



# IIT Madras

## BSc Degree

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**English – I (Basic English)**  
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**Syllables and Words**

Welcome to the class. Today, we are going to extend our discussion on words and we are going to look at parts of the words. And, more specifically, we are going to have a discussion on syllables within a word.

Words are important units of language. We have talked about sounds, we know about consonants and vowels, we know about how these sounds come in a particular order of alternating orders of consonants and vowels, how we get numerous words infinite number of words with a very finite set of 44 sounds, that is, 24 consonant sounds and 20 vowel sounds. With that understanding of words, we are going to look at parts of words which is known as syllable. Let us, say it is important for us to understand one more time that there, the parts of a word is also as equally, as important as words themselves.

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### Words

- A single distinct meaningful element of speech or writing, used with others (or sometimes alone) to form a sentence and typically shown with a space on either side when written or printed.

Examples of words: bees, hair, matter, tall etc.

bees



Let us understand words a little bit carefully and then we will come back to syllables that is a smaller part of the word. As we know, if you need to, here is a working definition of words, please read this definition for yourself. After reading, this is what we want you to understand, first of all, how do we read this, ‘a single distinct meaningful element of speech or writing used

with others to form a sentence and typically shown with a space on either side when written or printed.’ This is a working definition.

So, it basically tells you words are units of a sentence. They have to be meaningful when we use them in communication, when we use only meaningful words, when we speak. In writing or, that is, print, they are used with a space. Also, when we speak, there are pauses, there are certain pauses within the word, within a word too, but we do not mean to make it too technical about it.

So, and it is the single unit, single element it has, it must be meaningful and it is a unit of speech or writing. This is the basic definition, basic understanding of words. Examples are, look at this, I have purposely picked these words, ‘bees’, it is a bee and specifically I am making it plural to show you that this is, this still a word ‘bees’, ‘hair’, ‘matter’, ‘tall’ and so many others.

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### Word class

Words combine to form phrases and sentences. All words belong to categories called word classes (or parts of speech) according to the part they play in a sentence. The main word classes in English are listed below.

Noun – Book, cat, Ram  
Pronoun – She, him, that  
Adjective – tall, red, beautiful  
Verb – play, sing, cry  
Adverb – very, loudly, really



Preposition – on, at, in, above

Conjunction – but, for, if

Determiner – a, an, the

Interjection – Hello!

⑤ ✓ ①



So, if you look at it a little more closely, you will see that words belong to particular class, classes. So, they do combine to make a phrase first and then a sentence. But these words belong to categories or a class and they are also known as parts of speech. So, there is a so I am giving you some examples of these parts of speech and then we will come back to that. So, these parts of speech are, there are certain classes such as nouns, pronouns, adjectives, verb, adverbs, prepositions, conjunctions, determiner, interjections and maybe you can add more classes, but I am just giving you a few of examples.

So, examples like ‘book’, ‘cat’, and ‘Ram’. So, it is basically a, ‘Ram’ is just as an example of a proper name. ‘She’, ‘him’, ‘that’ are examples of pronouns. ‘Tall’, ‘red’, ‘beautiful’, these are examples of adjectives. ‘Play’, ‘sing’, ‘cry’, these are examples of verbs. ‘Very’, ‘loudly’, ‘really’, these are examples of adverbs. ‘On’, ‘at’, ‘in’, ‘above’ are examples of prepositions in English. ‘But’, ‘for’, ‘if’ are examples of conjunctions. ‘A’, ‘an’, ‘the’ only three of them are examples of determiners, and ‘hello’, ‘wow’ these are some of the examples of optatives and interjections.

Now, outside, out of a sentence, that is, out of its natural context, words are, words belong to class. But once they are used in a sentence, and we will discuss about that at a later stage, once they are used in a sentence, they belong to, they get into grammatical relations and then they become either subject, verb or object.

So, we will get to that. Just at this point, to make the distinction between a noun and a subject or a noun and an object, I am giving you this distinction. So, a noun can be a subject or an object, because subjects and objects are grammatical relations and nouns and pronouns are grammatical categories. Word classes, that is the discussion about word, that is, how, what we know about words but when we, like we have looked into the details of the words like plural formations and clusters in words.



