Introduction to Stress

When you speak English, do people sometimes find it difficult to understand what you are saying?
One major reason could be **incorrect word stress**.

Using **correct stress** immediately makes your English sound **clearer**, **more natural**, and **more fluent**.
To understand stress, however, we must first understand the **syllable**, because *stress always falls on a syllable*.

1. The English Syllable

A **syllable** is a unit of pronunciation (a rhythmic unit of speech) that contains **one vowel sound** (and only one vowel sound), possibly surrounded by one or more consonants. Think of it as one *beat* of sound in a word.

Word	Number of syllables	Division
fast	1=> monosyllabic	fast
person	2 => disyllabic	per-son
beautiful	3 => trisyllabic	beau-ti-ful
information	4 => polysyllabic	in-for-ma-tion

* Each syllable has a **vowel sound**, not necessarily a vowel *letter*.

* A word contains at least **one syllable.**

* **Formula:** up to **3 consonants** <u>before</u> the vowel and up to **4 consonants** <u>after</u> it ==> **CCCVCCCC**

* **Examples:** *Anne* /æn/, *sit* /sɪt/, *split* /splɪt/, *twelfths* /twelfθs/, *say* /seɪ/, *spray* /spreɪ/, *kicked* /kɪkt/.
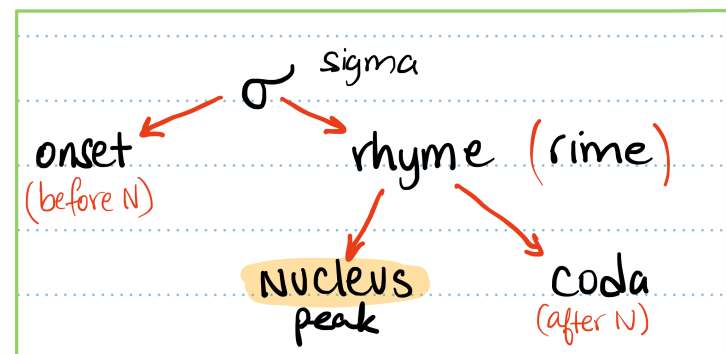
2. The Structure of the English Syllable

A syllable can be divided into **three parts.** The parts are **onset** and **rhyme**; within the rhyme we find the **nucleus** (central peak of sonority) and **coda**. Not all syllables have all parts, the **smallest** possible syllable contains a **nucleus** only.

Part	Description	Example
Onset	One or more consonants before the vowel	/p/ in *pen*
Nucleus	The vowel sound (core of the syllable)	/e/ in *pen*
Coda	One or more consonants after the vowel	/n/ in *pen*

The internal structure of a syllable

=> A syllable may or may not have an onset and or a coda.
* So, *pen* → **CVC structure**.
   Other examples: *eye* (V), *go* (CV), *stamp* (CCVCC).

• **Zero onset:** no consonant before the vowel (e.g., *ill* /ɪl/, *on* /ɒn/, *ask* /ɑːsk/).
• **Zero coda:** no consonant after the vowel (e.g., *may* /meɪ/, *fee* /fiː/, *strew* /struː/).
• Linguistics often use tree diagrams to illustrate syllable structure.

3. Syllabic Consonants

- Normally, the **nucleus of a syllable** is a vowel. However, in some cases (especially in **fast, natural speech**) certain consonants can replace the vowel and become the nucleus themselves.
- They occur most often with **sonorant consonants** (laterals, nasals, and approximants) because these sounds are already relatively **vowel-like** ==> they are **voiced**, **continuous**, and can carry sound ==> they allow continuous airflow similar to vowels.
- These are called syllabic consonants:
- /l̩ / (syllabic L)
- /n̩ / (syllabic N)
- /m̩ / (syllabic M)
- /ŋ̍ / (syllabic NG) → This syllabic consonant is rare in English. It does not form regularly, but it *can* appear in **very fast** or **reduced** speech when the vowel in an *-ing* or *-thing* sequence is **dropped**.
- /r̩ / (syllabic R → mainly in rhotic accents like American English).

