



FREE RESOURCE · PRONUNCIATION

Intonation

Intonation is the way your voice rises and falls in pitch across a phrase. In English a fall usually shows that you have finished or are sure, a rise usually shows a question or that you have more to say, and a wider pitch range sounds interested. It helps listeners understand your attitude as well as your words.

What to know

What is intonation?

Your voice is never flat. When you speak, the pitch goes up and down, and it follows a pattern. This pattern is intonation. It is the melody of speech.

The most important word moves the pitch

In each phrase, one syllable is the focus. This syllable is where the pitch moves most: it falls, rises or does both. The syllable is usually in the most important word of the phrase, and it is the last strong syllable.

- *Where did you go? I went to LONdon.* · *Who went to London? MArY went to London.*
- *Is it a red car? No, it's a BLUE car.* · *Is it a blue bus? No, it's a blue CAR.*

Falling intonation

The pitch falls on the last important word. This shows that you have finished and that you are sure. It is the usual pattern for statements, commands and wh-questions (what, where, when, why, how).

Rising intonation

The pitch rises at the end. This is the usual pattern for yes/no questions: 'Do you like tea?' (rise). It is also used for checking, for lists that continue, and for polite requests. A rise can show that you have not finished: 'First, I got up early...' (rise) tells the listener there is more.

Fall-rise intonation

The pitch falls and then rises on the same word, or on the last words. This shows that you are not completely sure, that there is a 'but', or that you want to be polite. For example: 'I like it, but...' or 'It's all right.' The fall-rise often means 'yes, but'.

How to make the sound

1. Hum a short note, then slide your voice up, then down, to feel the pitch change.
2. Say a statement and let your voice fall on the last important word: 'I live in LEEDS.'
3. Say a yes/no question and let your voice rise at the end: 'Do you like TEA?'
4. Say a short list with a rise on each item and a fall on the last one.

Exercises

1. A yes/no question such as *Do you like tea?* usually ends with a ____.
a. rise

- b. fall
2. A wh-question such as *Where do you live?* usually ends with a ____.
- a. fall
- b. rise
3. In the list *apples, oranges and bananas*, what does the last item have?
- a. A rise
- b. A fall
4. Answer to: Where did you go? Which stress pattern is natural? *I went to London.*
- a. I **WENT** to Lon don
- b. I went to **LON** don
5. Answer to: Who went to London? Which stress pattern is natural? *Mary went to London.*
- a. Ma ry went to **LON** don
- b. **MA** ry went to Lon don
6. A voice that stays flat usually sounds ____.
- a. bored
- b. interested
7. Which kind of pitch movement shows that you have not finished?
- a. A rise or fall-rise
- b. A final fall
8. What do we call the pitch pattern that goes down? Write one word.
9. *You live in London?* is a statement used as a question. How does it end?
- a. With a fall
- b. With a rise
10. Which helps you sound interested in a long answer?
- a. A wider pitch range
- b. Speaking louder only

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

IELTS tip. In the Speaking test, a lively voice makes your answers easier to follow and more interesting to listen to. Use a fall to finish each idea, a rise or fall-rise when you are about to add something, and a wider pitch range on the words that matter. Do this in Part 2, where you speak for up to two minutes.

FOR TEACHERS · PRONUNCIATION

Intonation

AIM	Learners use falling, rising and fall-rise patterns appropriately and place the focus on the new information.
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

Say 'really?' in four ways (interested, bored, surprised, doubtful). Learners say what each means.

Lesson steps

1. Show falling and rising on statements and questions, with hand movements to match the pitch.
2. Practise lists: rise on each item and fall on the last.
3. Give short question and answer pairs and ask learners to place the focus on the new information.
4. In pairs, learners read a short dialogue twice, once flat and once with a wide pitch range, and discuss the difference.

Extension

Learners shadow a short talk and mark where the speaker's pitch rises and falls.

Answer key

1. a) rise. Yes/no questions usually end with a rising pitch.
2. a) fall. Wh-questions usually end with a falling pitch.
3. b) A fall. Each item rises, and the last falls. The fall tells the listener that the list is complete.
4. b) I went to **LON** don. The answer to *where* is the new information, so the focus is on **LON**-don.
5. b) **MA** ry went to Lon don. The answer to *who* is the new information, so the focus moves to **MA**-ry.
6. a) bored. A flat voice can sound bored. A wider pitch range sounds interested.
7. a) A rise or fall-rise. A rise or a fall-rise tells the listener more is coming. A final fall closes the idea.
8. fall. A falling pitch is a fall. It is the usual pattern at the end of a statement.
9. b) With a rise. A rise at the end turns a statement into a question.
10. a) A wider pitch range. A wider pitch range, with higher and lower notes, makes speech sound lively. Volume alone does not.

Questions learners often ask

What is intonation? The rise and fall of the voice in pitch across a phrase. It is the melody of speech.

What is the difference between intonation and stress? Stress is about which syllables are strong. Intonation is about how the pitch moves across a phrase, and the movement usually happens on a stressed syllable.

Do all English speakers use the same intonation? No. Patterns differ between accents and speakers, but the basic uses of falling and rising pitch are shared.

How can I practise intonation? Shadow a short clip, copying the melody. Record yourself and compare.

Sources

- Roach, P. (2009). English Phonetics and Phonology: A Practical Course (4th ed.). Cambridge University Press.
- Cruttenden, A. (1997). Intonation (2nd ed.). Cambridge University Press.

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