



FREE RESOURCE · PRONUNCIATION

Word stress

Word stress is the syllable of a word that you say with more force: it is longer, louder, higher in pitch and has a clearer vowel. Every English word of two or more syllables has one main stress, for example eCONomy. The position follows patterns you can learn.

What to know

What is word stress?

In every English word with more than one syllable, one syllable is stronger than the others. This is the stressed syllable. You make it longer, louder and a little higher in pitch, and its vowel is clear. The other syllables are short and quiet, and often use the schwa /ə/.

- *photograph* (stress on PHO) · *photographer* (stress on TOG)
- *economy* (stress on CON) · *economic* (stress on NOM)
- *decide* (stress on CIDE) · *decision* (stress on CI)

Why word stress matters

Listeners recognise words by their rhythm as well as their sounds. When the stress is in the wrong place, the word has the wrong shape, and the listener has to work harder to know which word you mean. Research by Field (2005) found that putting stress on the wrong syllable can make it harder for listeners to recognise the word.

Basic word stress rules

English stress cannot be predicted perfectly, but several patterns are reliable. Use them as guides and check new words in a dictionary. Dictionaries mark the main stress with the sign ' before the strong syllable.

- Most two-syllable nouns and adjectives: stress on the first syllable (TAbble, HAPpy, STUdent).
- Most two-syllable verbs: stress on the second syllable (deCIDE, beGIN, reLAX). Exceptions include visit, answer and listen.
- Compound nouns: stress on the first part (TOOTHpaste, BLACKbird, HOMEwork).
- Words ending in -tion, -sion, -ic, -ical and -ity: stress on the syllable just before the ending (eduCAtion, ecoNOMic, aBILity).
- Words ending in -ee, -eer, -ese and -ique: stress on the ending itself (employEE, engiNEER, JapaNESE, techNIQUE). Common exceptions include COFfee and COMmittee.

What does not change the stress

Some endings and beginnings never move the stress. The endings -ing, -ed, -er, -ly, -ness, -ment and -ful keep the stress where it was in the base word. So beGIN becomes beGINning, deVELop becomes deVELopment, and CAREful keeps its first syllable.

Stress changes the meaning

In a small group of words, the stress tells you the part of speech. A noun has first-syllable stress and a verb has second-syllable stress: a REcord and to reCORD, an INcrease and to inCREASE. Moving the

stress also changes the vowels in the weak syllable. The article on homographs gives a longer list.

How to make the sound

1. Say the strong syllable longer, louder and a little higher in pitch.
2. Open your mouth and make the vowel clear in the strong syllable.
3. Say the weak syllables quickly and quietly, with a relaxed schwa /ə/.
4. Tap once on the strong syllable to feel the beat: pho-TOG-ra-pher.

Exercises

1. Which syllable is stressed in **education**? ed · u · ca · tion
2. Which syllable is stressed in **begin**? be · gin
3. Which syllable is stressed in **visit**? vis · it
4. Which syllable is stressed in **engineer**? en · gi · neer
5. Which syllable is stressed in **economic**? ec · o · nom · ic
6. Which ending pulls the stress to the syllable just before it?
 - a. -ee
 - b. -tion
 - c. -ing
7. Which stress pattern is natural? *The economy is growing.*
 - a. The e **CON** o my is **GROW** ing
 - b. The **E** con o my is **GROW** ing
8. How many syllables does *photographer* have? Write a number.
9. Which word is stressed on the first syllable?
 - a. hotel
 - b. table
 - c. decide
10. Compound nouns such as *toothpaste* are stressed on the _____ part.
 - a. first
 - b. second

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

IELTS tip. In the Speaking test, wrong stress on key words such as 'economy', 'environment', 'develop' or 'important' can make you harder to follow. Check the stress of the ten most important words for your topics before the test. In Listening, knowing stress patterns also helps you catch words in a fast recording.

FOR TEACHERS · PRONUNCIATION

Word stress

AIM	Learners place the main stress correctly using common rules and a dictionary.
TIME	25 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 photograph and photographer with the stress deliberately on the wrong syllable. Learners tell you where the strong syllable should be.

Lesson steps

1. Present the stress rules with five example words each. Learners tap the strong syllable as they say them.
2. Learners sort a list of twenty words into groups by rule: first-syllable, second-syllable, before -tion or -ic, and on the ending.
3. Check the exceptions in a dictionary with audio.
4. In pairs, learners say a word with the stress in one of two places and their partner says which is right.

Extension

Each learner marks the stress in ten key words from their next writing topic and says them in a sentence.

Answer key

1. edu**CA**tion. ed-u-**CA**-tion. Words ending in -tion are stressed on the syllable just before the ending.
2. be**GIN**. be-**GIN**. Most two-syllable verbs are stressed on the second syllable.
3. **VIS**it. **VIS**-it. This verb is an exception: it is stressed on the first syllable.
4. engi**NEER**. en-gi-**NEER**. Words ending in -eer take the stress on the ending.
5. eco**NOM**ic. ec-o-**NOM**-ic. Words ending in -ic are stressed on the syllable just before the ending.
6. b) -tion. Words ending in -tion are stressed on the syllable before the ending. In -ee the ending itself is stressed, and -ing does not move the stress.
7. a) The e **CON** o my is **GROW** ing. The strong syllable of economy is the second, e-**CON**-o-my, and **GROW** carries the next beat.
8. 4. pho-tog-ra-pher: four syllables, with the strong syllable second.
9. b) table. *Table* is a two-syllable noun, so it is stressed first. *Decide* and *hotel* are stressed on the second.
10. a) first. In compound nouns the first part takes the main stress: **TOOTH**paste, **HOM**Ework.

Questions learners often ask

What are the basic word stress rules in English? Two-syllable nouns usually take first-syllable stress and two-syllable verbs second-syllable stress. Endings such as -tion and -ic pull the stress to the syllable before them.

How can I find the stress of a word? Look it up in a dictionary. The sign ' before a syllable shows the strong syllable. Many online dictionaries also have audio.

Is word stress the same as sentence stress? No. Word stress is the strong syllable within one word. Sentence stress is which words in a sentence carry the beat, and those are usually the content words.

What happens to the weak syllables? They become short and quiet, and their vowel is often reduced to the schwa /ə/.

Sources

- Field, J. (2005). Intelligibility and the listener: the role of lexical stress. TESOL Quarterly, 39(3), 399-423.
- 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.

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