

**Why is word stress important?**

Stress is one of the most important speech tools used by English speakers to communicate meaning. English speakers use stress to highlight information they think is important. In addition, every English word with more than one syllable or word part has a defined stress pattern. That is, you can look up a dictionary to see which syllable is stressed. English stress is as important as English sounds.

**How does it work?**

The English stress system is based on the CONTRAST between stressed and unstressed syllables, stressed and unstressed words. Stressed syllables are longer and louder than unstressed syllables. They also have some pitch change or movement of the voice up or down.

Basically, there are three levels of stress in English:

<b>syllable stress in words</b>	contrast between stressed and unstressed syllables in words eg <b>ma</b> ny <b>peo</b> ple be <b>lieve</b>
<b>key word stress</b>	stress in longer speech chunks, clauses or sentences eg / that in an <b>increasingly globalised world</b> /
<b>focus word stress</b>	the syllable in the stressed word which has the strongest pitch change in a speech chunk eg / that in an increasingly <b>globalised world</b> / .... <div style="text-align: center; margin-top: 5px;"> <span style="margin: 0 20px;">↘</span> <span style="margin: 0 20px;">↗</span> </div>

**What will happen if I don't use stress?**

You may sabotage your communication and you may risk tiring and confusing listeners. Listeners may not be able to recognise even simple vocabulary if you stress syllables equally or use incorrect word stress. Listeners may not follow your meaning if you don't stress key words in information chunks.

Stress is essential for presenting key information clearly. Stressing information words at the end of a sentence or a speech chunk is also important because this is where new information often occurs in English.

## HELPS Pronunciation Fact Sheet

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### How do I know which syllable to stress?

Word stress is so important that it is marked in dictionaries with  $\square$  before the stressed syllable. For example, 'emphasis' is written phonetically as / $\square$ 'emfəsəs/. Dictionaries also mark secondary stress below the line, especially in multi-syllabic words and compounds. For example, 'multimillionaire' / $\square$ mʌltɪmɪljə'neə/.

There are some basic or typical word stress patterns. Go to **Pronunciation Fact Sheet: Summary of common word stress patterns**.

### Are there any 'secrets' for pronouncing stressed syllables well?

Yes. English speakers often pronounce unstressed syllables or parts of a word with a 'weak' or indefinite vowel. This vowel is so common, and so important in English, that it has a special name, the 'schwa' /ə/. Of course English speakers pronounce weak syllables in other ways as well; they say unstressed syllables more quickly and more softly than stressed syllables. Have a look at these examples:

/ə/	/ə/ /ə/	/ə/	/ə/ /ə/ /ə/
a/ma/zɪŋ	fa/bu/ləs	krɪ/tɪ/cal	un/be/lie/və/ble

### Getting word stress right in academic contexts

Many words in academic contexts are multisyllabic. It's important to get the pronunciation of these words right.

#### Tips for pronouncing word stress correctly:

Divide the word into syllables. Mark the main and secondary stress if applicable.

Look up a good online or print dictionary to check.

Listen closely to how a fluent speaker of English pronounces the word.

Make a list of important vocabulary and mark the stressed syllables.

Practise, practise, practise! Get feedback from a fluent English speaker.

## Chunking and pausing

### Why are chunking and pausing important?

Pausing and chunking are vital communication tools for both listeners and speakers. Speakers divide speech into 'pieces' or 'chunks' to communicate a thought or idea or to highlight information they think is important. This is the simplest and most effective way to 'package information' for the listener. Dividing information into chunks makes it easier for listeners to understand.

### What exactly are speech chunks?

A speech chunk can be a word, a phrase or a whole sentence. Speech chunks can be signalled in different ways:

- pauses - moments of silence, sometimes very short
- slowing down
- strong stress on the last key word in the chunk

When you are working with a written version of a spoken text, it's handy to mark short pauses with a single slash / and a double slash // for longer pauses.

### When should I use chunking and pausing?

You can use pausing and chunking to:

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• state information</li> <li>• give an opinion</li> <li>• emphasise a point</li> </ul> | <p>This is a powerful /<br/>but unfortunately flawed /<br/>argument //</p>                    |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• put forward a criticism</li> </ul>   | <p>The main problem with the argument is /<br/>the lack of hard / statistical evidence //</p> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• soften a criticism</li> </ul>  | <p>I do understand /<br/>that collecting data / is difficult //</p>                           |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• contrast a point</li> </ul>  | <p>However / ...</p>  |

## Chunking and pausing in presentations

When you give a presentation, it's important to pause enough to signal that you are introducing a new topic. Pause at the end of one section and before you start a new one. Then state the new topic and pause so the listener can get ready for new information.

### What will happen if I don't use chunking and pausing?

Speech without pauses and speech chunks can overwhelm the listener with 'too much information'. The listener may feel 'lost' in a 'forest' of words. Without chunking and pausing, it will be hard for listeners to follow your meaning and know where they are in your presentation.

