



SNS COLLEGE OF ENGINEERING
Kurumbapalayam (Po), Coimbatore – 641 107



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Stress and Intonation

Stress

Stress is the relative emphasis that may be given to certain syllables in a word, or to certain words in a phrase or sentence. In English, stressed syllables are louder than non-stressed syllables. Also, they are longer and have a higher pitch.

English is a stress-timed language. That means that stressed syllables appear at a roughly steady tempo, whereas non-stressed syllables are shortened. The stress can occur on both syllables in a word and words in a sentence. So we can divide stress as *word stress* and *sentence stress*.

In spoken language, grammatical words (auxiliary verbs, prepositions, pronouns, articles, ...) usually do not receive any stress. Lexical words, however, (nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, ...) must have at least one stressed syllable. There is no rule, however, about which syllable is stressed in a word with more than one syllable.

Word Stress:

If we mention about the stress within a word, we define the term 'stress' as syllable prominence. A stressed syllable can be identified with the following factors namely;

1. is louder,
2. is longer,
3. has a higher pitch and
4. contains a vowel different in quality from the neighboring vowels.

Look at the examples of stress in words. The stressed syllables are represented by bold writing. If you want to, you can listen to the words to hear the stress.

holiday, alone, admiration, confidential, degree, weaker, nervous, parents

You can look up the word in a dictionary that provides IPA transcript. The symbol ' in front of a syllable indicates that the following syllable is stressed. Look at some examples of IPA transcripts:

- ['gɑ:dn] ⇒ garden ⇒ the first syllable is stressed: **garden**



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- [ˈmɛdəʊ] ⇒ meadow ⇒ the first syllable is stressed: **meadow**
- [ˈmʌʃ,rʊm] ⇒ mushroom ⇒ the first syllable is stressed: **mushroom**
- [θərˈmɛtə] ⇒ thermometer ⇒ the second syllable is stressed: **thermometer**
- [juːˈmɪdɪ.ti] ⇒ humidity ⇒ the second syllable is stressed: **humidity**

There are many verbs that consist of two syllables. Mostly, the stress is on the second syllable. Due to historical developments, the same word has become a noun. The noun, however, is stressed differently: the stress is on the first syllable. Look at the examples:

- to **record** ⇒ a **record**
- to **permit** ⇒ a **permit**
- to **address** ⇒ an **address**
- to **export** ⇒ an **export**
- to **transport** ⇒ a **transport**
- to **transfer** ⇒ a **transfer**

Sentence Stress:

The stresses that can occur on words sometimes become modified when the words are part of sentences. English words have the stress on their first syllables when they are used alone. But when used in a sentence, the stress shifts. There is a stress on the first syllable of each of the words

Example ‘Mary, younger, brother, wanted, fifty, chocolate, peanuts’ when these words are said in isolation.

But there are normally fewer stresses when they occur in a sentence such as

‘Mary’s younger brother wanted fifty chocolate peanuts.’

If we put the stress on the first syllables of all the words in the sentence, it will not sound nice and the meaning may be hardly understood. The sentence should be

‘Mary’s younger **brother** wanted **fifty** chocolate **peanuts**.’

The first syllables of ‘younger’, ‘wanted’ and ‘chocolate’ are pronounced without stress.

The simple sentence below can have many levels of meaning based on the word you stress. The stressed words are written in bold.



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1. I don’t think he should get the job.

Meaning: Somebody else thinks he should get the job.

2. I **don’t** think he should get the job.

Meaning: It’s not true that I think he should get the job.

3. I don’t **think** he should get the job.

Meaning: That’s not really what I mean. Or I’m not sure he’ll get the job.

4. I don’t think **he** should get the job.

Meaning: Somebody else should get the job.

5. I don’t think he **should** get the job.

Meaning: In my opinion it is wrong that he is going to get the job.

6. I don’t think he should **get** the job.

Meaning: He should have to earn that job.

7. I don’t think he should get **the** job.

Meaning: He should get another job.

