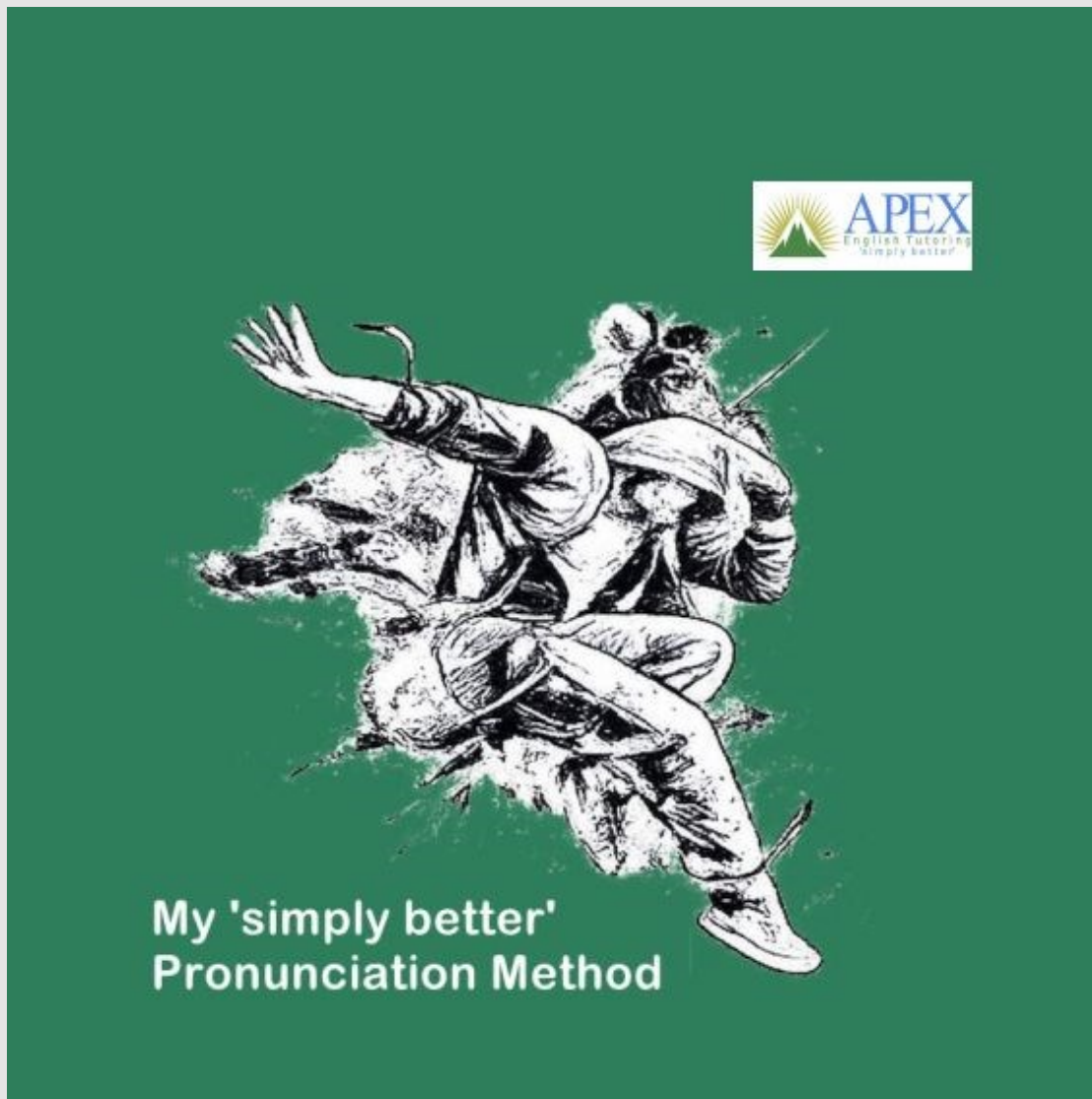


My 'simply better' Pronunciation Method

Stresses and Rhythm



Introduction

In this lesson, I will focus on three things:

- word stress
- sentence stress
- and rhythm.

You have learned the EPA (English Phonetic Alphabet).
And you have learned the Method.

Understanding phonemics AND using the Method is enough to get you started.

This lesson takes pronunciation a little further.

One word we shall be using a lot in this lesson is the word '**syllable**'.

A syllable is a part of a word that contains one vowel sound and is pronounced as one unit.

Let's begin with the first one.