Try reading the examples below. Which one do you think a listener would find easier to understand?

#### Example 1

*Does it really matter whether people speak with an accent as long as they can be easily understood many people now believe that in an increasingly globalised world we should accept variations in pronunciation that is accent however there's no point is speaking with an accent if people can't understand you is there?*

#### Example 2

*Does it really matter /  
whether people speak with an accent /  
as long as they can be easily understood?//  
Many people now believe /  
that in an increasingly globalised world /  
we should accept variations in pronunciation /  
that is / accent //  
However / there's no point is speaking with an accent /  
if people can't understand you / is there?//*

# Chunking and pausing

## Kofi Annan Listening Worksheet

**Speech sample** BBC Learning English, website  
Talk about English, Better speaking, Episode 3 – Kofi Annan  
[http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/learningenglish/webcast/tae\\_betterspeaking\\_archive.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/learningenglish/webcast/tae_betterspeaking_archive.shtml)

BBC presenter, Callum Robertson, and language teacher, Richard Hallows, listen to a clip from the former Secretary-General of the United Nations, Kofi Annan. They talk about what makes Kofi Annan an effective speaker of English and ways you can practise and improve your English pronunciation.

Callum Robertson [1:28 mins]: *Kofi Annan is from Ghana in West Africa, and ... uses English as an international language, in a highly effective way. In this excerpt from a speech on globalization, he's asking his listeners to make sure that the process of economic globalization helps everybody in the world, the poor as well as the rich.*

### Task 1 Pronunciation and communication strategies

Listen to Kofi Annan speaking. Do you think he is an effective speaker of English? Comment on the features below.

- intelligibility: easy to understand, speaks clearly (example)
- speed: \_\_\_\_\_
- pausing: \_\_\_\_\_
- vocabulary: \_\_\_\_\_
- stress or emphasis: \_\_\_\_\_
- overall impression: \_\_\_\_\_

### Task 2 Chunking and pausing

Listen and read the transcript below [1:48].  
Mark the pauses with a slash (/) (// for longer pauses).

*It is a much tougher sell out there in a world where half of our fellow human beings struggle to survive on less than two dollars a day. Try to imagine what globalisation can possibly mean to half of humanity that has never made or received a phone call. The simple fact of the matter is this. If we cannot make globalisation work for all in the end it will work for none.*

## Pausing and Focus Stress

### TED presentation by Richard St John - *The 8 secrets of success*

This presentation is given on the website

[http://www.ted.com/talks/lang/eng/richard\\_st\\_john\\_s\\_8\\_secrets\\_of\\_success.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/lang/eng/richard_st_john_s_8_secrets_of_success.html)

This segment begins at 1.00 of a 3.33 minute presentation.

Richard St. John describes himself as an “average guy who found success doing what he loved”. He spent more than ten years interviewing people he considered successful to find out the reasons for success. These ‘secrets’ were then distilled into 8 words, 3 minutes and a successful book.

#### Task 1 Listening

Listen to the presentation and write down the 8 secrets to success.

- |     |      |
|-----|------|
| i   | v    |
| ii  | vi   |
| iii | vii  |
| iv  | viii |

#### Task 2 Controlled speaking

Listen to the following extract from the presentation.

- Mark the pauses with a slash (/).
- Highlight or underline the focus words.
- Practise reading the transcript using pausing and focus stress.

#### Transcript

And the first thing is passion. Freeman Thomas says, "I'm driven by my passion." TED-sters do it for love, they don't do it for money. Carol Coletta says, "I would pay someone to do what I do." And the interesting thing is, if you do it for love, the money comes anyway.

## Word and Focus Stress Practice

Read the following item aloud then underline words that you think should have focus stress. Then mark the word stress for those words you have underlined.

Primary stress should be marked before the stressed syllable above the line and secondary stress below the line.

E.g. pro,nunci'ation.

### **Australia and the Global Financial Crisis**

A year ago, Australians were preparing themselves for a long period of recession. Many companies began belt-tightening in the expectation of poor consumer demand, while individuals also started to reduce their debt in case they were to lose their job. Well, some companies did suffer, and unemployment did rise, but not nearly as much as expected. In fact, technically, Australia has not been in recession and consumer confidence seems to be rising.

So, why has Australia escaped the worst of the global recession? There are several possible reasons. One is that the Federal Government almost immediately began to introduce stimulus packages by giving handouts and by providing for a range of infrastructure projects. These measures have increased retail sales and stimulated sections of the construction industry. Moreover, China's economy has continued to grow, so sales of resources to China have not fallen as much as expected. Other reasons are that the Australian economy was in surplus before the Global Financial Crisis (GFC), our banks are well-regulated and the government agreed to guarantee bank deposits for the short-term. Economists are reasonably optimistic that Australia will weather the crisis better than most countries.



