

Word stress

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:

- a) **One word has only one primary stress.** (One word cannot have two stresses. If you hear two primary stresses, you hear two words. 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.)
- b) **We can only stress syllables, not consonants.**

2.1. Rules of stress in bi-syllabic words

- Tow-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
- Tow-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. 'widen

2.2. 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/'enərdʒi/, HOSpital/'hɑ:spɪtl/, 'September, 'memory.
FInally/'fain əli/

- **Second syllable stressed:** The second syllable is stressed if it contains a long vowel or a diphthong.

Examples: po'tato, ba'nana, encounter.

- **Third syllable stressed:** The third syllable is usually stressed if it comprises a long vowel, a diphthong or a short vowel followed by two consonants.

Examples: resu'rrect, compre'hend.

2.3. Two-syllable heteronyms

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

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

Note: syllables whose peak is schwa or a syllabic consonant are never stressed; they are weak syllables.

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>