

HARD WORDS

30 Clues for Predicting the Pronunciation of Words in English

Before we begin –

- *Remember: you need to use the sounds of English to pronounce English words, not the vowels and consonants of your first language.*

a) No. syllables:

1. Words are divided into syllables with vc or friendly (F) sound connections.
2. There is one vowel spelling in each syllable.

b) Stressed syllable:

3. In a one-syllable content word the whole word is stressed – there are no weak syllables.
4. Nouns tend to be stressed on the first syllable, especially two-syllable nouns.
5. Two-syllable verbs tend to be stressed on the second syllable.
6. The majority of suffixes are unstressed.
7. We always stress before certain suffixes, e.g. -tion ('information') and -ier ('earlier').
8. A vowel sound in a weak syllable will usually be a schwa, or i or ii. 'er' and 'or' are written schwa sounds.
9. When a consonant letter (e.g. 'p' or 'b') meets 'l' in a suffix, there will be an embedded schwa sound between them, e.g. 'people': Pee pl and 'valuable': Val y bl.
10. Suffixes with 'i' contain the short i sound, while suffixes with 'y', 'ey', or 'ie' contain the short ii sound.
11. Some suffixes contain strong vowel sounds (svs), e.g. ei in 'aeroplane'.
12. A few suffixes are stressed, e.g. 'ee' in 'guarantee' and 'eer' in 'engineer'.
13. The majority of prefixes are unstressed, e.g. 'un' in 'unfortunately'.
14. Compound nouns are stressed on the first syllable, e.g. 'bookstore'.
15. Sometimes two weak syllables with schwas can merge to form a single syllable with a schwa, e.g. 'ua' in 'valuable'.
16. In some words it is necessary to delete a vowel sound or syllable to reduce the number of redundant weak syllables, e.g. 'or' in 'comfortable' and 'e' in 'vegetable'.
17. Some words contain two suffixes: their own, and one from the root word. The stress can carry through from the root word, e.g. 'extreme' > 'extremely'.
18. Weak syllables must be downplayed – spoken more quietly to let the strong syllable be heard.

c) Stressed vowel sound:

19. vcv rule – the first vowel is long and says its alphabet name, e.g. eu in 'focus'.
20. vcc rule – the first vowel is short, protected by the two (or more) consonant letters, e.g. o in 'opposite'.
21. cvc rule – in a one-syllable word with this pattern, the single vowel letter is short, e.g. e in 'debt'.
22. Two vowel letters together make a long sound or diphthong. The first vowel usually says its alphabet name, while the second is silent, e.g. 'ea' = ee in 'heat' and 'oa' = eu in 'boat'.
23. Long vowel sounds can be written with a digraph, vowel(s) + r, or vowel(s) + other consonant letters.
24. Diphthongs can be written with a digraph, vowel(s) + r, or vowel(s) + other consonant letter (b, g, gh, h, l, w, y).
25. A vowel at the end of a short word says its alphabet name, e.g. hi, fly, ago, also, no, go, so, menu, etc.

d) Other features

26. Some words have unexpected silent letters, e.g. 'b' in 'debt'.
27. Some words have unexpected hidden sounds, e.g. 'y' in 'menu'.
28. 'e' is usually silent at the end of a word, e.g. in 'garage'.

e) Exceptions

29. Loan words are often exceptions, e.g. 'restaurant'. We keep the spelling but force the word to fit our stress pattern.
30. Memorise the patterns above and learn the exceptions as sight words.