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## Words and Syllables

- One word may have one or more syllables
- Words with one syllables
  - sun, life, break, tongue
- Words with two syllables
  - tiger /tai-gar/, police /po-lis/, between /bit-wiin/, marriage /mair-raij/



We, when we look at this, we are going to see that words can have multiple parts within it and these parts of words are called syllables. So, what is a syllable in simpler understanding? Syllable is part of a word and it is larger than sounds and smaller than the full word, in general. Now, we can always argue that one sound can also be one word like 'a', 'the'.

Similarly, one word can itself be a full syllable. These are true things, but besides that, please try to understand that if we break a word into pieces and wherever we pause or we take a break, these parts, broken parts are syllables or we can say the same thing that we put these syllables together to make a word.

So, with that understanding, if we move forward, you can see that words can have, one word may have one or more syllables. So, we have lot of words huge number of words available in English or other languages, which have got just one syllable. So, they are called monosyllabic words. Huge number of examples just to give you a few, take words like 'sun', 'life', 'break', 'tongue', 'cat', 'mad', 'rat', 'cap', 'book'. All kinds can have just one syllable and they are monosyllabic words. Meaning it is not, we when we speak these words, we do not break it into two parts, unlike the following words, which have got two syllables.

So, look at this, when we contrast monosyllabic words with bisyllabic words, then we see the difference. So, let me give you a few examples of two syllable words like, and please pay attention here I have tried to put these two syllable words in phonetic symbol, we are using

phonetic symbols but not exact phonetic symbols I am only using some regular typing symbols, which are close to the sounds.

So, a word like 'tiger' hear it out carefully, 'Tiger'. If you hear carefully, you will hear one break and two parts of this word 'tai gar' that is what we mean by syllable. So, two parts 'tai gar' these are two syllables of this one word 'tiger'. 'Police': police 'po lis' two parts of this word makes two syllables and these are the two syllables in the word and therefore this word is called bisyllabic word. 'Between' between between, look at this 'bit wiin', two syllables. 'Marriage', 'mair rij', 'mair rij' it should be 'mair rij', 'mair rij', 'mair rij'. So, these are two syllable words. But when you compare them with 'sun', there is no break in that. Therefore, it is a monosyllabic word, 'life' no break, 'break' no break, 'tongue' no break.

Now, before moving further I want to draw your attention to the most significant part of the discussion so far which is true for both syllables and words. Each syllable must have at least one vowel sound in it, without a vowel sound there is no syllable. So, when we break the word, we have to make sure, or this comes intuitively to native speakers of English and as learners of English, we need to pay attention to them to sound, to make ourselves sound close to them or better.

We need to know that we break it only when we make sure that each part has got at least one vowel and now if you pay attention to these words, you will find it true and then I will ask you to do this exercise for at least 20, 40 words for yourself. Just make a list of any 40 words, any 20 words to begin with and see whether those words are monosyllabic words or bisyllabic words. If they are bisyllabic words, then do both syllables have got at least one vowel sound in them? This will be fascinating exercise for you and with that, you will get to know one of the most complex things of English language, which is called syllabification.

Please understand, there are certain rules for this, but those rules are not too critical for us to understand, because most of them are so intuitive to native speakers that it is tough to put them in words for learners. However, by paying attention to them, we get a fairly good sense of syllables and words.

So, when we say 'tiger', two parts 'tai' has a vowel in it, 'gar' has also a vowel in it. 'Police' two parts 'po' has a vowel in it o 'lis' has a vowel in it, 'between' both parts look at this 'bit' 'wiin'

