
4. credit **card**
5. sunglasses
6. post**man**
7. bus **driver**
8. text**book**
9. palm **tree**
10. fing**er**nails
11. girl**friend**

Adjective + Noun

- deep **pool**
large **store**
new **paper**
plastic **card**
nice **glasses**
tall **man**
fast **driver**
good **book**
tall **tree**
long **nails**
great **friend**



Practice Sentences

1. They had a good **time** playing football.
2. I bought some sunglasses at the new **store**.
3. My hairdresser has blond **hair**.
4. The **postman** brought me an important **letter**.
5. That **salesman** is a very nice **man**.
6. Her large **apartment** is on the third **floor** of that **apartment** building.
7. I left my **cell** phone in the front **seat** of my friend's **car**.
8. Let's go see the new **film** at the **movie** theater.

Compound Nouns Containing Adjectives

Sometimes in a compound noun, the first word is an adjective that no longer carries the original meaning. The meaning has been lost and has become a part of a fixed phrase or common expression. For example the adjective *super* in the compound noun *supermarket* doesn't make people think of the true meaning of the word *super*. Here are some other examples.

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Words for Practice

- | | |
|----------------|---------------|
| 1. White House | 6. green card |
| 2. greenhouse | 7. darkroom |
| 3. hot dog | 8. cold cut |
| 4. blue jeans | 9. Bluetooth |
| 5. high school | 10. high rise |

Phrasal Verbs

A "phrasal verb" is a verb + preposition combination that carries a special meaning. Phrasal verbs are idiomatic; they cannot be translated word-for-word. For example, *turn on*, *turn off*, *turn down*, and *turn up*, are all phrasal verbs. These types of words are very common in English and are often more frequently used than their one-word synonyms. For example, you are more likely to hear "**put out** the fire" rather than "**extinguish** the fire." In phrasal verbs, the stress is on the last word; note the bold words in the examples below.

phrasal verb	synonym
He <i>picked up</i> the box.	He <i>lifted</i> the box.
He <i>put out</i> his cigarette.	He <i>extinguished</i> his cigarette.
He <i>looked over</i> the material	He <i>reviewed</i> the material.

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Practice Dialogues

Practice with *turn*

- We don't need the heater.
 - Turn it **off**. (stop, extinguish)
- The music sounds good.
 - Turn it **up**. (increase the volume)
- Let's watch TV.
 - Turn it **on**. (to light, to start)
- He's impolite.
 - That turns me **off**. (disgust)
- The music is too loud.
 - Turn it **down**. (decrease the volume)
- Did he ask her out?
 - She turned him **down**. (reject a request or a person)
- He told me he'd be at the party.
 - He didn't turn **up**. (appear, arrive)
- Did you ask for help?
 - They turned me **away**. (reject, refuse)

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Practice Paragraph

This passage includes examples of all of the different word stress rules you have learned so far. Stress the words in bold letters. The items you have studied in this chapter—such as compound nouns, names of people and places, phrasal verbs, abbreviations—are in italics.

Trip to LA

I am planning to visit the *West Coast*. I will take *United Airlines* flight 307. It leaves *JFK* at 9:00 *am* and arrives at *LAX* at 12:15. I **found out** that there's a *three hour time difference* between *LA* and *New York*. I hope I **get over** my *jetlag* pretty quickly. After I **check in** at the hotel, I will call a *taxicab* to **pick me up** and take me to *Universal Studios*. Who knows, I might even see some famous *movie* stars like *Tom Cruise* and *Brad Pitt*. Oh, I hope I don't **pass out**! I also plan to visit *Palm Springs* and *San Diego*. On my way **back**, I'm planning a *layover* in *Las Vegas*. I really think it's going to be a nice *getaway*.

Word Stress Within a Sentence

You will now learn the rules of stress and reduction within sentences. First let's learn *how* words should sound when they are stressed. For now, just keep in mind that we generally stress words that carry the most meaning.

Lengthening the Main Vowel in Stressed Words

When the stressed word has only one syllable, just prolong the word and make the vowel higher in pitch. If the stressed word has more than one syllable, make sure that the stressed syllable of the word is prolonged and emphasized more than usual.

