

Intonation in English Pronunciation

INTONATION

What is intonation?

Intonation and stress are closely linked. In fact it's impossible to dissociate them. They go hand in hand.

Intonation is about *how* we say things, rather than *what* we say, the way the voice rises and falls when speaking, in other words the music of the language.

Just as words have stressed syllables, sentences have regular patterns of stressed words. In addition, the voice tends to rise, fall or remain flat depending on the meaning or feeling we want to convey (surprise, anger, interest, boredom, gratitude, etc.). Intonation therefore indicates the mood of the speaker.

There are two basic patterns of intonation in English: falling intonation and rising intonation. In the following examples a downward arrow (↘) indicates a fall in intonation and an upward arrow (↗) indicates a rise in intonation.

Again, these are not rules but patterns generally used by native speakers of English. Just remember that content words are stressed, and intonation adds attitude or emotion.

This explanation on intonation is intended to serve as a general guide to help learners. It should in no way make them unnecessarily anxious!

It should be remembered that a written explanation can never be a substitute for a 'live' conversation with a native speaker.

Attitudinal intonation is something that is best acquired through talking and listening to English speakers.

Falling Intonation (↘)

(The pitch of the voice falls at the end of the sentence.)

Falling intonation is the most common intonation pattern in English.

It is commonly found in statements, commands, wh-questions (information questions), confirmatory question tags and exclamations.

• Statements

- Nice to meet ↘ you.
- I'll be back in a ↘ minute.
- She doesn't live here ↘ anymore.
- Dad wants to change his ↘ car.
- Here is the weather ↘ forecast.
- Cloudy weather is expected at the end of the ↘ week.
- We should work together more ↘ often
- I'm going for a walk in the ↘ park.

- **Commands**

- Write your name ↘ here.
- Show me what you've ↘ written.
- Leave it on the ↘ desk.
- Take that picture ↘ down.
- Throw that ↘ out.
- Put your books on the ↘ table.
- Take your hands out of your ↘ pockets.

- **Wh- questions** (requesting information.)

(questions beginning with 'who', 'what', 'why', 'where', 'when', 'which', and 'how')

- What country do you come ↘ from?
- Where do you ↘ work?
- Which of them do you ↘ prefer?
- When does the shop ↘ open?
- How many books have you ↘ bought?
- Which coat is ↘ yours?
- Whose bag is ↘ this?

- **Questions Tags that are statements requesting confirmation rather than questions.**

Not all tag questions are really questions.

Some of them merely ask for confirmation or invite agreement, in which case we use a falling tone at the end.

- He thinks he's so clever, doesn't ↘ he?
- She's such a nuisance, isn't ↘ she?
- He failed the test because he didn't revise, did ↘ he?
- It doesn't seem to bother him much, does ↘ it?

- **Exclamations**

- How nice of ↘ you!
- That's just what I ↘ need!
- You don't ↘ say!
- What a beautiful ↘ voice!
- That's a ↘ surprise!

Rising Intonation (↗)

(The pitch of the voice rises at the end of a sentence.)

Rising intonation invites the speaker to continue talking.

It is normally used with yes/no questions, and question tags that are real questions.

- **Yes/no Questions**

(Questions that can be answered by 'yes' or 'no'.)

- Do you like your new ↗ teacher?
- Have you finished ↗ already?
- May I borrow your ↗ dictionary?
- Do you have any ↗ magazines?
- Do you sell ↗ stamps?

- **Questions tags that show uncertainty and require an answer** (real questions).
 - We've met already, ↗ haven't we?
 - You like fish, ↗ don't you?
 - You're a new student ↗ aren't you?
 - The view is beautiful, ↗ isn't it?

We sometimes use a combination of rising and falling intonation in the same sentence. The combination is called Rise-Fall or Fall-Rise intonation.

Rise-Fall Intonation (↗↘)

(The intonation rises and then falls.)

We use rise-fall intonation for choices, lists, unfinished thoughts and conditional sentences.

- **Choices** (alternative questions.)
 - Are you having ↗ soup or ↘ salad?
 - Is John leaving on ↗ Thursday or ↘ Friday?
 - Does he speak ↗ German or ↘ French?
 - Is your name ↗ Ava or ↘ Eva?
- **Lists** (rising, rising, rising, falling)
Intonation falls on the last item to show that the list is finished.
 - We've got ↗ apples, pears, bananas and ↘ oranges
 - The sweater comes in ↗ blue, white pink and ↘ black
 - I like ↗ football, tennis, basketball and ↘ volleyball.
 - I bought ↗ a tee-shirt, a skirt and a ↘ handbag.
- **Unfinished thoughts (partial statements)**
In the responses to the following questions, the rise-fall intonation indicates reservation. The speaker hesitates to fully express his/her thoughts.
 - Do you like my new handbag? Well the ↗ leather is ↘ nice... (but I don't like it.)
 - What was the meal like? Hmm, the ↗ fish was ↘ good... (but the rest wasn't great).
 - So you both live in Los Angeles? Well ↗ Alex ↘ does ... (but I don't).
- **Conditional sentences**
(The tone rises in the first clause and falls gradually in the second clause.)
 - If he ↗ calls, ask him to leave a ↘ message.
 - Unless he ↗ insists, I'm not going to ↘ go.
 - If you have any ↗ problems, just ↘ contact us.

