



Sentence Stress

1. What is Sentence Stress?

Sentence stress is similar to word stress. Just as one syllable in a word is stressed, certain **words** in a sentence are stressed.

When teachers talk about the **rhythm** or **beat** of English, they are usually referring to sentence stress. English is a **stress-timed language**, which means stressed words occur at regular intervals.

Sentence stress makes English sound natural. It creates the rising and falling melody of speech.

2. Content Words vs. Function Words

In English sentences:

- **Content words** usually receive stress.
- **Function words** usually do NOT receive primary stress in neutral sentences because function words *can* receive stress in contrastive or emphatic contexts.

Understanding this difference is the key to mastering English rhythm.

a. Content Words (Stressed)

Content words carry the **main meaning** of the sentence. They are pronounced louder, longer, and clearer.

Type	Explanation	Examples
Nouns (not pronouns)	People, places, things	Jack, dog, car, Brazil, Texas
Main Verbs	Action verbs (not helping verbs)	walk, talk, think, run, speak
Adjectives	Describe nouns	blue, happy, fast, harmful
Adverbs (except frequency)	Describe verbs	quickly, eagerly, nervously
Negatives	Make meaning negative	no, not, never, nothing
Wh-Question Words	Used in questions	who, what, where, when, why, how

These words help the listener understand the message.

b. Function Words (Unstressed)

Function words make sentences grammatically correct, but they do not carry strong meaning. They are usually pronounced quickly and softly.

Type	Explanation	Examples
Pronouns	Replace nouns	he, she, it, they, them
Auxiliary Verbs	Helping verbs	is, will, shall, may, has, would

Prepositions	Show relationships	in, on, at, after, to, within
Conjunctions	Join clauses	and, but, because, or
Determiners	Come before nouns	a, an, the, some, this
Adverbs of Frequency	Tell how often	always, usually, often, sometimes

3. Examples of Sentence Stress

The stressed words below are in **bold**.

- **Open** the **door**.
- Can you **open** the **window**?
- **Where** did you **buy** that **book**?
- **Why** are they **laughing**?
- **Mary** **found** her **keys**.
- He **lost** his **phone** yesterday.
- **David** **traveled** to **Spain** last **summer**.
- They **built** a **small house** near the **river**.
- **Who** **broke** the **glass**?
- She **cooked** a **delicious meal**.
- We **watched** an **interesting movie**.
- **Thomas** **drove** the **car** to the **airport**.
- She did **not finish** the **project**.
- **Nadia** and **Omar** did **not attend** the **meeting**.
- He **never drinks coffee**.

Notice how only the important words are stressed.

4. The Three Main Rules of Sentence Stress

1. **Stress content words**
2. **Do NOT stress function words**
3. **Keep the time between stressed words equal**

This means: Even if there are many unstressed words between stressed words, the time stays almost the same.

Example:

- **Birds fly south**.
- The **birds** will **fly south**.
- The **birds** are **flying** to the **south**.

All three sentences take nearly the same time to say.

*Exceptions to the Rules

English always has exceptions!

1. Correction Stress

When correcting information, we stress the corrected word — even if it is usually a function word.

- You called Anna. – No, I called **Sara**.
- They met on Monday. – No, they met on **Tuesday**. The stress shows contrast.

2. “Be” as a Main Verb

When “be” is used as a **main verb**, it can receive stress.

- I **am** ready.

- They **are** students.
- Here, “am” and “are” express important meaning (existence/location).

3. Auxiliary Verbs in Negative Form

Negative auxiliaries often receive stress because negation carries important meaning.

- She **can't** swim.
- We **won't** accept the offer.
- He **hasn't** completed the task.

Why Sentence Stress Is Important

Correct sentence stress:

- Improves pronunciation
- Makes speech sound natural
- Helps listening comprehension
- Makes communication clearer

Incorrect stress can make English difficult to understand.

Activity

Mark the stressed words in these sentences:

1. She bought a new car yesterday.
2. Why did you call me?
3. They are going to the market.
4. I have never seen that bird.

Final Summary

Sentence stress is about **rhythm and meaning**.

Remember:

- ✓ Stress content words
- ✓ Do not stress function words
- ✓ Keep the rhythm regular
- ✓ Stress corrections and negatives

Mastering sentence stress will make your English sound more fluent, natural, and confident.