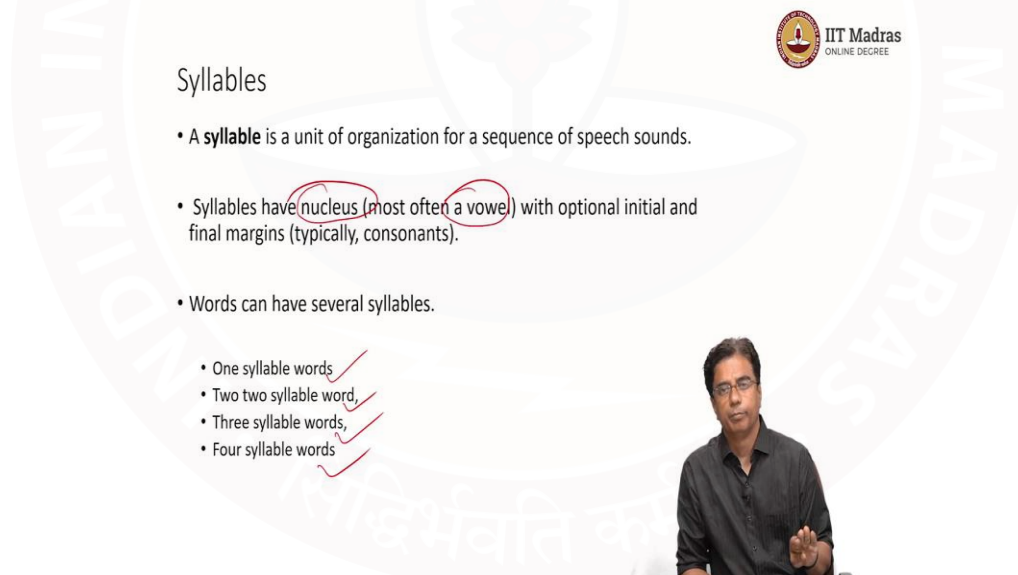


both parts have got vowels in them. 'Marriage' both parts 'mair' 'rij' have got vowels in them, the first part has got a diphthong in it and second part has got a short vowel in it.

So, likewise, when you see monosyllabic words with just one syllable, you find a vowel in them anyway. So, when we see that vowel is a requirement for syllable formation, it should be very easy and intuitive for us to understand that if a syllable must have a vowel, then it is intuitive to say a word must have a vowel.

And therefore, we say no words without a vowel. And therefore, we say, vowels are fundamental sounds to the formation of your word. So, when you look at these things back and forth, some of these so rigid-looking patterns and which is basically rules, become so intuitive for us to understand and this is the purpose of this discussion that you do not have to memorise these things as rules, rather you understand them intuitively and thus it will be easier to apply when you are paying attention to your preparations.

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**Syllables**

- A **syllable** is a unit of organization for a sequence of speech sounds.
- Syllables have **nucleus** (most often a vowel) with optional initial and final margins (typically, consonants).
- Words can have several syllables.
- One syllable words ✓
- Two two syllable word, ✓
- Three syllable words, ✓
- Four syllable words ✓

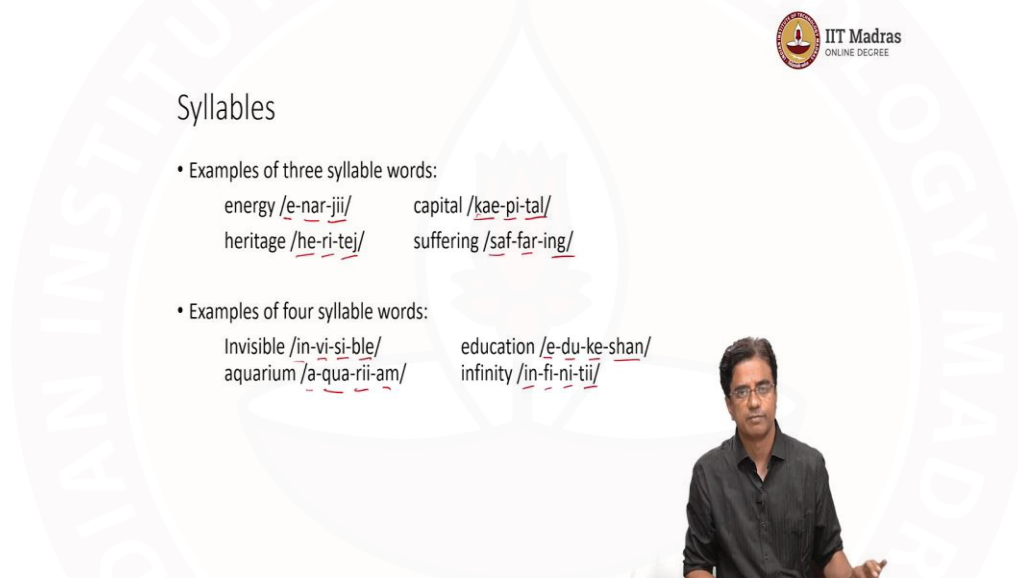
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So, how do we understand a syllable? It is a unit in the organisation of words. Syllable, there are, a syllable has a nucleus. For the time being we can say this nucleus is only a vowel. The reason why I am writing most often a vowel because there are certain cases where certain other sounds which are vocalic in nature becomes nucleus of a syllable but we leave that discussion aside for the time being, most of the words will have a vowel most of the syllables will have a vowel as nucleus and therefore most of the words will definitely have a vowel.



