

To an English-speaking person, the rhythm of many other languages sounds mechanically regular—a series of little bursts of sound all of about the same size and force, like a machine-gun fire. English pronounced with such rhythm would probably not be understood.

In a language like French or Spanish, a line of poetry is usually determined by counting the total number of syllables, stressed and unstressed alike. Lines containing the same number of syllables are felt to be of the same length. In a line of English poetry, the number of sentence stresses is more important than the number of syllables. Here are two verses from Tennyson which are considered to be perfectly matched and of the same length.

“'Break, 'break, 'break,
On the 'cold grey 'stones, Oh, 'sea!”

The unstressed syllables are so unimportant, rhythmically speaking, that it is not necessary to count them. When a person recites these lines, it takes them as long to say the first line as the second, even though the first contains only three syllables and the second is made up of seven.

This leads to a significant observation regarding English pronunciation.

Sentence-stresses tend to recur at regular intervals. The more unstressed syllables there are between stressed ones, the more rapidly they are pronounced. This is true to a large extent even of prose.

Here a native speaker of English pronounces these two sentences for you at normal speed.

The 'boy is 'interested in en'larging his vo'cabulary.

'Great 'progress is 'made 'daily.

Note how he unconsciously crushes together the unstressed syllables of the first sentence in order to get them said in time and how he lengthens somewhat the stressed syllables of the second so as to compensate for the lack of intervening unstressed syllables.

The problem of acquiring a good English speech may be divided into two parts:

1. Giving proper emphasis to stressed syllables, and making them recur regularly within an intonation phrase.
2. Weakening unstressed syllables and words, and obscuring the vowels in most of them.

It is a feature of English that the utterance is delivered as a series of close-knit units—rhythmic groups, which override in importance on the phonetic level the significance of the word on the linguistic level, Compare the rhythmic groups, based on strongly accented syllables, which are likely to occur in the following sentence:

They couldn't have / chosen a / better / time for their / holiday.

Mary and / George / specially / want to / go tomorrow.

As you can see in the examples, there is a tendency to pronounce unstressed syllables together with the preceding rather than the following stressed syllable within a rhythmic group.

The following exercises will help to acquire correct rhythmic habits.

Exercises on Rhythm

1. 0 0

come here / look out / what for? / where to? / on top / no more /
speak up / sit down / say “yes” / try hard / wash up / ask John / go
slow / hold tight / no use / please do / no thanks / yes please / run fast
/ work hard / quite right / that’s true / read this /

2. 0 0 0

try again / not enough / look inside / show me yours / not so fast /
lend a hand / cut the bread / make the tea / go to sleep / have a drink /
drive a car / break it up / practise hard / sing a song / draw a line /
have a go / light the fire / where’s your hat? / ring me up /

3. 0 0 0

I think so / I thought so / I’d like to / a pity / of course not / I’d love to
/ as well as / she had to / with pleasure / I’m sorry / just listen / but
why not? / a lot of / in daytime / I’d rather / it’s broken

4. 0 0 0 0

I think it is / I’d like you to / a bucketful / we oughtn’t to / he wants us
to / they knew it was / a lot of it / they’ve finished it / he thinks he can
/ I’ve heard of it / it used to be / they must have been / get rid of it /
I’ve paid for it / a pair of them

5. 0 0 0 0

writing it now / send him away / reading aloud / terribly slow / give
him a book / what is the time? / sing us a song / running away / top of
the class / are you awake? / send me a card / give me a ring / where
have they gone? / what is it for? / pouring with rain / come for a swim
/ heavy as lead / time and again / handsome young man / no-one is in
/ wait till I come / leave it behind

6. o O o o o

I've eaten them all / a beautiful one / I think it will be / I promised him
it / to satisfy them / I thought it had been / he wanted us to / he ought
to have had / an exercise-book / I've written to them / I asked if I could
/ a quarter of them / I gave it to her / the railway station

7. o O o O

I want to know / to do it well / it's quite all right / she tied it up / a
rubber band / he had to go / it's very good / it's hard to say / but hurry
up / she took it off / they put them on / another day / they mustn't
know / he locked the door / a waste of time / they've gone away / it's
all for you / I'd love to help / a glass of wine / it's not for sale

8. o O o o O

I wanted to know / I think that he might / I'll finish it now / a spoonful
of salt / she asked me to go / I thought he had gone / we wanted to see
/ a walk in the park / a plateful of soup / the best in the class / it's
warmer indoors / he left it outside / a hole in your sock / he borrowed
a pound / she's gone to the shops / you promised to write / the engine
won't start / I'm glad you have come

9. 0 0 0 0 0

finishing today / doing it alone / carry it away / clean it with a brush /
follow my advice / mind how you behave / get in touch at once / just
in time to see / waiting for the train / have another cake / what about
a drink / bring along your friend / hang it up to dry / let me take your
hat / put it on the shelf / don't be such a fool

