

## Pronunciation: Sentence stress

**Exam tip:** Sentence stress gives English its rhythm. When a native speaker speaks English, they do not pronounce all words with equal stress. Important words are stressed and less important words are unstressed and are fitted in the spaces between the stressed words.



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Look at the following chant and then listen to a native speaker saying it, pronouncing the stressed and unstressed (weak) words.

<b>ONE</b>		<b>TWO</b>		<b>THREE</b>		<b>FOUR</b>
<b>ONE</b>	and	<b>TWO</b>	and	<b>THREE</b>	and	<b>FOUR</b>
<b>ONE</b>	and then	<b>TWO</b>	and then	<b>THREE</b>	and then	<b>FOUR</b>
<b>ONE</b>	and then a	<b>TWO</b>	and then a	<b>THREE</b>	and then a	<b>FOUR</b>

Now try it for yourself. Say *one, two, three, four* as you clap. Then, without slowing down the clapping, add the word *and* between the claps. Then add *and then*, and then add *and then a*.



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It is much easier to make *and then a* fit in the small spaces between the numbers if you use weak forms of the function words *and* and *a*. Listen and copy how the words are pronounced:

and /ən/      and then /ənðen/      and then a /ənðenə/

Listen and then say the chant again, using the weak forms. Try to speed up. Can you say it as quickly as the native speaker?

**Exam tip:** Understanding and correctly using sentence stress will make a significant difference to your speaking. It will improve your fluency – you can speak more quickly and easily if you stress important words and do not stress less important words. It will also make your pronunciation closer to a native speaker's, and therefore easier for the examiner to understand without effort.

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Look at the explanation and the table below.

In most neutral sentences, content words, which carry meaning, are stressed and function words, like prepositions, pronouns, and auxiliary verbs are unstressed.

Content words		Function words	
main verbs	<i>go, spoke, invented</i>	pronouns	<i>I, you, she, they</i>
nouns	<i>scientist, radio</i>	prepositions	<i>at, under, with</i>
adjectives	<i>interesting, clever</i>	articles	<i>a, the, some</i>
adverbs	<i>quickly, properly</i>	conjunctions	<i>and, but, so</i>
negative auxiliary verbs	<i>can't, don't, aren't</i>	auxiliary verbs	<i>can, should, must</i>
demonstratives	<i>this, that, these</i>	verb <i>be</i>	<i>is, am, was</i>
question words	<i>who, which, where</i>		