

Word stress

Introduction

Now that we have reviewed the various sounds of English, we must discuss syllable and word stress or another way to put it, **the rhythm of English**. It is important to keep in mind that English is a **time-stressed language**. As opposed to Spanish, which is a syllable-timed language in which an equal amount of time is given to each syllable, **English adjusts the timing of stressed and unstressed syllables and words. In English, some syllables are longer and some shorter**. By stressing certain syllables and words, we can better understand the meaning of the word or sentence. Understanding time stress and intonation in English will help the learner both better understand English and be better understood.

1. Syllable stress

Words are made up of syllables. **Syllables are units of sound which almost always have, with few exceptions, at least one vowel sound**. In words of two or more syllables, one syllable is stressed while the others are said quickly and without emphasis. The stressed syllable is longer and louder than the unstressed.

The only fixed rules for syllable stress are: 1) words can only have one stress and 2) the stress is always on a vowel.

Interestingly, related words can have different syllable stresses (PHOto, phoTOgrapher, photoGRAPHic).

2. Rules of stress

There are two very simple rules about word stress:

1. **One word has only one stress.** (One word cannot have two stresses. If you hear two stresses, you hear two words. Two stresses cannot be one word. It is true that there can be a "secondary" stress in some words. But a secondary stress is much smaller than the main [primary] stress, and is only used in long words.)
2. **We can only stress vowels, not consonants.**

2.1. Rules of stress in mono-syllabic words

One syllable words logically have the stress on the one syllable. Only verbs, adjectives, nouns, and adverbs made up of one syllable are stressed.

Examples:

PAY /'peɪ/

DRIVE/'draɪv/

GOOD/'gʊd/

Prepositions, articles and conjunctions are not stressed as: so, and, off, in, from, an, the, etc.

2.2. Rules of stress in bi-syllabic words

- 2-syllable **nouns**, **adjectives**, and **adverbs** are usually stressed on the first syllable. The second syllable is stressed only if it includes: a long vowel, a diphthong (except / əʊ /) or a short vowel followed by 2 consonants. E.g.
 - **1. Nouns:** 'par ent, 'stud ent, 'mem ber
 - **2. Adjectives:** 'qui et, 'bet ter, 'ba sic
 - **3. Adverbs:** 'sel dom, 'may be, 'nev er
- 2-syllable **verbs** are usually stressed on the second syllable. The first syllable is stressed only if it contains a long vowel or a diphthong.

e.g. em 'brace, sus 'pend, ne' glect

e.g. 'open

2.3. Rules of stress in three-syllable words

- **First syllable stressed:** Most three syllable words (nouns, adjectives or verbs) are stressed on the first syllable especially if the whole word contains only short vowels or the first syllable contains a long vowel or a diphthong.
Examples: ENergy/'enədʒi/, HOSpital/'hɑ:spɪtəl/, 'September, 'memory.
FInally/'fam əli/
- **Second syllable stressed :** The second syllable is stressed if it contains a long vowel or a diphthong.
Examples: po'tato, ba'nana.
- **Third syllable stressed :** The third syllable is stressed if it comprises a long vowel, a diphthong or a short vowel followed by two consonants.
Examples: resu'rrect, compre'hend.

2.4. Rules of Stress in four-syllable words

The stress in four syllable words is either on the second or third syllable. The second syllable is generally stressed if the word ends in “-cy”, “-ty”, “-phy”, “-gy” or “-al”.

Examples:

dePENdency/dɪ'pendənsi/

psyCHIatry/sə'kaɪətri/

eQUALity/ɪ'kwɑ:ləti/

2.5. two-syllable heteronyms

Some words, called *heteronyms*, have a single spelling, but two different pronunciations. There are a number of 2-syllable words that are stressed on the first syllable when the word is being used as a noun or adjective, and stressed on the the second syllable when it is being used as a verb.

1. 'pro ject (n.), pro 'ject (v.)
2. 'sus pect (n.), sus pect (v.)

Note: syllables whose peak is schwa are never stressed.

Exercise: Which syllable is stressed in each of the following words. (For the key, consult the dictionary).

- a. Desk, class, or, post, to, joy, calm, pay. (mono-syllabic words)
- b. Single, number, second, address, window, heaven, hostel, humane. (bi-syllabic nouns and adjectives)
- c. Impact, obtain, include, possess, proclaim, discuss, embrace, redden, achieve. (bi-syllabic verbs)
- d. Understand, department, together, camera, Saturday, hamburger, behaviour (three-syllable words)
- e. Kindergarten, discovery, military, consistency (four-syllable words)

Resources

<https://www.curso-ingles.com/en/learn/courses/advanced-level/pronunciation/syllable-stress>

<https://www.englishclub.com/pronunciation/word-stress.htm>

<https://pronuncian.com/2syllable-word-stress>