

## Sentence Stress

**Sentence stress** is the music of spoken English. Like **word stress**, sentence stress can help you to understand spoken English, even rapid spoken English.

Sentence stress is what gives English its **rhythm** or "beat". You remember that word stress is accent on **one syllable** within a **word**. Sentence stress is accent on **certain words** within a **sentence**.

Most sentences have two basic types of word:

- **content words**  
Content words are the key words of a sentence. They are the important words that carry the meaning or sense—the real content.
- **structure words**  
Structure words are not very important words. They are small, simple words that make the sentence correct grammatically. They give the sentence its correct form—its structure.

If you remove the structure words from a sentence, you will probably still understand the sentence.

If you remove the content words from a sentence, you will **not** understand the sentence. The sentence has no sense or meaning.

Imagine that you receive this telegram message:

**SELL CAR GONE FRANCE**

This sentence is not complete. It is not a "grammatically correct" sentence. But you probably understand it. These 4 words communicate very well. *Somebody wants you to sell their car for them because they have gone to France.* We can add a few words:

**SELL my CAR I've GONE to FRANCE**

The new words do not really add any more information. But they make the message more correct grammatically. We can add even more words to make one complete, grammatically correct sentence. **But the information is basically the same:**

content words  
Will you **SELL** my **CAR** because I've **GONE** to **FRANCE**.  
structure words

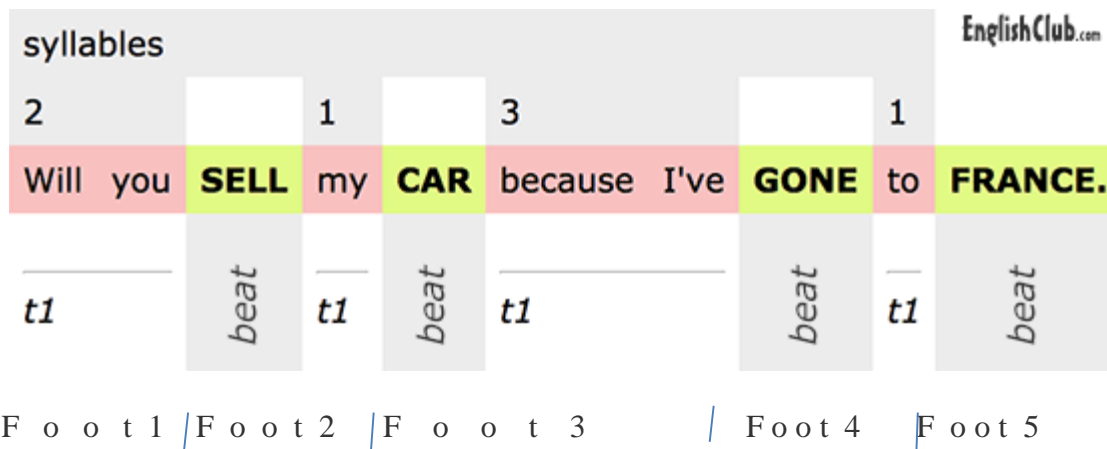
In our sentence, the 4 **key words** (sell, car, gone, France) are accentuated or **stressed**.

Why is this important for pronunciation? It is important because it adds "music" to the language. It is the **rhythm** of the English language. It changes the speed at which we speak (and listen to) the language. **The time between each stressed word is the same.**

In our sentence, there is **1 syllable** between SELL and CAR and **3 syllables** between CAR and GONE. But the **time** (*t*) between SELL and CAR and between CAR and GONE is the same. We maintain a constant

beat on the stressed words. To do this, we say "my" more **slowly**, and "because I've" more **quickly**. We change the speed of the small structure words so that the rhythm of the key content words stays the same.

The rhythm of the key content words stays the same.



e.g. I am a proFESsional phoTOgrapher whose MAIN INterest is to TAKE SPEcial, BLACK and WHITE PHOtographs that exHIBit ABstract MEANings in their photoGRAPHic STRUCture.

## Rules for Sentence Stress in English

The basic rules of sentence stress are:

1. *content words (verbs, nouns, adjectives, adverbs, along with demonstrative pronouns and negative words as 'not') are stressed*
2. *structure words (prepositions, articles, conjunctions, pronouns, auxiliaries) are unstressed*
3. *the time between stressed words is always the same*
4. *the phonological unit of rhythm is the **FOOT**: – each foot starts with a stressed syllable or with a 'silent beat'. – we will use a forward slash ( / ) to indicate a foot boundary.*

**Exercise:** Where does stress fall in this sentence? Divide it into rhythmic units (i.e. feet).

She has been teaching English for twenty years to adults.

Jane has not worked as a freelancer for two years.

This journal contains scholarly publications by researchers.

**Links:** <https://www.englishclub.com/pronunciation/sentence-stress.htm>

<http://www.spence.saar.de/courses/phonetics/phon1502topic07/phonetics20151214-print.pdf>

