

## Word Stress in English

Word stress is your **magic key** to understanding spoken English. Native speakers of English use word stress naturally. Word stress is so natural for them that they don't even know they use it. Non-native speakers who speak English to native speakers without using word stress, encounter two problems:

1. They find it difficult to understand native speakers, especially those speaking fast.
2. The native speakers may find it difficult to understand them.

To understand word stress, it helps to understand **syllables**. Every word is made from syllables. Each word has one, two, three or more syllables.




word		number of syllables
dog	dog	1
green	green	1
quite	quite	1
quiet	qui-et	2
orange	or-ange	2
table	ta-ble	2
expensive	ex-pen-sive	3
interesting	in-ter-est-ing	4
realistic	re-al-is-tic	4
unexceptional	un-ex-cep-tion-al	5

Notice that (with a few rare exceptions) every syllable contains at least one **vowel** (a, e, i, o or u) or **vowel sound**.

### What is Word Stress?

In English, we do not say each syllable with the same force or strength. In one word, we accentuate ONE syllable. We say **one** syllable very **loudly** (big, strong, important) and **all the other syllables** very **quietly**.

Let's take 3 words: **photograph**, **photographer** and **photographic**. Do they sound the same when spoken? No. Because we accentuate (stress) ONE syllable in each word. And it is not always the same syllable. So the **shape** of each word is different.

	shape	total syllables	stressed syllable
<b><u>PHO</u> TO GRAPH</b>		3	#1
<b>PHO <u>TO</u> GRAPH ER</b>		4	#2
<b>PHO TO <u>GRAPH</u> IC</b>		4	#3

This happens in ALL words with 2 or more syllables: TEACHer, JaPAN, CHINa, aBOVE, converSAtion, INteresting, imPORtAnt, deMAND, etCETera, etCETera, etCETera

The syllables that are not stressed are **weak** or **small** or **quiet**. Native speakers of English listen for the STRESSED syllables, not the weak syllables. If you use word stress in your speech, you will instantly and automatically improve your pronunciation **and your comprehension**.

Try to hear the stress in individual words each time you listen to English - on the radio, or in films for example. Your first step is to HEAR and recognise it. After that, you can USE it!

There are two very important rules about word stress:

1. **One word, one stress.** (One word cannot have two stresses. So if you hear two stresses, you have heard two words, not one word.)
2. **The stress is always on a vowel.**

## Why is Word Stress Important?

Word stress is not used in all languages. Some languages, Japanese or French for example, pronounce each syllable with eq-ual em-pha-sis. Other languages, English for example, use word stress.

Word stress is not an optional extra that you can add to the English language if you want. It is **part of the language!** English speakers use word stress to communicate rapidly and accurately, even in difficult conditions. If, for example, you do not hear a word clearly, you can still understand the word because of the position of the stress.

Think again about the two words **photograph** and **photographer**. Now imagine that you are speaking to somebody by telephone over a very bad line. You cannot hear clearly. In fact, you hear only the first two syllables of one of these words,



**photo...** Which word is it, photograph or photographer? Of course, with word stress you will know immediately which word it is because in reality you will hear either **PHOto...** or **phoTO...** So without hearing the whole word, you probably know what the word is ( **PHOto...graph** or **phoTO...grapher**). It's magic! (Of course, you also have the 'context' of your conversation to help you.)

This is a simple example of how word stress helps us understand English. There are many, many other examples, because we use word stress all the time, without thinking about it.

## Where do I Put Word Stress?

There are some rules about which syllable to stress. But...the rules are rather complicated! Probably the best way to learn is from experience. Listen carefully to spoken English and try to develop a feeling for the "music" of the language.

When you learn a new word, you should also learn its stress pattern. If you keep a vocabulary book, make a note to show which syllable is stressed. If you do not know, you can look in a dictionary. All dictionaries give the phonetic spelling of a word. This is where they show which syllable is stressed, usually with an apostrophe (') just **before** or just **after** the stressed syllable. (The notes at the front of the dictionary will explain the system used.) Look at (and listen to) this example for the word **plastic**. There are 2 syllables. Syllable #1 is stressed.

example	phonetic spelling: dictionary A	phonetic spelling: dictionary B
<b><u>PLAS</u> TIC</b>		
	/plæs'tlk/	/'plæs tlk/

## Rules of Word Stress in English

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.**

Here are some more, rather complicated, rules that can help you understand where to put the stress. But do not rely on them too much, because there are many exceptions. It is better to try to "feel" the music of the language and to add the stress naturally.

### 1 Stress on first syllable

rule	example
Most <b>2-syllable nouns</b>	PRESent, EXport, CHIna, TAbLe
Most <b>2-syllable adjectives</b>	PRESent, SLENDER, CLEVer, HAPpy

### 2 Stress on last syllable

rule	example
Most <b>2-syllable verbs</b>	to preSENT, to exPORT, to deCIDE, to beGIN

There are many two-syllable words in English whose meaning and class change with a change in stress. The word **present**, for example is a two-syllable word. If we stress the first syllable, it is a noun (gift) or an adjective (opposite of absent). But if we stress the second syllable, it becomes a verb (to offer). More examples: the words **export**, **import**, **contract** and **object** can all be nouns or verbs depending on whether the stress is on the first or second syllable.

### 3 Stress on penultimate syllable (penultimate = second from end)

rule	example
Words ending in <b>-ic</b>	GRAPHic, geoGRAPHic, geoLOGic
Words ending in <b>-sion</b> and <b>-tion</b>	teleVIsion, reveLAtion

For a few words, native English speakers don't always "agree" on where to put the stress. For example, some people say **teleVIsion** and others say **TELevision**. Another example is: **CONtroversy** and **contROversy**.

#### 4 Stress on ante-penultimate syllable (ante-penultimate = third from end)

rule	example
Words ending in <b>-cy</b> , <b>-ty</b> , <b>-phy</b> and <b>-gy</b>	deMOcracy, dependaBIlity, phoTOgraphy, geOLOgy
Words ending in <b>-al</b>	CRItical, geoLOGical

#### 5 Compound words (words with two parts)

rule	example
For compound <b>nouns</b> , the stress is on the <b>first</b> part	BLACKbird, GREENhouse
For compound <b>adjectives</b> , the stress is on the <b>second</b> part	bad-TEMpered, old-FASHioned
For compound <b>verbs</b> , the stress is on the <b>second</b> part	to underSTAND, to overFLOW