Fall-Rise Intonation (↘↗)

(The voice falls and rises *usually within one word*.)

The main function of fall-rise intonation is to show that the speaker is not certain of the answer they are giving to a question, or is reluctant to reply (as opposed to a falling tone used when there is no hesitation). It is also used in polite requests or suggestions.

- **Hesitation/reluctance:**
 - So you'd be willing to confirm that? ...Well ... I ↘sup↗pose so ...
 - You didn't see him on Monday? I don't quite ↘re↗member ...
- **Politeness-Doubt-Uncertainty:** (You are not sure what the answer might be.)
 - Perhaps we could ↘vis↗it the place?
 - Should we ↘cop↗y the list?
 - Do you think it's ↘al↗lowed?

Tips for learners:

A good exercise to improve pronunciation would be to listen to short recordings of everyday dialogues and then 'shadow read' the script, or read it along with the tape using the same stress and intonation as the speaker. Students can repeat this exercise until their voice sounds similar to the voice on the recording.

It is also a good idea to note down or record some examples of everyday conversations (either from real life or from film or television dialogues) and repeat them as often as possible, copying the stress and intonation of the speakers.

Modern English songs are also a useful way of learning English stress, rhythm and intonation. To begin with, try singing (or saying loudly) the lyrics of songs that you find easy to understand.

You will be surprised how quickly your pronunciation will improve with the help of audio materials. It will be a reward for all your hard work!

Stress in English Pronunciation

STRESS

English is known as a stressed language.

Stressed languages are languages spoken with differing degrees of emphasis on the words and syllables in the sentences.

The content of this page is not intended to be a set of rules but rather an attempt to show that native speakers of English use regular patterns of stress when speaking.

Although stress and intonation are an important part of English pronunciation, learners must remember that it would be impossible for anyone to speak naturally with a set of rules in mind.

By far the best way to improve one's pronunciation is through constant contact with native speakers of English, either through conversation, by watching films and news channels, or listening to the radio.

However, the patterns of stress outlined below may be useful to learners, for example when preparing a discussion or a presentation, and help them to feel more comfortable.

WORD STRESS

In English we accentuate or stress ONE syllable in a word.

We pronounce that syllable louder than others.

There are words with just one syllable (e.g.. **mind**), and words with one STRESSED syllable and one or more WEAK syllables (e.g. **re**mind, **re**minder, **re**minding).

In the examples below, bold letters indicate stressed syllables.

1) When a noun or adjective stems from a one-syllable word, (for example *art*, *mind*), the stress usually **stays** on the **syllable** of the **original word**.

art	art ist
break	break able

friend	<u>friend</u> ly
paint	<u>paint</u> er
come	bec <u>ome</u>
mind	re <u>mind</u>

2) To differentiate between a noun and a verb with the same spelling, **stress position changes**.

noun	verb
a <u>d</u> ecrease	to dec <u>re</u> ase
an <u>i</u> nsult	to ins <u>ult</u>
an <u>o</u> bject	to obj <u>ect</u>
a <u>p</u> rotest	to prot <u>est</u>
a <u>r</u> ecord	to rec <u>ord</u>
a <u>r</u> ebel	to reb <u>el</u>
a <u>s</u> uspect	to sus <u>pect</u>
a <u>t</u> ransfer	to tran <u>fer</u>

3) In compound nouns (two words merged into one) the stress is on the first part:

- **book**shop
- **foot**ball
- **note**book
- **tooth**brush

4) The stress is generally at the end of words ending in **-eer**.

- auction**eer**
- engine**eer**
- pion**eer**
- volunt**eer**

5) Stress usually falls AFTER **prefixes** :

- de**m**olish
- dis**miss**
- pre**pare**
- un**tie**

6) Stress usually falls on the syllable BEFORE **the following letters**:
 (The words below are just some examples - there are many more.)

Before -tion/-sion	Before -ic/-ical	Before -ity/-ety -graphy -ody/-ogy	Before -ient, -cient -ience, -ial, -ual -ious,
Attention	Automatic	Authority	Convenient
Competition	Democratic	Majority	Efficient
Demonstration	Historic	Paternity	Experience
Explanation	Fanatic	Society	Essential
Invitation	Elastic	Variety	Official
Obsession	Biological	Geography	Potential
Permission	Illogical	Custody	Individual
Position	Philosophical	Rhapsody	Intellectual
Quotation	Political	Morphology	Conscientious
Repetition	Radical	Psychology	Judicious

STRESSED WORDS WITHIN SENTENCES

Not all words receive equal stress within a sentence in English.