Prolonging the stressed vowel may sound exaggerated to you, particularly if the vowel is already a long vowel, such as /a/ and /æ/ and /ou/. For example, if you say, "It's really far." or "Stop that!", the vowel sound may be much longer than it would sound in your native language. Don't say: "It's really far." Say: "It's really *far* (*faaar*)." Don't say "Stop that!" Say "Stop (*staaap*) that!" Let's first get used to prolonging the vowels within stressed words since this will create a distinctly American sound to your English.

Practice with Vowel Length

Make sure you raise your pitch and prolong the underlined vowel in the stressed words below.

Stressed Words with /a/

1. I got it.
2. I got a new job.
3. I think I got a new job.

Stressed Words with /æ/

1. I have a new class.
2. I can't stand it.
3. I can't stand my new class.
4. I'll call you back.
5. ...as soon as I can.
6. I'll call you back as soon as I can.

Stressed words with /ou/

1. It's so cold.
2. I didn't know.
3. I didn't know about it.
4. I didn't know it would be so cold.

Stressed words with /i/

1. How do you feel?
2. When did he leave?
3. How did you feel when he had to leave?

Stressed words with /ɔ/

1. That's awful.
2. It's too long.
3. That awful novel is too long.
4. I'm exhausted.
5. I've been talking all day long.
6. I'm exhausted from talking all day long.



Advice from a Successful Student

"I record myself reading in English. I listen to the recordings and write down the mistakes. This way, I catch the sounds that I don't normally catch when I am speaking with people."

Mai Ling, China

Which Words Should I Stress?

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Now that you have had a quick introduction to *how* words sound when they are stressed and reduced, let's learn the rules of which words are stressed and which are reduced.

Content Words

"Content words" are the words that carry the most meaning. These words are usually nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, and sometimes question words such as *when*, *why*, or *where*. If we removed the surrounding words and just spoke using content words, the general idea of what we were trying to say would still be understood. For example, imagine that you heard someone say: "Went store morning." You would understand that they meant: "I went to the store in the morning."

Also, content words are like key words that you would use when searching a topic on the internet. For example, you would only type: "SYMPTOMS, HEART ATTACK," instead of "What are the symptoms of a heart attack?" Another good example of content words can be found in newspaper headlines. They would say: "Suspect arrested" instead of "A suspect has been arrested;" and "Neighbors complain" instead of "The neighbors have been complaining."

As a general rule, the **last** content word of a phrase gets the most stress. So, in the sentence "A suspect has been arrested," *arrested* will get the most stress. Similarly, we don't say: "The **neighbors** have been complaining." Instead, we stress the last content word and we say: "The neighbors have been **complaining**."

Now let's practice stressing content words and placing the most stress on the final content word.

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Practice Sentences

Remember to stress the last content word in each sentence. Notice how the stress changes as more information is added to the end. The underlined word gets the most stress.

1. I like **bacon**.
I like **bacon** and eggs.
2. It's **black**.
It's **black** and white.
3. Do you want **salt**?
Do you want **salt** and pepper?
4. That's **good**.
That's a good idea.
5. It's **hot**.
It's a hot day.
6. I **need** it.
I need to go.
I need to go home.
I need to go home at five o'clock.
7. I **saw** him.
I saw the man.
I saw the man you told me about.*
8. He **drove** it.
He **drove** the car.
He **drove** the car he bought yesterday.
He **drove** the car that he bought from his friend.

*Note: *me* and *about* are not stressed because they are not content words.

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Content Words in Detail: Verbs

Verbs are action words, such as *go*, *eat*, and *study*. We emphasize main verbs more than the participles or gerunds that come before them. That's because words like *can*, *could*, *am*, *been*, *don't*, and *have* (when it's a participle) are less important than the main verb.

Practice Sentences

Notice how the verbs are stressed the most and how the surrounding words have been reduced.

1. I'll **call** you.
2. I **saw** him.
3. I'll **wait** for you.
4. I **have** to go.
5. It's nice to **meet** you.

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Stress Nouns but Not Pronouns

We stress nouns like *man*, *book*, *John*, and *Mary*. We don't stress pronouns such as *he*, *it*, *her*, and *myself*.

