

Basics

English is a stress-timed language. This means that some syllables are stressed, while other syllables are weak. The main stressed syllables have *tonic* stress, and there can be more than one tonic stress in a sentence. These are usually the content words, i.e. the words that carry more meaning. Other stress-timed languages are German, Russian and Dutch.

Other languages, such as French and Spanish, are syllable-timed. That means all syllables take about the same time to pronounce, so tonic stress in sentences isn't so important. It is a bit more difficult for speakers of these languages to learn to use tonic stress in English, but it is essential in order to express yourself clearly.

The academic context

In an academic environment, your intonation is key to getting your message across. It doesn't matter how brilliant your ideas are if your colleagues and teachers can't understand them. Clear delivery depends greatly on your use of tonic stress.

Key features

Words that carry meaning are usually stressed. Consider this sentence:

She's waiting for her mother at the station.

In this sentence, the words that carry more meaning are *waiting*, *mother* and *station*. So the stressed syllables would be:

She's **wait**ing for her **mo**ther at the **sta**tion.

Usually, the last tonic stress is stronger than the others (marked with a •), but that can change in the following three cases:

1 Emphatic stress

You use emphatic stress when you want to give emphasis to a certain piece of information. For example, in the sentence *He's a great friend*, the usual tonic stress would be on *friend*:

He's a great **friend**.

But the speaker might use emphatic stress because they want to highlight just how great the friend is:

He's a **great** friend.

2 Contrastive stress

You use contrastive stress when you want to highlight the difference between one piece of information and another, for example to correct something that was said before. Going back to the first example:

- A Is she waiting for her father at the station?
- B No, she's **wait**ing for her **mo**ther at the **sta**tion.
- A So she's at the station with her mother?
- B No, she's **wait**ing for her **mo**ther at the **sta**tion.

3 New information stress

You use this kind of stress especially when answering questions, in order to stress the information requested.

- A Where are you from?
- B I was born in **Ox**ford, but I grew up in **Braz**il.
- A What time do you want to meet?
- B How about **nine**?

Weak forms

Just as important as stressing the right words is to use weak forms in the other words. That will emphasize the tonic syllables even more. So for example, *for* can become /fə/; *to* might be /tə/; *and* could be just /ən/. Try using the weak forms in this sentence:

It is im**port**ant for you to **listen** and rem**em**ber.
/fə/ /tə/ /ən/

Challenges / difficulties

There are two main difficulties regarding stress:

1 Not knowing which words to stress

Remember to stress the important information. It could be important because it's the information that was requested; or you might want to correct the other person; or it might simply be information you want them to focus on.

2 Not managing to stress some words over others

You can often experience this difficulty if your first language is syllable-timed. Practise saying specific sentences (such as the ones in Theory to practice) until you have nailed them. Then you can transfer those patterns to other sentences.

How can I develop this skill?

You can gradually improve your intonation mainly by listening to yourself and correcting your stress patterns. Record conversations (with the other person's permission, of course) and listen later, repeating sentences that didn't come out quite right. When you are giving a presentation, write a script beforehand, underline the tonic stresses, and practise as much as possible in front of the mirror!

Learning outcome

If you use tonic stress and weak forms correctly, you will be able to express yourself much more clearly and persuasively in conversations, discussions and presentations. Understanding how stress works will also bring a very desirable bonus: you will be able to understand your teachers and identify the most important information from lectures and seminars a lot better.

Theory to practice

Say these sentences out loud. Which syllables would receive tonic stress? Which stress would be the strongest?

- 1 They go on holiday every year.
- 2 When do you leave the office?
- 3 I don't see her very often these days.
- 4 The English class starts at nine.
- 5 It doesn't rain much around here.
- 6 We do the laundry on Sundays.

Ways to get more practice

The best way to get a good 'feeling' for tonic stress and weak forms is to listen and copy native speakers. There are very good sites online, such as ted.com, where you can watch presentations and copy the intonation of the speakers.