> **Phonetics Tip: /ŋ̍/**
>
> • Normally, syllabic consonants have the line **under** them: /l̩/, /n̩/, /m̩/.
>
> • For **/ŋ/**, the line goes **above**: /ŋ̍/
>
> • **Why?** /ŋ/ has a descender, so the mark is moved above for clarity.
>
> • Meaning is the same: the consonant **acts as a vowel**.
>
> **Example:** *something* → /ˈsʌmθɪŋ̍/

Tip: In phonetic transcription, syllabic consonants are shown with a small **vertical line under the symbol** (e.g. /l̩/, /n̩/, /ŋ̍/).

Examples:
- *bottle* → /ˈbɒtl̩/
- *button* → /ˈbʌtn̩/
- *rhythm* → /ˈrɪðm̩/
- *something* → /ˈsʌmθŋ̍/ (in fast speech, when the ing is dropped)
- *butter* (in AmE) → [ˈbʌt.r̩]

When a consonant becomes syllabic
- It usually follows another consonant, especially /t/, /d/, or /s/.
  - *button* → /ˈbʌtn̩/, *little* → /ˈlɪtl̩/
- The vowel is weak (/ə/) or disappears in **fast speech**.
  - *garden* → /ˈgɑːdn̩/, *rhythm* → /ˈrɪðm̩/
- Occurs in **unstressed syllables**, often at the end of a word.
  - *prism* → /ˈprɪzm̩/, *open* → /ˈəʊpn̩/
- Only **sonorant consonants** can be syllabic: /l, n, m, ŋ/ (sometimes /r/).
  - *butter* → [ˈbʌt.r̩]

Common Syllabic Consonants and Examples

Syllabic Consonant	Example Words	Phonetic Transcription	Notes
/l̩/ (syllabic L)	bottle, little, apple	/ˈbɒtl̩/, /ˈlɪtl̩/, /ˈæpl̩/	After /t/, /d/, /p/; common in unstressed final syllables
/n̩/ (syllabic N)	button, garden, lesson	/ˈbʌtn̩/, /ˈgɑːdn̩/, /ˈlesn̩/	After alveolar stops /t/, /d/
/m̩/ (syllabic M)	rhythm, prism, bottom	/ˈrɪðm̩/, /ˈprɪzm̩/, /ˈbɒtm̩/	After bilabial consonants
/ŋ̍/ (syllabic NG)	walking, something, nothing	/ˈwɔːkŋ̍/, /ˈsʌmθŋ̍/, /ˈnʌθŋ̍/	Occurs after /ŋ/ when the vowel is **elided in fast speech**
/r̩/ (syllabic R)[1]	butter, father, teacher (AmE/Scot.)	[ˈbʌt.r̩], [ˈfɑːð.r̩], [ˈtiːtʃ.r̩]	Occurs mainly in rhotic accents (not in RP)

[1]**Note:** In non-rhotic accents (e.g. British RP), /r̩/ does not occur → the /r/ is only pronounced when followed by a vowel.

4. Syllabification:
- Syllabification is the <u>process</u> of dividing a word into its individual syllables.
- It shows the **internal structure of a word**: how consonants and vowels are grouped into pronounceable units.
- Knowing syllabification helps with **pronunciation, stress, and rhythm** in English.

Rules for Syllabifying Words

1. **Identify vowel nuclei.** Count every vowel sound (monophthong or diphthong) – each is one syllable nucleus. (Diphthongs count as one nucleus, not two.) For example, *banana* has three vowel sounds /ə/, /ɑ:/, /ə/, so it has three syllables: /bə.ˈnɑ:.nə/.

2. **Split single consonants:** If a single consonant lies between two vowels, split *before* it (pattern V·CV). E.g. *pilot* → /ˈpaɪ.lət/ (nuclei /aɪ/ and /ə/): syllables /paɪ/·/lət/.

