

Stress

13 Word stress

A Introduction

When a word has more than one syllable, there is always one syllable that has greater stress than the others. For example, the word 'coffee is stressed on the first syllable *cof*, which has greater prominence than the second syllable. The word *e'normous* is stressed on the second syllable *nor*.

Here are some examples of how words are stressed.

First syllable	Second syllable	Third syllable	Fourth syllable
'always	<i>al</i> 'ternative	corre' <i>spondent</i>	environ' <i>mentally</i>
'energy	<i>ap</i> 'pear	inter' <i>national</i>	organiz' <i>ation</i>
'everybody	<i>a</i> 'vailable	oppo' <i>r</i> tunity	responsi' <i>bility</i>
'industry	<i>be</i> 'tween	recom' <i>mend</i>	underde' <i>veloped</i>
'popular	com' <i>mittee</i>		
'programme	ex' <i>tremely</i>		
'sorry	im' <i>portant</i>		
'water	tech' <i>nology</i>		

The syllable which follows the stress mark (') is stressed. In the word *always*, the syllable *al* is stressed, and the syllable *ways* is unstressed.

NOTE

- In longer words some syllables have secondary stress. The word *international* has its main or primary stress on the syllable *na* and a secondary stress on the syllable *in*, which has greater stress than *ter* or *al* but weaker stress than *na*. A syllable which follows the stress mark (,) has secondary stress. Here are some examples.
,inter'national '*every*,body *re*,*sponsi*'bility
- Some words can have different stress patterns, e.g. '*yesterday* or '*yester*'day, '*head*'quarters or '*head*quarters. This often depends on the stress pattern of the sentence as a whole.
- There are some words which can be either a verb or a noun depending on how they are stressed, e.g. *trans*'port (verb) or '*transport* (noun). > 11B

TIP

Remember that the most important thing in order to make yourself understood is to put the primary stress on the correct syllable. Unfortunately there is no general rule to tell you which syllable should be stressed. Usually the stress pattern has to be learned as part of the pronunciation of each individual word. The best way to learn how to stress words is by listening to them used in speech and imitating the pronunciation. If you see a word and want to know how it is stressed, you will find the pronunciation in a dictionary such as the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*.

B The /ə/ sound

The /ə/ sound or 'schwa' is the sound of *a-* in *about* or *again* or of *-er* in *water* or *colder*. It is used only in unstressed syllables and is spelled in a number of different ways. Here are some examples.

payment /'peɪmənt/ *famous* /'feɪməs/
corner /'kɔːnə(r)/ *support* /sə'pɔːt/
forget /fə'get/ *figure* /'fɪɡə(r)/

The schwa is also used in certain one-syllable words when they are unstressed in connected speech, e.g. *from* /frəm/, *than* /ðən/. These are called 'weak forms'. > Finder 289

C Stress in words with suffixes

When we add a suffix to a one-syllable word, most suffixes are unstressed.

'*hopeful* 'playing 'quickly 'sadness 'statement 'treatable 'useless

The same usually happens when the suffix is added to a word with more than one syllable.

'powerful at'tacking 'silently 'loneliness
'manageable 'colourless 'punishment

But with certain suffixes the stress falls on the syllable before the suffix.

'commerce → com'mercial
in'form → inform'ation
'luxury → lux'urious
'photograph → photo'graphic
'stupid → stu'pidity

These suffixes include *-ial*, *-ion*, *-ious*, *-ic*, and *-ity*.

TIP

When a word ends in *-ion*, always stress the syllable before the last one: 'nation, con'dition, dis'cussion, satis'faction, recommen'dation.

D Stress in compounds

In a noun compound, we often stress the first word. > Finder 142A

'*bus* ticket 'living-room 'softball 'fireworks 'share price

But when the first word expresses time, place, or material, it is not usually stressed. > Finder 142C

afternoon 'tea town 'hall metal 'box

For pairs like 'softball and a soft 'ball, > 7A Note.

In compounds with participles, we stress the participle when the compound does not come before a noun.

The paint is quick-'drying.

I'm left-'handed.

But when the compound comes before a noun, we stress the first word.

I bought some 'quick-drying paint.

I need 'left-handed golf clubs.

14 Sentence stress → Audio

A Which words are stressed?

Stress operates at word level and at sentence level. At word level there is always one syllable that is more prominent than the other syllables. For example, *ticket* is stressed on the first syllable, and *arrive* is stressed on the second syllable. At sentence level some words receive greater stress than others because they are more important for the message and need to be prominent. Here is an example.

The 'tickets for the 'show ar'rived this 'morning.

Here the words *tickets*, *show*, *arrived*, and *morning* are most likely to be stressed. The stress falls more often on the vocabulary items: the nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs. It falls less often on the 'grammatical words' such as *the*, *for*, and *this*. These words are generally unstressed, and some of them have weak forms such as /ðə/ and /fə(r)/. > Finder 289

But we can stress a grammatical word if we want to draw special attention to it.

The 'tickets arrived 'this morning, not 'yesterday morning.

Here we emphasize *this* to contrast it with *yesterday*. For more about emphatic stress, > 38B.

B Rhythm

Typically in speech the stressed syllables come at more or less regular intervals.

The 'tickets for the 'show ar'rived this 'morning.

The rhythm of the sentence is created by the syllables *tick*, *show*, *rived*, and *morn*. The unstressed syllables have to fit into the rhythm. Where there are several unstressed syllables together, they will be spoken more quickly than a single unstressed syllable.

'*tickets for the* 'show (three unstressed syllables *ets for the* spoken quickly)
ar'*rived this* 'morning (a single unstressed syllable *this* spoken less quickly)

NOTE

Another important aspect of pronunciation is intonation. In one or more places in a sentence there will be a noticeable fall or rise in the intonation of the voice. One place where this usually happens is at or near the end of the sentence.

The tickets for the show arrived this ↘morning.

Have we got time for a ↗coffee?

Intonation is a very complex subject and is dealt with in Oxford Learner's Grammar only where it is important for an understanding of grammar, for example in question tags.