



FREE RESOURCE · PRONUNCIATION

Homographs

Homographs are words that are spelled the same but have different meanings. For learners, the important ones also change their pronunciation, like the noun REcord and the verb reCORD, or live /lɪv/ and live /laɪv/. You choose the right sound from the grammar and the meaning of the sentence.

What to know

What are homographs?

A homograph is a word that looks exactly like another word but means something different. Bank (the place for money) and bank (the side of a river) are homographs, and they sound the same.

Pattern 1: the stress moves between noun and verb

In many two-syllable words, the noun has its strong syllable first and the verb has it second. The strong syllable is longer, louder and higher in pitch. The other syllable becomes short and weak, often with a quiet vowel like /ə/ or /ɪ/.

- an INcrease /ɪŋkri:s/ (noun) · to inCREASE /ɪn'kri:s/ (verb)
- a REcord /'rekɔ:d/ (noun) · to reCORD /rɪ'kɔ:d/ (verb)
- a PREsent /'preznt/ (noun, a gift) · to preSENT /prɪ'zent/ (verb)

Pattern 2: the vowel sound changes

In the second group, the stress stays where it is, but the vowel or a consonant changes. Here the meaning decides the sound, not the part of speech alone.

- live /lɪv/: I live in Leeds. · live /laɪv/: a live concert
- lead /li:d/: to lead a team · lead /led/: the metal
- read /ri:d/: I read every day. · read /red/: I read it yesterday.

How to choose the right sound

Ask two quick questions. First, what is the word doing in the sentence? After the, a, an or my, it is usually a noun. After to, will or must, it is usually a verb. Second, what does it mean here?

- Look at the words before it: the, a, my, this (noun) or to, will, can (verb).
- Check the stress mark in a dictionary: the mark sits before the strong syllable.
- Say the phrase aloud with the strong syllable long and the weak syllable short.
- Keep a small list of your own homographs from your reading and add the sentence you found them in.

More pairs worth knowing

These words appear often in academic topics. Learn each one with a short phrase, not alone, so the stress and the meaning stay together.

- a CONtract /'kɒntrækt/ (an agreement) and to conTRACT /kən'trækt/ (to get smaller)
- an OBject /'ɒbdʒɪkt/ (a thing) and to obJECT /əb'dʒekt/ (to disagree)

- a DEsert /'dezət/ (dry land) and to deSERT /dɪ'zɜ:t/ (to leave)
- REfuse /'refju:s/ (rubbish) and to reFUSE /rɪ'fju:z/ (to say no)
- a PERmit /'pɜ:mɪt/ (a document) and to perMIT /pə'mɪt/ (to allow)

How to make the sound

1. Say the strong syllable longer, louder and a little higher.
2. Say the weak syllable quickly with a relaxed tongue and mouth: /ə/ or /ɪ/.
3. Move the strong syllable and keep the same speed: INcrease, then inCREASE.
4. Say each pair in a short sentence so the rhythm helps you.

Exercises

1. In *Students must present their results*, how is *present* said?
 - a. /prɪ'zent/, with stress on the second syllable
 - b. /'preznt/, with stress on the first syllable
2. In *The pipes are made of lead*, how is *lead* said?
 - a. /led/
 - b. /li:d/
3. Which sentence uses *live* with the sound /laɪv/?
 - a. We watched the concert live.
 - b. I live in a small flat.
4. In *There was a sharp increase in sales*, the word *increase* is a _____ and the stress is on the first syllable.
 - a. verb
 - b. noun
5. The word *increase* is a noun here. Which stress pattern is natural? *There was an increase in the price.*
 - a. There was an in **CREASE** in the **PRICE**
 - b. There was an **IN** crease in the **PRICE**
6. Write the word that means a metal (/led/) and also 'to guide' (/li:d/).
7. In *The shop will close at nine*, how is *close* said?
 - a. /kləʊz/
 - b. /kləʊs/
8. Which word keeps the same stress as a noun and as a verb?
 - a. present
 - b. record
 - c. visit
9. In *I read the report yesterday*, how is *read* said?
 - a. /ri:d/

b. /red/

10. A word with one spelling and two pronunciations is sometimes called a _____.

a. heteronym

b. synonym

Practise online, free: hear every example and check your answers at www.ielts-laboratory.co/free-resources/homographs/practice/

IELTS tip. In Speaking Part 3 you often talk about change, so you will say 'an increase' and 'to increase' many times, and the same stress pattern applies to many other words you use when you describe trends. Put the stress on the right syllable each time. Saying the sentence with natural stress is more important than saying one word perfectly.

FOR TEACHERS · PRONUNCIATION

Homographs

AIM	Learners recognise homographs with a change of stress or vowel and choose the pronunciation from grammar and context.
TIME	20 minutes
LEVEL	B1 to B2 (IELTS 5 to 6.5)
MATERIALS	This worksheet, one copy per learner; the free online practice for the audio

Warm-up

Write 'record' on the board. Ask for two sentences using it as a noun and as a verb, and notice which syllable learners stress.

Lesson steps

1. Present the noun and verb stress pairs (increase, record, present, produce, conflict) with the stress marked and the weak vowel shown.
2. Drill each pair in a frame sentence: 'an increase in prices', 'prices will increase', clapping the strong syllable.
3. Give the vowel-change group (live, lead, read, close, use, wind) as a set of sentence cards. Learners read each aloud and justify the choice from context.
4. Learners write three gap-fill sentences of their own for a partner to read aloud.

Extension

Learners find five homographs in an IELTS Reading passage, mark the stress and read the sentences to the class.

Answer key

1. a) /prɪˈzent/, with stress on the second syllable. Here *present* is a verb (it follows *must*), so the strong syllable is the second one: preSENT.
2. a) /led/. The metal is /led/. The verb meaning 'to guide' is /li:d/.
3. a) We watched the concert live. As an adjective or adverb meaning 'happening now', *live* rhymes with *five*. As a verb, it rhymes with *give*.
4. b) noun. After *a sharp* the word is a noun, and nouns of this type usually have first-syllable stress: INcrease.
5. b) There was an **IN**crease in the **PRICE**. The noun is **IN**-crease. The strong syllable comes first, and *price* carries the next beat.
6. lead. *Lead* is a homograph: the metal is /led/ and the verb is /li:d/.
7. a) /kləʊz/. The verb 'to shut' ends in /z/. The adjective 'near' ends in /s/, as in *a close friend*.

8. c) visit. *Visit* is stressed on the first syllable in both uses. *Record* and *present* move the stress.
9. b) /red/. The past tense of *read* is spelled the same but said /red/, like the colour *red*.
10. a) heteronym. A heteronym is spelled the same but said differently. A synonym is a different word with a similar meaning.

Questions learners often ask

What is the difference between homographs and homophones? Homographs are spelled the same. Homophones sound the same but are spelled differently, like write and right.

Do all homographs sound different? No. Bank (money) and bank (river) sound the same. The ones that sound different, like lead and live, are the pronunciation problem.

Is there a rule for noun and verb pairs? In many two-syllable pairs the noun is stressed first and the verb second, but there are exceptions such as visit and promise. Check a dictionary when you are not sure.

What if I choose the wrong sound? Listeners will usually work it out from the sentence, but wrong stress can slow them down. It is worth learning the common pairs.

Sources

- Roach, P. (2009). English Phonetics and Phonology: A Practical Course (4th ed.). Cambridge University Press.
- Cruttenden, A. (2014). Gimson's Pronunciation of English (8th ed.). Routledge.

Written by Will Salisbury · IELTS Laboratory · ielts-laboratory.co/free-resources/homographs · Free to copy for classroom use.