And so, there are, so we have words with one syllables, two syllables, three syllables, four syllables, up to four syllables, you find a lot of words. But the moment you go beyond, that is, a five syllable word, six syllable words or a seven syllable words in that order seven, six and five, you find them in a very rare quantity, very few in numbers. There are seven syllable words possible, there are six syllable words possible and if you try hard to just coin an example, you can also coin an eight-syllable word, but what we need to understand is the larger the number of syllables in a word, the more if they are difficult to pronounce together as one word and hence a multi-syllable word is not preferred and they are not possible.

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### Syllables

- Examples of three syllable words:
 

energy /e-nar-jii/	capital /kae-pi-tal/
heritage /he-ri-tej/	suffering /saf-far-ing/
- Examples of four syllable words:
 

Invisible /in-vi-si-ble/	education /e-du-ke-shan/
aquarium /a-quar-ii-am/	infinity /in-fi-ni-tii/

So, let us look at examples of some three syllable words. As I said, beyond five becomes difficult, six, five words are still possible, larger in number than six syllabic words and six syllable words if there are two, four, ten, seven syllable words will be fewer in number than six syllable. But these are, they very intuitive rules for any language and if you understand the role of syllabification and you understand that we need to, we have words that are easier to speak, then we understand why multi syllable words are not possible.

So, let us come back and focus on three and four syllable words just to get some examples. 'Energy', energy look at this 'ae' 'nar' 'jii', what do we need to look at? We do see three breaks, but each one of them must have got a vowel in them, we do have. 'Heritage', heritage look at

them. 'Capital', 'kae' 'pi' 'tal'; 'Suffering', 'saf' 'far' 'ing' four syllables; you can have your own examples of three syllable words.

And like I said, syllabification is intuitive to speakers. So, if you want to find number of syllables, there are tools available these days, you can find them online, you can look at a dictionary and once you start paying attention to them, you slowly train yourself in syllabification by keeping simple things in mind that a word can have just one syllable, a word can also have possibly two syllables in them, three syllables in them, four syllables in them and then you will by paying attention to these things. You will train your subconscious mind in syllabification and through proper syllabification you are going to sound very good when you speak. Therefore, understanding syllabification of a word is important for improving our pronunciation.

Coming back to four syllable words. 'Invisible', look at that 'in' 'vi' 'si' 'ble'; 'aquarium' 'a' 'qua' 'rii' 'am'; 'education' 'e' 'du' 'ke' 'shan'; 'infinity' 'in' 'fi' 'ni' 'tii'. The four breaks, four syllable each syllable has got a vowel and that vowel is nucleus of the syllable.