## Stress on words that give new information at the end of a sentence

Information that may be *new* to the listener, is usually placed towards the end of the clause or sentence in English. Although the information is near the end of the sentence, it is stressed in speaking because it is important for the listener. If you let your voice fade away at the end of a sentence, an important part of your message might be lost to the listener. This new information has the focus stress.

Example:     *My presentation today is about obesity.*  
                   *I've just been accepted into the Master's program.*

*Obesity* and *Master's program* are the topics of the sentences but the words appear at the end of the sentences. Those words must be stressed in the usual way i.e. *o'besity* with stress on the second syllable and '*Master's ,program*, with main stress on the word *Master's* and secondary stress on *program*.

### Task 1

Here are some more examples where the sentence begins with information that the listener probably has some background knowledge of, and ends with the new information that the listener wants to receive.

The *new* information is underlined. Other key words that are stressed are in italics. In pairs, practise reading the text, paying attention to the stress on key words but with the focus stress on the underlined words.

The listener should give feedback to the reader.

NB. Refer to the Fact Sheet, *Summary of common word stress patterns*, or a dictionary, for help with word stress on multisyllabic words.

A new *tourism program* has been set up to promote Indigenous tourism in Australia. *Many people* want to experience Indigenous culture first hand but find it difficult to access special tours and camps. The *new* program will feature Indigenous businesses in local and international marketing and will set up training and mentoring programs. (adapted from 'Tourism champions help sell Australia to the world', *National Indigenous Times*, 10 December 2009, p.31).



## Signpost words – pausing and stress

*Signpost words* (also called *transition signals*) such as *Firstly*, *In other words*, and *It's quite clear that...* are used to guide the listener.

These words should therefore be spoken clearly and given appropriate emphasis. This involves pausing after the word or word group, and using suitable stress and intonation. Not all signpost words should receive the same amount of stress. It depends on their importance in the development of your presentation. Note that a comma in punctuation indicates that a pause is likely in speech.

### Task

Read the sentences below and do the following:

- Mark with / where you think you would pause. If it is a longer pause to give more emphasis, mark with //
- Underline any stressed words or syllables
- Read the sentences aloud and compare with your partner

(Note that punctuation within the sentences has been removed.)

- So first of all let me introduce myself.
- In the second part I will be examining the causes of teenage binge drinking in Australia
- Another factor is the increase in teenage violence on weekends.
- On the other hand will a tax on alcopops make much of an impact?
- However if such a tax is introduced young people will merely switch to other kinds of alcoholic drinks.
- One suggestion already taken up by some licensed premises is to limit drinking hours.
- As a result a pilot education program is being introduced in some schools.
- Finally and most importantly we must look at community attitudes to teenage drinking.
- To summarise we've looked at some of the causes of teenage binge drinking and some possible solutions.

## Stress Timed Languages

Some pronunciation researchers talk about languages being stress timed or syllable timed. Others question the importance of this. *What do you think?*

### Stress Timed Languages

- The rhythm is created using stressed and unstressed syllables
- Syllables are 'squashed' together so that stressed syllables are regular.

#### 1. English speakers **SQUEEZE** weak grammar words together



#### 2. English speakers **STRETCH** the information words



Zawadski, H.1994, *In Tempo An English Pronunciation Course*, National Centre for English Language Teaching and Research, Macquarie University, Sydney

**Other languages** with greater or lesser tendency to **stress timing** include:

- **Cousins** of English: German and Dutch
- Scandinavian languages: Swedish, Norwegian, Danish
- Russian, Serbian
- Mandarin Chinese (especially in the formal register)

### Syllable-timed languages:

- The rhythm is spread evenly across all syllables
- **'More of a patter than a wave'**
- *Romance languages:* French, Italian, Portuguese, Romanian, Spanish
- Indian subcontinent: Hindi, Urdu, Bengali
- The majority of East and South East Asian languages including
  - Cantonese and all dialects of Chinese except Mandarin
  - Vietnamese, Lao, Thai, Khmer, Burmese
  - Indonesian, Malay
  - Japanese, Korean

**Kevin Rudd's apology speech**

Listen to it on Youtube:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b3TZOGpG6cM>

I move that today we honour the Indigenous peoples of this land, the oldest continuing cultures in human history.

We reflect on their past mistreatment. We reflect in particular on the mistreatment of those who were Stolen Generations — this blemished chapter in our nation's history.

The time has now come for the nation to turn a new page in Australia's history by righting the wrongs of the past and so moving forward with confidence to the future.

We apologise for the laws and policies of successive Parliaments and governments that have inflicted profound grief, suffering and loss on these our fellow Australians. We apologise especially for the removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families, their communities and their country.

For the pain, suffering and hurt of these Stolen Generations, their descendants and for their families left behind, we say sorry.

...To the mothers and the fathers, the brothers and the sisters, for the breaking up of families and communities, we say sorry.

And for the indignity and degradation thus inflicted on a proud people and a proud culture, we say sorry.