

Basics

When we give a talk or presentation, we want people to listen – we want to keep their attention. We can do this by including interesting information and by choosing the right words, but we can also do it with our voice. Good speakers pause, put emphasis on keywords and phrases, and use intonation to make sure people keep listening to what they are saying.

When we pause, we slow down or wait a moment before we make an important point. When we put emphasis (stress) on a word (or on a syllable of a word), we say it louder and with a higher tone so that the listener hears it and focuses on it. We use rising and falling intonation rather than flat intonation to express an emotion, for example to show we are positive about something or we think something is surprising.

In academic, social and practical situations, you will communicate more effectively if you can use pauses, emphasis and intonation to get your message across.

The academic context

When you are giving talks and presentations, you will have far more impact if you can use your voice to make your audience pay attention. In class discussions, delivering your opinions with appropriate stress and intonation will give them more weight, and will make it easier for others to understand and respond to you.

Key features

- Pauses before delivering key information:

The most important thing in my life isn't my family. It's [PAUSE] my mobile.

- Stress to emphasize keywords (strongest stress marked with a •):

The sun **doesn't** rise in the **west**. It **rises** in the **east**•.

- Appropriate intonation:

Isn't it now the most polluted city in the world?

Challenges / difficulties

How much difficulty you have with stress and intonation may depend on your first language(s). If you don't use these features of speech in your own language, it will be more of a challenge to sound natural. Speakers of some languages (Japanese, for example) use a lot of stress and intonation but not in the same way as speakers of English do!

How can I develop this skill?

When you listen to a talk or presentation given by a proficient speaker of English, listen to the way they use these features of speech (they will probably use gesture and body language too). Record yourself giving short talks, and check that you're satisfied with the way you use your voice.

Learning outcome

When you have developed this skill, you will communicate more confidently and effectively. You will be able to give talks and presentations that will hold people's attention.

Theory to practice

1 Read the transcript of part of a talk. Then work in pairs to do the following:

- Find places where you think the speaker will pause.
- Find words (or syllables in long words) that will be heavily stressed for emphasis.
- Find sentences that you think will have noticeable intonation.

In 1965, a Hungarian teacher called Laszlo Polgar had an idea. He thought, 'Geniuses are made – not born.' So, he decided to teach his three daughters – Susan, Sofia and Judit – to play chess. He wanted to make a genius. Together with his wife Klara, he gave them a special chess education. They made playing chess seem very easy and natural. And they made the lessons fun. They were brilliant teachers. And Laszlo was right! He did make a genius!

2 01 Listen and check your answers to Exercise 1. Then discuss the questions with your partner.

- Which of your predictions were correct?
- Were there any examples of pausing, emphasizing or using intonation that you didn't predict?

3 01 Read the observations. Then listen to the recording again to check.

- The speaker's intonation rises as she comes to the emphasized word *idea*. She pauses before explaining what the idea was.
- She puts a lot of emphasis on *made* and *born* to contrast them, and her intonation rises and falls.
- She pauses slightly before saying the names of the three daughters and then puts emphasis on each name. Her intonation falls as she says *daughters* but rises on each name.
- She puts emphasis on *chess* as it is the topic of the talk. She then pauses noticeably before going on.
- She puts a lot of emphasis on *make* before *a genius* because the verb is surprising – geniuses are not usually made.
- The speaker begins the sentence *Together with his wife ...* with high intonation, and she puts emphasis on the name *Klara*. She strongly stresses *chess* again before *education*.
- She puts a lot of emphasis on *fun* because chess is usually serious, and then on the first syllable of *brilliant* because it is a very positive adjective.
- Finally, she pauses before saying *He did make a genius!* to create expectation; and she puts lot of stress on *right* and *did* to emphasize Laszlo's success.


TIP

We often put strong emphasis on words that we think will surprise people, or when we want to contrast one thing with another.

Our teacher makes **maths** lessons **fun**.

Many baby turtles **die**, but some **survive**.

Ways to get more practice

- Record yourself saying some of the sentences from  01. Listen back and decide how you could improve.
- Write a short talk about something surprising. Practise delivering it with pauses, stress and suitable intonation.
- Practise arguing a point with a classmate. Pay attention to how you use your voice.