

The concept of word stress and its importance

What is it?

Word stress (l'accent de mot) is an **essential** concept, but also a **difficult** one for French speakers, because *word stress does not matter in French!* In French, all the syllables of a word are equally accentuated, while in English each word has a **stressed syllable** which is “stronger”: it is **louder, longer, and higher**.

⇒ For example, in the English word **trumpet** /ˈtrʌmpət/, the syllable “**trum**” is louder, longer, and higher than “pet”.

In the pronunciation dictionary, word stress is marked by the **ˈ** symbol, placed directly BEFORE the stressed syllable. In longer words, there will also be a secondary stressed, marked by the same symbol but below the word: /ɪmˈpɑːsəˈbɪləti/

Why does it matter?

If you put the stress on the wrong syllable, **most Anglophones** will **NOT understand the word** when you **say** it, and **you may not understand the word** when you **hear** it. The place of the stress in the word **influences** how you pronounce the **vowels** in it, so a misplaced stress leads to **mispronounced sounds**, which is why native speakers cannot understand what you say!

⇒ Putting the stress on the proper syllable is crucial **to understand and be understood**.

How do you know where to put the stress?

Unfortunately, **English word stress is NOT regular and predictable**, which means you need to learn which syllable is stressed in each word. Unfortunately again, you probably haven't learned which syllable is stressed in all of the English words you think you know. So, **you have to learn the stress pattern of any new word, AND review the stress pattern of familiar words**.

⇒ TO REMEMBER:

1: Word stress is extremely important for comprehension!

2: You need to learn which syllable is stressed in each word

3: You cannot guess, but you can find this information in a dictionary

For instance, use the online dictionary: <http://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/>

OPTIONAL - FURTHER EXPLANATION:

This is not crucial, but if you take the time to read this, it will help you understand the logic behind word stress a little better.

Some basic rules for primary and secondary stress

Stress is mostly unpredictable, but there are **a few basic rules** to remember to help you:

1. There is **only 1 primary stress** in each word.
2. The **secondary stress**, if there is one, is always **before the primary stress**
3. **Not two initial unstressed syllables**, therefore...

4. The **secondary stress** appears only if the **primary stress does not fall on one of the first two syllables**
5. If there is **no primary or secondary stress**, the syllable is **unstressed**.
6. **Not two stressed syllables in a row.**

It is only a **statistic**, not a rule, but most **2-syllable words** are stressed on the **first syllable**.

Neutral and stress-assigning endings

The formation of the word (if it has a **prefix** or **suffix**) can also help you, as some suffixes are **always stressed**, for instance -ee, while others are **neutral** and never influence the stress pattern, such as -ed or -ing.

A few common ones to remember:

- **Grammatical suffixes (-ed, -ing, -s)** are 'neutral' – they don't change the stress. When you conjugate a verb or add a plural, it doesn't change the stress pattern.
- **Some common suffixes are neutral too:** -ful, -less ('powerful, 'powerless), -ness ('happiness), -ly ('kindly), -able, -ible ('comfortable, 'sensible), -ism, -ist ('nationalism, 'nationalist)
- **Some suffixes have an influence:** words in -ic(s) and -ion are always **stressed on the syllable before -ic(s)/-ion** (auto'matic, pre'caution)
- **Words in -ee, -een, -eer, -aire**, are always **stressed on the final suffix** (guaran'tee, bet'ween, engi'neer, millio'naire)

The full list of suffixes which influence word stress is rather long and specific, so will not be included here, but you can find more information on this document for instance:

http://phoneticsiiuam.wikispaces.com/file/view/affixes_neutral&strong.pdf