

The concept & its importance

If you want to improve your English fluency, you need to work on the rhythm of your sentences. “Rhythm” means the **alternation between stressed and unstressed syllables**, and **stressed and unstressed words**, as a result of sentence stress. In addition to getting the pronunciation of individual English words right, you need to get the rhythm right, **to speak more fluently and naturally**. This is the “music” of the language, and it changes the speed at which we speak.

1) Stressed words in a sentence

1) The basic rules of sentence stress are:

- **content words are stressed**
- **function words are unstressed**
- **the time between stressed words is always the same**

Content words: usually **nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, negative words**. *They carry the meaning.*

Function words: usually **articles, auxiliary verbs, pronouns, prepositions, conjunctions**. *These are the grammatical words we use to put content words together.*

Because they carry the meaning, content words are stressed in connected English speech. More precisely, **the stressed syllable in key content words is stressed**. However, **function words are reduced**: the vowel sounds are reduced to /ə/ or /ɪ/, and final or initial consonant sounds may even disappear.

⇒ *For a list of the **reduced forms**, see below – part 2*

Since the time between each stressed word is the same, we maintain a **constant beat on the stressed words, by saying function words more quickly**. This allows the rhythm of the key content words to stay the same. *For example, these two sentences would take as much time to be spoken:*

John loves music. (3 content w.) / **John must have listened to your music.** (3 content w. + 4 function w.)

2) Shifting stress:

If we want to make a **contrast**, or to show **disagreement** with what someone said, we use **shifting stress**. We do this by changing the usual patterns of sentence stress:

instead of using the weak form of a word, we might **use the full form of a function word**;

instead of saying all stressed words equally, we **insist on one of the stressed content words** specifically.

Ex: « I didn't say we should kill him. »

You can choose to stress **each word** of this sentence; each pattern will imply a **different meaning**:

1. I didn't say we should kill him. = **Someone else said** we should kill him.
2. I **didn't** say we should kill him. = I **am denying** saying it.
3. I didn't **say** we should kill him. = I **implied** it / **wrote** it down.
4. I didn't say **we** should kill him. = I said **someone else should** kill him /you should kill him, etc.
5. I didn't say we **should** kill him. = I said we **shouldn't** kill him / we **must** kill him, etc.
6. I didn't say we should **kill** him. = I said we should **leave him/ punish him**/etc.
7. I didn't say we should kill **him**. = We should **kill someone else**.

Example from <https://designerlessons.org/2011/12/10/intonation-sentence-stress-esl/>

To practice recognizing the stressed word in a sentence, you can do the 3 exercises on Phrasal stress on this page:

<http://davidbrett.uniss.it/phonology/page%20with%20frames2.htm>

2) Weak forms

French speakers tend to pronounce unstressed words with full vowels, which does not respect the music of English. To change this, remember that **it is essential to use the weak forms of function words** in your sentences.

In the table below, **weak forms are in blue** and should be used most of the time, while **strong forms are in red** and should only be used for contrast.

a	am	and	are	as	at	can	could	for
ə	əm	ənd	ə	əz	ət	kən	kəd	fə
eɪ	æm	ænd	ɑ:	æz	æt	kæn	kʊd	fɔ:

from	had	has	have	must	of	shall	should	some
fɹəm	əd	əz	əv	məst	əv	ʃəl	ʃəd	səm
fɹɒm	həd	həz	hæv	mʌst	ɒv	ʃæl	ʃʊd	sʌm

that	them	to	us	was	were	would	you	your
ðət	ðəm	tə	əs	wəz	wə	wəd	jə	jə(r)
ðæt	ðem	tu:	ʌs	wɒz	wɜ:	wʊd	ju:	jʊə

3) Linking

When we speak naturally, we do not pronounce a word, stop, then say the next word in the sentence.

Fluent speech flows with a rhythm and **the words are linked** to each other. **The way we pronounce the end and beginning of some words can change depending on the sounds at the beginning and end of those words.**

=> *If you are already quite comfortable with English sentence stress, have a look at the links below to understand what happens and practice linking words in connected speech.*

⇒ features of connected speech – introduction and simple examples:

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/learningenglish/grammar/pron/features/connected.shtml>

⇒ Aspects of connected speech – more detailed explanation and two exercises:

http://davidbrett.uniss.it/phonology/aspects_of_connected_speech_inde.htm

4) How to practice

a) Rhythm of sentences:

Read aloud in English for 15 minutes every day. Read slowly and pay attention to each word – again, look them up if not sure of their pronunciation. Pay attention to sentence stress – make sure you stress lexical words while making an effort not to stress grammar words, using their weak forms.

More specifically, you can choose a few lines in a text, mark the stressed syllable in all words, underline the stressed words, then practice reading so that you respect words stress and emphasize stressed words while gliding over unstressed words.

b) Rhythm and intonation:

Listen to articles or recorded books with the text in front of you, to compare the pronunciation and intonation with what you read. Record yourself reading some passages, then compare how you read to the original recording. For articles for instance NPR has a lot of audio documents with their transcripts:

www.npr.org . Some TED Talks have transcripts too. <https://www.ted.com/talks>