

HARD WORDS

How to Predict Word Stress

1. English stress is fairly regular, although not completely, and there are **exceptions** (Lesson 7). Every **content word** has one strong-stressed syllable, e.g. 'dentist'. The most important sound in the word is the stressed vowel sound – in this case: e. One-syllable content words are stressed on the whole word, because there are no weak syllables, e.g. 'bought' and 'shirt'. **Function words** are not stressed, apart from pronouns at the end of a clause ('I know *him*.') or in intonation. ('He *is* helpful.') [\[LINK\]](#) [\[LINK\]](#) [\[LINK\]](#)

2. In general, a word is stressed on the nearest strong syllable to the end, so to find the stress in a word we have to work backwards from the end [\[LINK\]](#) [\[LINK\]](#). A **strong syllable** is one with a **long vowel sound** (e.g. ar, ee), a **diphthong** (e.g. ai, ei), or a **short vowel sound** (not a **schwa**) e.g. in one syllable words: 'big', 'hat'. A **weak syllable** usually has either a schwa sound ('normal'), a **short i sound** ('automatic'), or a **short ii sound** ('hobby'). **Suffixes** usually contain *one or more* of these weak vowel sounds – most usually the schwa. So, working backwards, let's look at typical word stress scenarios:

a) The **final** syllable is often strong in **two-syllable verbs** (avoid, receive) and when the suffix is stressed (engineer, Chinese). [\[LINK\]](#) While the vast majority of suffixes are unstressed, there is a small group of about 20 suffixes which *are* usually stressed. One-syllable content words are stressed on the whole word ('buy', 'cow').

b) The **penultimate** (next to final) syllable is often strong in words with suffixes, which are not usually stressed, like 'plumber' and 'happy'. There are certain suffixes that we always stress on the preceding syllable, e.g. '-ic' ('automatic') and '-tion' ('information').

c) The **antepenultimate** (next to penultimate) syllable is strong if the final and penultimate are both weak, e.g. in 'cinema' and 'emergency'. If this syllable is *also* weak, we have to keep moving back until we find a strong syllable, e.g. in 'definitely'. This word contains two suffixes: one from the root word ('definite') + one from the longer word: 'definitely'. We can discount the two suffixes for stress and weigh up whether it will be 'de-' or 'fi-' with the stress. The 'i' in the second syllable makes it look weak (with the vowel sound i), compared to the first. We may also know how to pronounce the root word 'definite'.

3. If the word is a **compound noun**, it is stressed on the first syllable, e.g. in 'bookshop' and 'popcorn'. [\[LINK\]](#)

If the word is a two-part **phrasal verb**, both words are stressed, e.g. in 'wake up' and 'put on'. If the phrasal verb has three parts or more, the stress depends on the word used as a particle, e.g. 'run away' = Ru n Wei. The stress pattern in 'away' is o O due to the first rule in Point 6, below. [\[LINK\]](#) [\[LINK\]](#)

4. A small group of words, called **homographs**, are spelled the same but have different stress depending on the type of word they represent, e.g. 'record' (noun), 'record' (verb); 'produce' (noun), 'produce' (verb). [\[LINK\]](#) [\[LINK\]](#)

5. **Two-syllable nouns** ('people', 'nature') *tend to* be stressed on the first syllable, because the second syllable is a suffix with (usually) a schwa sound, while two-syllable verbs ('confirm', 'occur') *tend to* be stressed on the second syllable. **Acronyms** are stressed on the final syllable, e.g. 'DVD', 'UN', 'ABC', 'ITV'.

6. Two-syllable words with 'a-' prefix, like 'alone' and 'above', will be stressed on the second syllable because 'a-' represents a schwa sound. [\[LINK\]](#) Sometimes weak syllables merge together in a word as we say it, e.g. 'generally' becomes 'gen-rally' and 'comfortable' becomes 'comf-table'. Since the most important sound in a word is the stressed vowel sound, it does not matter if we lose a few consonant sounds or a whole (weak) syllable, as long as the stressed vowel sound is clearly heard.