3. **Maximise the onset (The Maximal Onset principle 'MOP'/ the onset is greedy):** If two or more consonants occur between vowels, give as many as possible to the onset of the following syllable – *but only if that cluster is a legal English onset (it follows the **phonotactics** of the language).* For example, *napkin* is /ˈnæp.kɪn/. The consonant cluster "pk" cannot begin a syllable in English, so we split as /næp/ ·/kɪn/, with /p/ closing the first syllable and /k/ starting the second. By contrast, in a word like *pilot* (two vowels separated by one consonant), we simply attach the consonant to the second syllable as above. Other examples include: diploma | dɪ.pləʊ.mə | , extra | ɛk.strə |, etc.

4. **Check onset clusters:** English allows many multi-consonant onsets (e.g. **s**+stop as in *spin* /spɪn/, stop+liquid as in *play* /pleɪ/, *strong* /strɒŋ/, etc.). Common legal onsets include **sp, st, sk, sl, sm, sn, sw** and **pl, pr, bl, br, kl, kr, gl, gr, tr, dr, fl, fr, θr, ʃr**, etc. If a split would force the next syllable to begin with an illegal cluster, adjust the break. For instance, *window* /ˈwɪn.dəʊ/ splits as /wɪn/·/dəʊ/ (not *wi.ndəʊ) because /nd/ cannot start a word, so /n/ coda and /d/ onset.

5. **Treat digraphs and silent letters as one:** Do not separate letters that represent one sound. "Th", "sh", "ch", "ng", etc., each count as a single consonant when syllabifying. Likewise, ignore silent letters (silent *e* at the end, *kn* where k is silent, etc.), since they do not add a syllable.

6. **Split double consonants:** When two consonants appear between vowels (VCCV), usually split between them. Example: *rabbit* → /ˈræb.ɪt/ → /b/ closes first syllable, /ɪt/ second.

7. **Prefixes and suffixes:** Prefixes and suffixes often form their own syllables. Example:
   - *unhappy* → /ʌnhæpi/ → /ʌn/ · /hæ/ · /pi/
   - *running* → /ˈrʌnɪŋ/ → /rʌn/ · /ɪŋ/

8. **Mark syllabic consonants:** When a syllable has no pronounced vowel, certain consonants (in RP mainly /m, n, l/) can act as the nucleus. Commonly this occurs in words ending in –*le*, –*en*, –*on*, etc. For example, *button* is transcribed /ˈbʌt.ən/, but the /ə/ is often omitted in speech, giving [ˈbʌt.n̩] with a syllabic [n]. Similarly *bottle* /ˈbɒt.əl/ → [ˈbɒt.l̩].
   ==>A simple test: if you hear a syllable with only an [m], [n], or [l] sound (no clear vowel), mark it as syllabic (diacritic ◌̩) and drop a schwa. (Note: RP is non-rhotic, so final /r/ is not syllabic in RP.)

How can I count the syllables of a word I have never seen before?

- **Jaw method:** Place your hand under your chin and say the word. Count how many times your jaw drops ==> each drop is one syllable.
  Example: ta/ble → jaw drops twice → 2 syllables.
- **Robot voice method:** Speak the word slowly like a robot.
  Example: pa/per → "pa…per" → 2 syllables.
- **Hum method:** Hum the word, focusing only on the vowels; each hum counts as one syllable.
  Example: o/pen → hum twice → 2 syllables.
- **Clapping method:** Clap once for each syllable as you say the word.
  Example: hun/dred → clap twice → 2 syllables.

What should I do when reading a new word?
1. Place a dot beneath each vowel in the word.
2. Check for a silent "e", and remember that diphthongs count as a single vowel sound.
3. Count the vowels to determine how many syllables are present.
4. Begin dividing the word according to syllable division rules.