Word Stress

Stress is an important part of English. Hence, stressed syllables tend to be higher, longer, clearer, and louder than unstressed syllables.

When we say the word 'banana' we actually say "baNAna".

Unstressed syllables take on the schwa /ə/ sound.

In phonemic script, the word 'banana' looks like this.

UK /bə'na:nə/ (banarna)

US /bə'næn.ə/ (bananna)

Although the middle syllable is pronounced differently, there are three syllables in both the US and UK pronunciations of 'banana'.

Task:

To help you understand stress better, look at the list of 24 countries. Five have already been placed to help you.

oO
Iran

Oo
England

Ooo
Mexico

oOoo
Australia

oOo
Jamaica

Decide the stress pattern for each country and then write each one in the correct column.

The capital O's represent stressed syllables and the small o's represent unstressed syllables.

Countries

Japan	China
Ecuador	Benin
America	Portugal
Kenya	Russia
Egypt	Switzerland
Germany	Bulgaria
Canada	Nigeria
Belgium	Scotland
Korea	Lebanon
India	Brazil
Morocco	Peru
Zimbabwe	Iraq

Answers are on the next page.

Here are the answers:

oO Iran	Oo England	Ooo Mexico	oOoo Australia	oOo Jamaica
Japan	Egypt	India	America	Morocco
Brazil	Belgium	Portugal	Nigeria	Zimbabwe
Iraq	China	Switzerland	Bulgaria	Korea
Peru	Scotland	Germany		
Benin	Kenya	Ecuador		
	Russia	Canada		
		Lebanon		

How do we mark a written word to show its stress?

Many systems have been devised.

Rather than explain each one, the way I show the stressed syllables of words is that I underline the stressed syllable in the word.

You can see that I have underlined the 'un' of the word 'underline'.

'Rules' Governing Word Stress

This is a difficult area with many teachers disagreeing.

Rules that have been made are overly complex and extremely difficult to learn.

It's better to think of them as 'tendencies' or 'guidelines' rather than rules.

To explain, do this task to show the 'tendencies' that seem to work, in action.

Task:

Look at the following words that are both nouns and verbs. Noun first, verb second.

Do you notice anything about their stress patterns?

That's a nice *record*. (noun)

Let's *record*_that song. (verb)

They gave her a nice *present*.

They plan to *present* her with an award.

That's the *suspect*.

They *suspect*_him of the crime.

That's an *insult*.

Don't *insult* me like that.

We're making good *progress*.

I only wish that we could *progress* more quickly.

Did you notice that **nouns are stressed on the first part** while **verbs are stressed on the second part**.

Noun: record

Verb: record

Noun: present

Verb: present

Noun: suspect

Verb: suspect

Noun: insult

Verb: insult

Noun: progress

Verb: progress

Interestingly, 'surprise' (noun) and 'surprise' (verb) have the same stressed syllable.

Now, do the test on the next page to help you better understand stress patterns between nouns and verbs.

Test:

Underline the stressed parts according to whether these words are nouns or verbs, or identify which one is the noun and the other is the verb:

conduct
conduct

Noun: reject
Verb: reject

produce
produce

Noun: rebel
Verb: rebel

export
export

Noun: converse
Verb: converse

The answers are on the next page.

Answers:

conduct verb
conduct noun

Noun: reject
Verb: reject

produce (noun)
produce (verb)

Noun: rebel
Verb: rebel

export (verb)
export (noun)

Noun: converse
Verb: converse

To help you practice the stressed parts, you can:

- **clap your hands**
- **or move your hand up and down**
- **or raise your voice on the stressed syllable,**
- **or any combination of these things.**

Stress-timed Languages

In spoken English, some words are stressed and some are not.

English is called a stress-timed language.

This means that stressed words in a sentence tend to occur at roughly equal intervals of time, regardless of the number of unstressed syllables between them.

(Read that last paragraph again— to understand it.)

This task will help.

Look at the following examples”

CATS CHASE MICE.

The **CATS CHASE MICE.**

The **CATS CHASE** the **MICE.**

The **CATS** might **CHASE** the **MICE.**

The **CATS** might have **CHASED** the **MICE.**

Each of these sentences has the same number of stresses (three), but different numbers of unstressed syllables.

If you say these sentences, they will all take about the same amount of time.

Hence, the amount of time that it takes to say a sentence in English is determined by the number of stressed words, not by the total number of syllables.

If that is complex, read it again.