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### Syllables

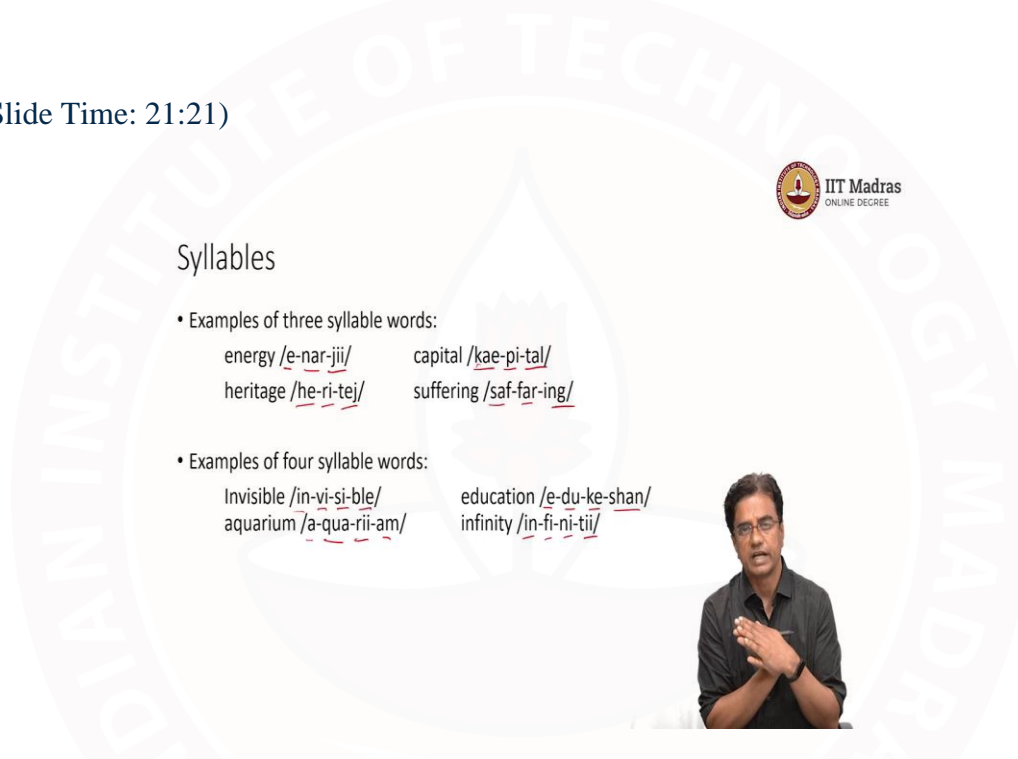
- A syllable consists of several segments –
  - nucleus, onset, rhyme, coda
- Nucleus: a vowel or syllabic consonant, obligatory in most languages
- Onset- a consonant or consonant clusters
- Rhyme – contrasts with onset and splits into nucleus and coda



Now, when we, when we speak a word. So, there are three important parts, several parts of a syllable, these are called nucleus, onset, rhyme, coda. These are technical terms, I do not recommend you to remember these things I am putting it in just for you to have these words heard for yourself.

So, you I have spoken nucleus several times, which is the most important part of a syllable; onset, a consonant or consonant clusters; rhyme, contrast with onset and splits into two that becomes nucleus or coda. Basically, there are three parts: nucleus, onset, and rhyme, and it is rhyme which has nucleus inbuilt in them. In the sense that this is not required for you to know, but just so that you, when you have heard the word syllable, you should also know these terms like nucleus, onset, rhyme and coda. Hence, I spoke about this. What I must tell you and what you must know is the fact that every syllable will have a nucleus, primarily a vowel, as nucleus of it.

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**Syllables**

- Examples of three syllable words:  
 energy /e-nar-jii/      capital /kae-pi-tal/  
 heritage /he-ri-tej/      suffering /saf-far-ing/
- Examples of four syllable words:  
 Invisible /in-vi-si-ble/      education /e-du-ke-shan/  
 aquarium /a-quar-ri-am/      infinity /in-fi-ni-tii/

So, when we, when you know that a vowel is the nucleus of the syllable, we are done with syllables and whenever we break the word, we need to know that there is a vowel in the syllable. But, please pay attention to the following. When we speak the word ‘education’, we do not say ‘e du ka tion’. For ‘infinity’, we do not say ‘in fi ni ty’; ‘invisible’, ‘aquarium’ or ‘energy’, ‘heritage’, ‘capital’, we do not say these way.

How do we say? We say ‘capital’, ‘invisible’, ‘education’, ‘aquarium’, ‘infinity’. What I am trying to get at is the moment we have a word with more than one syllable, that is the moment we have a word which has got at least two syllables in English in particular, one syllable becomes more prominent than the other. In our speaking, we, and to make one syllable prominent we stress that, and that is called stress patterns of English words.

So, these are some of the things that we need to pay attention to, to make our speaking better. And we need to make our understanding of words better to improve our speaking. So, we look forward to a discussion on this with you. Hope this will make sense. Please do the two types of exercises that I have recommended for you to do. Looking forward to hearing from you. Thank you.