Content words are stressed. Content words include:

Nouns (e.g. school, station, train)

Normal verbs (e.g. run, work, speak)

Adjectives (e.g. beautiful, tall, friendly)

Adverbs (e.g. quickly, noisily, badly)

Function words are unstressed. Function words include:

Determiners (e.g. a, an, the)

Auxiliary verbs (e.g. can, have, may, will, etc.)

Conjunctions (e.g. and, but, as, etc.)

Pronouns (e.g. you, he, she, us, it, them, etc.)

Even if the listener does not hear some quickly pronounced function words, the meaning of the whole sentence should be clear. This is how native speakers of English communicate.

Emphasis is put on the most important words.

For example: "Would you **like** a **cup** of **tea**?"

It is a general rule of English that when there is a sequence of equal stresses, the last stressed word should be the strongest, or the loudest - which in the above case would be **tea**.

Try to imagine receiving a text message like "train delayed home late".

You understand that this means: "The **train** has been **delayed**. I will be **home late**"

Only content words are used in the message but the meaning is quite clear.

In English, words are stressed according to the meaning the speaker wants to convey.

For example, depending in which word in the following sentence is stressed, the meaning changes:

- Are **you** going to the cinema tonight? (or is it someone else?)
- Are you **going** to the cinema tonight? (or not?)
- Are you going to the **cinema** tonight? (or somewhere else?)
- Are you going to the cinema **tonight**? (or another night?)

During a conversation, learners should listen for stressed content words in order to understand the meaning of the whole sentence.

Likewise, they should practice stressing content words in their speech so that other people will understand them.

English Pronunciation

How stress changes in nouns and verbs with same spelling.

Some nouns and verbs have the same spelling in English.

To differentiate between the noun and the verb with the same spelling, the stress position changes from the first to the second syllable. Here are some examples.

NOUN	VERB		NOUN	VERB
an ad dress	to ad dress		a per mit	to per mit
a con test	to con test		a pre sent	to pre sent
a con tract	to con tract		a pro cess	to pro cess
a con vert	to con vert		a pro test	to pro test
a de crease	to de crease		a re bel	to re bel
a de sert	to de sert		a re cord	to re cord

a discount	to discount	a refill	to refill
an escort	to escort	a refund	to refund
an import	to import	a subject	to subject
an insult	to insult	a survey	to survey
a mandate	to mandate	a torment	to torment
a misprint	to misprint	a suspect	so suspect
an object	to object	a transfer	to transfer

Silent letters in English

Many words in English have silent letters.

Silent letters are letters that are not pronounced, but are there when you write the word.

Here is a list of common words with silent letters from A to Z.

Silent letters Words containing silent letters

B aplomb, bomb, climb, comb, crumb, debt, doubt, dumb, jamb, lamb, limb,
numb, plumb, subtle, succumb, thumb, tomb, womb

C abscess, ascend, ascent, crescent; descend; descent, disciple, fascinate, fluorescent, incandescent,
isosceles, luminescent, miscellaneous, muscle, obscene, resuscitate, scenario, scene, scent, science, scissors,
sclerosis,

D handkerchief, handful, handsome, Wednesday,

G align, assign, benign, campaign, champagne, cologne, consign, deign, design, feign, foreign, gnarl, gnash,
gnat, gnaw, gnome, gnu, high, light, reign, resign, sign, though, through

H ache, aghast, anchor, archeology, architect, archives, chaos, character, charisma, chemical, chemist,
chemotherapy, chlorine, choir, chorale, cholera, chord, choreography, chorus, Christian, Christmas, chrome,
echo, ghastly, ghost, heir, honest, honour, hour, loch, mechanic, mechanical, melancholy, monarch,
monochrome, orchestra, orchid, psychic, psychiatrist, psychology, rhyme, rhythm, scheme, school, stomach,
technical, technique, technology, thyme

K knack, knapsack, knave, knead, knee, kneel, knell, knew, knickers, knife, knight, knit, knob, knock, knoll,
knot, know, knowledge, knuckle

L almond, balk, balm, calf, calm, chalk, could, folk, half, palm, psalm, salmon, should, talk, walk, would,
yolk

N autumn, column, condemn, damn, hymn, solemn

P coup, pneumatic, pneumonia, psalm, pseudo, psyche, psychedelic, psychiatrist, psychiatry, psychotherapy, psychotic, receipt

S aisle, apropos, bourgeois, debris, fracas, island, isle, viscount

T apostle, bristle, bustle, castle, Christmas, fasten, glisten, hustle, jostle, listen, moisten, mortgage, nestle, ricochet, rustle, soften, thistle, trestle, whistle, wrestle

U baguette, biscuit, build, building, catalogue, colleague, dialogue, circuit, disguise, guard, guess, guest, guide, guild, guile, guillotine, guilt, guise, guitar, rogue, tongue

W answer, awry, playwright, sword, two, whole, wrack, wrangle, wrap, wrath, wreath, wreck, wren, wrench, wrestle, wretch, wriggle, wring, wrinkle, wrist, write, writhe, wrong, wrote, wrought, wrung, wry