8. I don’t think he should get the **job**.

Meaning: Maybe he should get something else instead.

In an answer statement, a word has the stress on it when it is contrasted with an item in the question statement. It is more clearly understood with the examples below:

A) Would you prefer coffee or tea?

B) Tea, please.

The answer shows which option you choose in respond to the question, so ‘tea’ has the contrastive stress.

A) Did you go to the campus yesterday or **not**?



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B) I went to the campus yesterday.

The verb 'went' appears to be the old information and it has the meaning of confirmation.

A) Did you park your car inside the garage?

B) No, I parked my car outside.

'Outside' is contrasted with 'inside'. The meaning is: the car is parked outside, not inside.

Exercise 1:

Make your students say this sentence aloud using the stress word marked in bold. And have them match the sentence version to the meaning below.

1. I said she might consider a new haircut
 2. I **said** she might consider a new haircut
 3. I said **she** might consider a new haircut
 4. I said she **might** consider a new haircut
 5. I said she might **consider** a new haircut
 6. I said she might consider a **new** haircut
 7. I said she might consider a new **haircut**
- a. Not just a haircut
 - b. It's a possibility
 - c. It was my idea
 - d. Not something else
 - e. Don't you understand me?



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- f. Not another person
- g. She should think about it. It's a good idea

Exercise 2:

Have students write 10 FALSE sentences. They could be about anything, as only as they are not true. Next have students read the statements to their partner. The partner must correct each of the incorrect statements.

For example: "Christmas is in July." - "No, Christmas is in *December* ."

Exercise 3:

Put students in pairs. Give student A a list of questions or statements. Give student B a list of replies. Student A should hum the intonation patterns of his utterances. Student B should reply with the correct response.

Student A	Student B
I like pizza, pickles, and chips.	Not all together, I hope.
Would you prefer coffee or tea?	Tea, please.
Would you like some ice cream and cake?	No, thank you. I'm not hungry.
Next week we are flying to Rome.	Really? How long will you be there?
Is he going to the dentist?	Yes. He has a toothache.

Intonation

The entire variation of pitch while speaking is called intonation. A very obvious difference in intonation can be observed when looking at statements and questions.

Example



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- When someone utters an echo or asks declarative questions (like **He found it on the street?**), the intonation (i.e. the voice) is rising to a higher pitch at the end.
- When someone asks a wh-question (like **Where did he find it?**) or utters a statement (like **He found it on the street.**), the intonation (i.e. the voice) is falling to a lower pitch at the end.
- Yes or no questions (**Did he find it on the street?**) often have a rising end, but not always.

Intonation also deals with the stress of words. Words are stressed to make a certain emphasis. A sentence can be spoken differently, depending on the speaker's intention.

Look at the following sentences. Speak them out loud and especially stress the word that is in bold writing. Then think about how the meaning of the utterance changes.

- I did not read anything about the disaster.
- **I** did not read anything about the disaster.
- I did **not** read anything about the disaster.
- I did not **read** anything about the disaster.
- I did not read **anything** about the disaster.
- I did not read anything about the **disaster**.

Word Stress Quiz

Test your understanding of the word stress pages. For each question, the correct choice is the one in which the stressed syllable is capitalized, as in voCABulary.

1. Can you pass me a plastic knife?

PLAS-tic
plas-TIC

2. I want to be a photographer.

PHO-to-graph-er
pho-TO-graph-er

3. Which photograph do you like best?



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PHO-to-graph
pho-TO-graph

4. He was born in China.

CHI-na
Chi-NA

5. Whose computer is this?

com-PU-ter
com-pu-TER

6. I can't decide which book to borrow.

DE-cide
de-CIDE

7. Couldn't you understand what she was saying?

un-DER-stand
un-der-STAND

8. Voting in elections is your most important duty.

im-POR-tant
im-por-TANT

9. We had a really interesting conversation.

con-VER-sa-tion
con-ver-SA-tion

10. How do you pronounce this word?



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PRO-nounce
pro-NOUNCE