5. Types of Syllables:

1. Open Syllables
- End in a vowel sound (no coda).
- Usually have a **long vowel** in stressed syllables.
- Examples (RP):
  - *he* /hiː/ → /h/ onset, /iː/ nucleus, no coda
  - *go* /gəʊ/ → /g/ onset, /əʊ/ nucleus, no coda

2. Closed Syllables
- End in a **consonant sound** (coda present).
- Usually have a **short vowel** in stressed syllables.
- Examples (RP):
  - *cat* /kæt/ → /k/ onset, /æ/ nucleus, /t/ coda
  - *sit* /sɪt/ → /s/ onset, /ɪ/ nucleus, /t/ coda

6. Practice

1/ Analyse the syllable structure of the following words:
- Splashed
- Doctor
- Over
- Yellow
- Hospital
- Yesterday
- Notification
- Glimpsed

2/ Draw Syllable Tree Diagrams

Instructions:
1. Divide each word into syllables.
2. Identify the **onset**, **nucleus**, and **coda** of each syllable.
3. Draw a **syllable tree diagram** for each word, showing: Syllable (σ)
   - Onset (O)
   - Rhyme (R)
   - Nucleus (N)
   - Coda (C)

Example format (for "cat" /kæt/):

```
      σ
    /  \
   O    R
   |   / \
   k  N   C
      |   |
      æ   t
```

Words to diagram:
1. cat /kæt/
2. window /ˈwɪn.dəʊ/
3. button /ˈbʌt.n̩/
4. rabbit /ˈræb.ɪt/
5. picture /ˈpɪk.tʃə/
6. banana /bəˈnɑː.nə/
7. beautiful /ˈbjuː.tɪ.fəl/
8. information /ˌɪn.fəˈmeɪ.ʃn̩/
9. university /ˌjuː.nɪˈvɜː.sɪ.ti/
10. comfortable /ˈkʌm.fə.tə.bl̩/

3/ How many syllables are in the following words:

cat, sit, pen, dog, map, fish, hat, tree, go, may, eye, see, run, stop, ask, ill, on, twelfth, kick, spray, split, stamp, plate, window, button, little, rabbit, picture, garden, butter, something, banana, university, tomorrow, computer, beautiful, employee, activity, chemistry, information, communication, photographer, comfortable, politician, revision, electricity, discussion, situation, revision, education, photograph, photography, photographic, economy, economic, educate, education, happily, possibility, pregnancy, robbery, afternoon, Japanese, expensive, tomorrow, anyone, possible, open, prism, rhythm, walking, running, dancing, teacher, student, textbook, breakfast, comfortable, economic, dramatic, Atlantic, scientific, politician, electrician.

Strong and Weak Forms in English

In English, some words are stressed and spoken clearly, while others are unstressed and sound weaker. These differences relate to **content** and **function words**, and to **strong** and **weak forms;** key features of natural English speech.

1. Content Vs Function Words

When we speak English, some words carry the **main meaning** of a sentence, while others mainly serve to **connect** or **support** those words. This distinction divides English words into **content words** and **function words**.

Content Words (Lexical words)	Function Words (grammatical/ structural words.)
Content words are the words that **carry information**. They tell us *who*, *what*, *where*, or *how*. Because they are important for meaning, they are usually **stressed** in speech. Examples: • Nouns: teacher, house, idea • Main verbs: *run, think, go* • Adjectives: beautiful, tall, easy • Adverbs: quickly, never, really When we listen to English, these are the words that stand out clearly => they are spoken with stronger stress, longer vowels, and clearer pronunciation. Content words have one pronunciation form called the strong form.	Function words do not carry much meaning on their own. Instead, they **show grammatical relationships** between content words and help sentences make sense. Because they are less important for meaning, they are usually **unstressed** and often pronounced in their **weak forms**. Examples: • Articles: *a, an, the* • Prepositions: *to, for, at* • Conjunctions: *and, but, or* • Pronouns: *he, she, it* • Auxiliary verbs: *am, is, have, will* Function words can have **two** or **more** pronunciations called the weak forms.

In natural English, function words are spoken quickly and lightly to maintain the **rhythm** of the language.

- **Content words** = carry meaning → stressed.
- **Function words** = grammar words → unstressed (often weak forms).

2. Strong Vs Weak Forms

In English, many short grammatical words (such as *to, for, and, can, have*) can be pronounced in two different ways, depending on whether they are **stressed** or **unstressed**. These are known as **strong forms** and **weak forms**.

They are an important feature of the **natural rhythm of English speech**, helping it sound fluent, connected, and more native-like.