To further illustrate this point, look at the following sentences:

1. **TOM** is **MARY'S FRIEND**. (5 syllables)
2. The **PROFESSOR** is **READING**. (7 syllables)

Although sentence #2 has more syllables (7), sentence #1 actually takes longer to say because it has more stressed words.

English, German, and Dutch are three examples of languages said to be *stress-timed*.

Spanish, Japanese, Korean and Turkish are said to be *syllable-timed*.

Focus Words

What's important to remember about stress is that it is directly related to **meaning**.

Native English speakers emphasise the most important word/s in a sentence.

We call this the **focus word**—or focus words if there are more than one.

If you change the stress pattern in a sentence, or if you change the focus word, you change the meaning.

In the above sentences about mice, if we change one of the unstressed words to a stressed one, the meaning changes (slightly).

The **CATS MIGHT** have **CHASED** the **MICE**. (might to MIGHT)

Or the professor:

The **PROFESSOR IS READING**. (is to IS)

To illustrate this further, do this activity:

Task: Say each sentence emphasising each of the different stressed words.

Ask yourself: Is the meaning affected by changing where the stress is placed?

1. **Why** do you say that?
2. Why do **you** say that?
3. Why do you **say** that?
4. Why do you say **that**?

Here are some possible interpretations:

1. **Why** do you say that?

Asking for a reason the other person said something.

2. Why do **you** say that?

Asking why a specific person (you) said something.

3. Why do you **say** that?

Asking why the other person believes something enough to say what they said.

4. Why do you say **that**?

Asking about the message that the other person said.

Task:

Look at the following dialogue.

The focus word is capitalised (and stressed).

The conversation proceeds with each person responding to the focus words in the preceding statement.

A: What's the **MATTER**?

B: I lost my **HAT**!

A: What **COLOUR** hat?

B: It was **BLUE** **DARK** blue.

A: There was a blue hat in the **CAR**.

B: **WHICH** car?

A: (pointing to car that is driving away) **THAT** car!

Here is another activity to help you see the changed meaning created by the differently stressed words.

Task:

Look at the following pairs of sentences.

They are exactly the same, except that the focus word is different.

When you say them, give extra emphasis to the focus word. What is the difference in meaning?

I think that animal is a **FOX**.
I **THINK** that animal is a fox.

I ordered two **COKES**.
I ordered **TWO** Cokes.

Answers are on the next page.

In some cases, we stress words that are generally not stressed.

When we do this, they often become the focus words.

Look at these examples:

A. Would you like soup or salad?

B. I'd like soup **AND** salad. (I'm really hungry.)

- A. Is the book on the table?
B. No, it's **UNDER** the table.

I think that animal is a **FOX**.

(It's more important to make the assertion—by stressing the name of the animal.)

I **THINK** that animal is a fox.

(It's more important to stress what the person thinks—that he/she is unsure about the animal.)

I ordered two **COKES**. (stressing the name of the drink)
I ordered **TWO** Cokes. (stressing the number)

- A. Would you like soup or salad?
B. I'd like soup **AND** salad. (I'm really hungry.)

In A, the question is asking for a choice, one or the other.

B, however, is hungry and by stressing **AND** not **OR**, makes it clear that they want both not just one.

- A. Is the book on the table?
B. No, it's **UNDER** the table.

This is similar to the other one. A is asking if the book is **ON** the table. B corrects the question by stressing the book is not **ON** the table, but **UNDER** the table.

Sentence Stress

We can see the rhythm of English is determined by the number of stressed syllables.

But how do we know what words to stress and which ones not to?

Native speakers don't think about this, but for non-native speakers, it can be extremely tricky.

To help understand the kinds of words that are stressed, look at the following examples.

Take his **hand** **firmly**.

Who **said** the **dogs** need to **stay** **outside**?

The **ice** **cream** was **delicious** but it was **very** **expensive**.

My **house** is on **fire**.

I **brought** him his **meal** but he wasn't **hungry**.

We **paid** the **man** the **money** for our **tickets**.

I've **lost** a **lot** of **weight** **myself**.

Jack and **Jill** **went** up the **hill**.

Look closely at the above examples.

We can see that there is a general pattern of the kinds of words we tend to stress and those that we generally do not stress.

We can divide them into 2 kinds of words.

One type is stressed, the other is unstressed.

Content words are *stressed*.

Function words are *unstressed*.

Content words and function words are easy to differentiate.

Look at the next part to see the differences.

Stressed Words (Content Words)

Nouns:

hand, dogs, ice cream, house, fire, meal, money, tickets, weight, Jack, Jill.