10. 0 0 0 0 0

I think it will be fine / I wanted him to know / to finish with it now / a
bucketful of ice / there isn't any need / you ought to go to bed / he
waited half an hour / you only have to try / I never have a cold / it
doesn't make much sense / the middle of the road / impossible to say /
we thanked him very much / we promised to be good / I'll try to be in
time / she's eaten all the cream / you're wanted on the phone / it's
absolutely true / so don't forget to write

11. 0 0 0 0 0

I think he wants to / I want to meet him / I like it better / another
spoonful / you mustn't leave her / he left on Monday / she has to
practise / without your hat on / you need a haircut / it doesn't matter
/ we'll have a party / a great occasion / an awful nuisance / another
sandwich / suppose he saw me / a clap of thunder / a piece of
chocolate / a cup of cocoa

12. 0 0 0 0 0 0

he started to talk to me / I think that he wants us to / she wanted to
write to him / I'll borrow another one / you'll get it on Saturday /

they've all gone on holiday / it's very unfortunate / perhaps you'll
have heard of it / it's not the right attitude / I don't want to frighten
her / she wants a thermometer / it's not what I asked you for / she's
sewing the buttons on / a Beethoven /'beɪθəʊvn/ symphony / he came
on a bicycle / let's open the other one / repeat it again for me / the
soup isn't hot enough / the price has gone up again / he hasn't yet paid
for it

13. o O o o o O o o o

I wanted you to write about it / it's not the one I borrowed from you / I
didn't think it's interesting / she doesn't want to talk about him / you
won't forget to thank him for it / I took it to a watchmaker / the doctor
didn't see the patient / she bought some new pyjamas for him / I'd like
it with some soda-water / but where's the glass you're drinking out of?

14. O o o o o O

show him up to his room / throw it into the fire / walking along the
road / that's to be left alone / ready to go away / standing behind the
door / why did you run away? / tell her not to be late / sew it on to my
coat / ask them where they have been / show me what you have done /
sing me another song / multiply it by three / opposite the hotel /
suffering from a cold / polish it with a cloth / fill it up to the top

15. o O o o o O

I think he wants to go / it's not the one I want / it isn't quite the same
/ I haven't been before / the train is very late / he hasn't got a chance /
on Friday afternoon / they played a game of bridge / the concert starts

at eight / he goes to walk on foot / she has to stay in bed / excuse my
being late / it doesn't matter much / I can't afford a car / he practised
every day / a spoonful every hour

16. o O o o O o o O

I think that he wants us to go / it isn't the same as before / I didn't
expect to be asked / we shan't be in time for the play / you'd best be as
quick as you can / she's gone for a walk in the park / it's time we were
having our lunch / I've taken my coat to be cleaned / this shop doesn't
sell what I want / another affair for the police / she's sure to forget
what to do / he practises once in a while / a spoonful of apricot jam

17. o O o o o O o o o O

I think it was an excellent affair / I wonder if she'll ask me in advance /
we haven't got an envelope to match / there isn't really quite enough
for two / I don't suppose you'll understand my point / the bus is more
convenient than the tram / the concert's being broadcast after six / I'd
like a lump of sugar in my tea / we'll fetch you in a car in half an hour
/ a basketful of apples from the shop

18. o O o o o O o

I think he wants to go there / he's never very punctual / I want a
pound of sugar / I've got to do some shopping / you ought to buy a
wireless / you mustn't waste a moment / you're looking smart this
morning / in case you're late for dinner / it's time we went to dinner /
he doesn't speak much English

19. o O o o O o o O o o

I think that he wants us to take him there / I told him to wait in the
corridor / now what have I done with my handkerchief / remember to
get me another one / it's cheaper to go to the cinema / the ambulance
took him to hospital / apply for a post as a lecturer / he looked for a
stick to defend himself / I ought to have sent her a Christmas card /
you must have it ready by Saturday / we've hundreds of places to take
you to

20. O o o O o o O

buy her a pretty new dress / honey and strawberry jam / when are you
going away? / what have you done with the ink? / hurrying off to the
train / take it away to be cleaned / that can be seen at a glance /
wearing a funny old hat / why have they left you alone? / where have
you hidden the key? / go to another hotel / nearly as far as the bridge

21. o O o O o o o O

I think he wants to go there too / he did his best to save the child / the
snow was falling thick and fast / I know you didn't mean to hurt / it's
time the children went to bed / a glass of beer is what I need / he left
the room without a word / I saw her standing all alone / I can't forget
the things he said / they said they had to leave at once

22. o O o o O o o O o o O

he says that he wants us to take it away / we ought to be grateful we
haven't to pay / a woman has fallen and broken her leg / I never say no
to a hot cup of tea / then turn to the right at the end of the street / he
tied up the parcel and took it away / the gramophone record has

broken in two / it won't be the first time I've gone without lunch / the
tram stop is just a bit farther along / I see he's forgotten to leave his
address / I like to sit down with a good cigarette (and a book)