Feature	Strong Form	Weak Form
When used	When the word is **stressed**, said **on its own**, or emphasised	When the word is **unstressed** in **connected speech**
Vowel sound	Full vowel sound (clear and long)	Reduced vowel sound, often the **schwa /ə/**
Length	Longer and clearer pronunciation	Shorter and quicker pronunciation
Purpose	To give **emphasis** or **contrast**	To maintain the **rhythm** and **speed** of natural speech
Example	*and* → /ænd/, *to* → /tuː/, *can* → /kæn/	*and* → /ən/ or /n/, *to* → /tə/, *can* → /kən/

* Strong forms are the careful, full pronunciations of words, while weak forms are the reduced, natural versions used in everyday speech. Understanding both will help you **speak more naturally** and **understand native speakers** more easily.

3. Why Do Weak Forms Occur?
* Weak forms exist because English is a **stress-timed language**.
* Which means that the rhythm of speech is based on **stressed syllables**.
- The time between stressed syllables tends to stay **roughly the same**, no matter how many unstressed syllables come in between.
- To keep a regular rhythm, English speakers **shorten and reduce** unstressed words.

Practice Sentences: Identify Content vs Function Words

1. She went to the library to study.
2. They have been waiting for the bus since morning.
3. Can you help me with this exercise?
4. I will meet you at the station after lunch.
5. We saw a beautiful painting in the museum.
6. They should have told her the truth.
7. The children are playing in the garden.
8. Do you want some tea or coffee?

- **Content words** = carry meaning → usually stressed → nouns, main verbs, adjectives, adverbs.
- **Function words** = grammar words → usually unstressed → articles, prepositions, auxiliary verbs, pronouns,

4. Rules for Using Strong Forms

Function words are often **unstressed** in normal speech, but their **strong forms** are used in several situations:

1. When the word is **stressed for emphasis**
   ° You **must** give me more money.
2. When the word is spoken on its **own** or in **isolation**
   ° Can you spell "and"? → /ænd/
3. When the word is at the e**nd of a sentence**
   ° Chips are what I am fond <u>of</u>.
4. When the word is **contrasted** with another word
   ° The letter is <u>from</u> him, not <u>to</u> him.
5. When the word is **quoted** or **cited**
   ° We must use the word "<u>and</u>" to join clauses.
6. When the word is used for **demonstration** or to **point something out**
   ° Look at **<u>that!</u>** → /ðæt/
   ° Notice **<u>this</u>** and **<u>that</u>** in the sentence. → /ðɪs/, /ðæt/

5. Full Forms vs Weak Forms

You can think of full and weak forms as **two sides of the same word**:
- The **full form** is like a formal photograph: clear, slow, and precise.
- The **weak form** is like a casual picture: faster, natural, and relaxed.

The table presents a list of common English words that have weak forms (used when the word is not stressed):

Word(s)	Weak Form(s)	Example(s)
a, an	/ə/ (before consonants)	I saw a cat in the garden.
	/ən/ (before vowels)	She wants an orange.
the	/ðə/ (before consonants)	Pass me the book.
	/ði/ (before vowels)	Open the umbrella.
and	/ən/	Come and sit here.
	/n/ (after /t, d, s, z, ʃ/)	Bread and butter.
but	/bət/	I like it but don't need it.
that	/ðət/	This is the shirt that fits me.
than	/ðən/	She runs faster than me.
his	/iz/ (before a noun)	Take his coat.
	/hiz/ (sentence initial)	His dog is friendly.
her	/ə/ (before consonants)	Call her back.
	/ər/ (before vowels)	Give her an apple.
your	/jə/ (before consonants)	Check your bag.
	/jər/ (before vowels)	On your own, it's easier.
she	/ʃi/	She said yes.
he	/I/ (usually without /h/, except sentence initial /hi/)	Did he arrive on time?
we	/wi/	We agree with the plan.
you	/ju/	Can you help me?
him	/im/	I called him yesterday.
her	/ə/ (/hə/ sentence initial)	Her smile is lovely.
them	/ðəm/	Give them a chance.
us	/əs/	They invited us.
at	/ət/	Meet me at the station.
for	/fə/ (before consonants)	That's for you.
	/fər/ (before vowels)	Thanks for inviting me.
from	/frəm/	I got a letter from Anna.
of	/əv/	Most of the cake is gone.
	/v/ (final position)	Have you heard of it?
to	/tə/ (before consonants)	Go to bed now.
	/tu/ (before vowels)	I want to eat too.
as	/əz/	Use it as needed.
some	/səm/	Can I have some water?