Main Verbs: take, stay

Adverbs: firmly, very

Adjectives: delicious, expensive

WH-Question words: who, what, where, when

Reflexive Pronouns: myself, ourselves

Unstressed Words (Function Words)

Pronouns: I, he, we, him

Determiners: a, the

Prepositions: up, in, between

Conjunctions: and, but

The verb 'to be': is, are, were, was, am

Task:

Underline the stressed words in the sentences.

Example:

The man is sleeping on the bench. (the, is, on, the—are unstressed)

Tom owns a big house.

The project was hard, but I finished it myself.

There's a book in the drawer.

Do you know how to do it?

I gave him a dollar, but he wanted more.

Tom would have eaten his hamburger more quickly.

Mary can come, but Jane is busy.

Answers are on the next page.

Tom owns a big house.

The project was hard, but I finished it myself.

There's a book in the drawer.

Do you know how to do it?

I gave him a dollar, but he wanted more.

Tom would have eaten his hamburger more quickly.

Mary can come, but Jane is busy.

Read these out loud and immediately you will 'sound' more like a native English speaker.

Here is another task:

Mark the stress in the following sentences:

Where do you live?

Is Sally a doctor?

When are you going to France?

The movie was great!

What time is it?

What shall we do with the lazy worker?

Who is going to pay for this meal?

Answers are on the next page.

Here are the answers.

Where do you live?

Is Sally a doctor?

When are you going to France?

The movie was great!

What time is it?

What shall we do with the lazy worker?

and:

Answers are on the next page.

How did you go?

Rhythm, Stress, and Song

Every song has a rhythm, and so does every language.

The rhythm of English is related to a combination of stressed and unstressed words, with stresses generally falling about equal length from each other.

Certain songs closely follow the rhythm of English.

These include *What Shall We Do with the Drunken Sailor*, *Michael Row the Boat Ashore*, and *Rock-a My Soul*.

Task

Look at the following song, *The Drunken Sailor*.

Mark the words you think should be stressed.

(Reading it a few times to feel the rhythm will help you.)

WHAT SHALL WE DO WITH THE DRUNKEN SAILOR

What shall we do with the drunken sailor (sing 3 times)

Early in the morning.

Chorus: *Hooray, and up she rises (3x)*
Early in the morning.

Take him and shake him and try to awake him (3x)

Early in the morning.

Chorus *Hooray...etc.*

Give him a dose of salt and water (3x)
Early in the morning.

Chorus

Heave him by the leg in a running bowline (3x)
Early in the morning.

Chorus

Shave his belly with a rusty razor (3x)
Early in the morning.

Chorus

That's what we do with the drunken sailor (3x)
Early in the morning.

WHAT SHALL WE DO WITH THE DRUNKEN SAILOR

What shall we do with the drunken sailor (sing 3 times)

Early in the morning.

Chorus: Hooray, and up she riser (3x)

Early in the morning.

Take him and shake him and try to awake him
(3x)

Early in the morning.

Chorus Hooray...etc.

Give him a dose of salt and water (3x)

Early in the morning.

Chorus

Heave him by the leg in a running bowline (3x)

Early in the morning.

Chorus

Shave his belly with a rusty razor (3x)

Early in the morning.

Chorus

That's what we do with the drunken sailor (3x)

Early in the morning.

Conclusion

Some Final Words about Stress and Rhythm

In English, we tend to:

- emphasise or stress the most important words in a sentence
- and de-emphasise the less important words.

As emphasising certain words draws our attention to them, most of **the meaning comes from the words we stress.**

Hence, stress and meaning are very closely linked in English.

We stress the most important words in a sentence, and stressed words tend to fall at equal intervals when we speak.

I hope the explanations I have given have helped you understand the complexity of phonology.

Many of the 'rules' that exist are simply wrong, misleading, or overly simple.

Many course books present these ‘rules’ as needed to pronounce well but they only end up confusing and frustrating learners.

The examples and tasks I gave you were designed to help you by ‘doing’ rather than just ‘reading about them’.

I hope they helped you.

Some advice

The best advice for you is to listen a lot to native English speakers (especially those who speak clearly and naturally) to hear how they stress some words and un-stress others.

Learning the differences between Content and Function Words will help you greatly because by **practicing** reading sentences with them (and every sentence will have both types) your spoken English will become much better—and more ‘rhythmical’.

[When you are ready, click or tap here.](#)

Open the PDF: **Stress and Rhythm—Intonation**

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