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Practice Sentences

stressed nouns:

1. He told **John**.
2. I like that **car**.
3. I need a **job**.

reduced pronouns:

He told **him**.
I like **it**.
I need **it**.

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Content Words in Detail: Adjectives

Place full stress on an adjective if it's not followed by a noun. If it is followed by a noun, stress the noun more.

adjective alone:

1. That was **good**.
2. It's really **hot**.
3. It's **long**.
4. John is **nice**.

adjective + noun:

That was a **good film**.
It's a really **hot day**.
It's a **long drive**.
John is a **nice man**.

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Practice Sentences

A.

1. **Wait!**
2. I'll **wait** for you.
3. I can **wait** for you.
4. I am **waiting** for you.
5. I'll be **waiting** for you.
6. I've been **waiting** for you.
7. I could've **waited** for you.
8. I could've been **waiting** for you.
9. I'll **wait** for you in the car.
10. I should've been **waiting** for you in the car.

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B.

1. Tell her.
2. He'll tell her.
3. He'll be telling her.
4. He didn't tell her.
5. He should have told her.
6. He should've been telling her.
7. He didn't tell his wife.
8. He should've been telling his wife.
9. He didn't tell his wife about the situation.
10. He should've been telling his wife about the situation.

C.

1. I bought it.
2. I bought a watch.
3. I bought a new watch.
4. I bought a new gold watch.
5. I bought a new gold watch for him.
6. I bought a new gold watch for his birthday.
7. I bought a new gold watch for his thirtieth birthday.
8. I would have bought a new gold watch for his thirtieth birthday.

D.

1. He lost it.
2. He lost the money.
3. I think he lost the money.
4. I think he lost the money again.
5. I think he lost the money that I gave him.
6. He might have lost the money that I gave him.
7. I think he might have lost the money that I gave him.

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Reducing Vowels in Unstressed Words

We reduce "function words." These types of words generally don't carry as much importance or meaning as the content words. If they were eliminated, the sentence would still make sense. Here is a list of the function words:

- a. **pronouns** - *he, she, you, they, mine, his, himself, etc.*
- b. **prepositions** - *to, in, for, at, by, on, with, from, etc.*
- c. **conjunctions** - *and, but, or, nor, so, yet*
- d. **auxiliary verbs** - *am, is, was, were, do, does, been, have, can, could, should, etc.*
- e. **articles** - *a, an, the*
- f. **indefinite pronouns** - *one, some, any, anywhere, somewhere, anything, something, etc.*

There is one exception to the rule above: auxiliary verbs are stressed in their negative forms. See below.

affirmative:

I can do it.

He should try it.

I'd like it.

negative:

I can't do it.

He shouldn't try it.

I wouldn't like it.

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Weak Forms

When a word is reduced we use the "weak form" of the word. The weak form is said more quickly and more softly. The vowel becomes the schwa sound, /ə/. For example, the preposition *for* sounds like "fur" or /fər/, and *at* sounds like /ət/. Let's now practice using the weak forms of some commonly unstressed words.

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Practice Sentences

to becomes /tə/

1. I'd like *to* go.
2. I need *to* talk *to* you.
3. I'd like *to* go *to* the park.

and becomes /n/

1. bacon 'n' eggs
2. black 'n' white
3. in 'n' out
4. rock 'n' roll

for becomes /fər/

1. Let's go *for* a walk.
2. Wait *for* John.
3. This is *for* Bill.
4. I'm looking *for* my book.

can becomes /kən/

1. I *can* do it.
2. You *can* call me.
3. *Can* you swim?
4. When *can* you come over?

as becomes /əz/

1. It's *as* big *as* a house.
2. I'm *as* hungry *as* a wolf.
3. I'll call you *as* soon *as* I can.
4. Keep it *as* long *as* you need it.

or becomes /ər/

1. Is it this one *or* that one?
2. I'll do it today *or* tomorrow.
3. I saw it five *or* six times.
4. I'm leaving on Monday *or* Tuesday.

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