	/s m/ (final position)	I bought some.
there	/ðə/ (before consonants)	There was a noise.
	/ðər/ (before vowels)	There is an answer.
can	/kən/	We can try it tomorrow.
could	/kəd/	He could explain it better.
have	/əv/	Which have you finished?
has	/əz/	Who has seen it?
had	/əd/	They had already left.
shall	/ʃəl/	We shall continue later.
should	/ʃəd/	You should follow the instructions.
must	/məs/ (before consonants)	You must be patient.
	/məst/ (before vowels)	He must eat now.
do	/də/	Why do they care?
does	/dəz/	When does it start?
am	/əm/	I am tired today.
are	/ə/ (before consonants)	Here are my keys.
	/ər/ (before vowels)	The plates are on the table.
was	/wəz/	She was happy yesterday.
were	/wə/ (before consonants)	They were late.
	/wər/ (before vowels)	The questions were easy.

6. How Weak Forms Work in Sentences

Let us look at some examples of weak forms in **connected speech**:

Sentence	Explanation
They are studying.	*They are* → /ðeɪ ə/ (the auxiliary "are" reduced to schwa).
I have two brothers.	*have* → /həv/ or /v/, often contracted → *I've two brothers*.
What do you want to do?	First *do* (auxiliary) → /də/, second *do* (main verb) → /duː/ (stressed).
Is this your bag?	*your* → /jə/ unless emphasised (*Is this your bag, not his?*).
We have lived here for years.	*we* → /wi/, *have* → /həv/, *for* → /fə/.
I picked them up at the school.	*them* → /ðəm/, *at* → /ət/, *the* → /ðə/ (with linking: /pɪkðəmʌpətðəskuːl/).

7. The Role of the Schwa /ə/

- The **schwa** is the most common vowel in English.
- It is short, weak, and central => pronounced quickly and without stress.
- Over 30% of spoken English vowels are schwas.
- Found in: *a, the, to, for, of, about, your, some, can*, etc.

Practice Exercises

Exercise 1: Transcription

* Transcribe the following: English, linguistics, grammar, civilisation, literature, methodology, students, teachers, handout, administration, cheating, insult.

* Can you identify the words in weak forms?

/edʒʊˈkeɪʃn̩ ɪz ðə məʊst ɪmˈpɔːtnt ˈfæktə fə
ˈhjuːmən ˌsɪvɪlaɪˈzeɪʃn̩ | ɪt prəˈvaɪdz ðə ˈneɪʃn̩
wɪð mæn ˈpaʊəz | prəˈməʊts ˈnæʃnəl ˈjuːnɪti
ənd ˌʌpˈlɪfts ˈpʌblɪk əˈweənəs | ɪf ˈpiːpl̩ ər
ˈedʒʊkeɪtɪd | ðeɪ kən ˌʌndəˈstænd ðeə ˈdjuːtɪz
ənd raɪts |ɪn ˈɔːdə tu ˌʌpˈlɪft ˈhjuːmən səˈsaɪəti
| iːtʃ ʃəd bi ˈkeɪpəbl̩ tu ˌʌndəˈstænd ˈʌðəz |

Exercise 3 : Identify Weak Forms

Transcribe the following sentences using weak forms:

1. She has been reading a book in the garden.
2. They will arrive at the station in the morning.
3. Can you tell me the way to the library?
4. I am going to meet my friend after school.
5. He bought a new coat for the winter.
6. We should have asked them for help.
7. The children are playing football in the park.
8. Do you want some milk or tea?
9. My sister is writing a letter to her teacher.
10. She was very pleased with the results of the test.