

Talk a Lot

Focus on Connected Speech

What is Sentence Stress?

Sentence stress is a natural part of spoken English and students should be encouraged to use it during Talk a Lot courses. English is a **stress-timed language** which is spoken with **rhythm**. This results from strong and weak stresses that are built into both individual words and sentences. How can students recognise stresses in a sentence? The main rules for sentence stress in a *neutral* sentence (one without special emphasis) are as follows:

- i) There are two kinds of word in most sentences: **content words** and **function words**. Content words are words that give the meaning in a sentence, such as **nouns** (e.g. bread), **main verbs** (e.g. eat; note: “be” is an exception because it is a main verb, but is always unstressed), **phrasal verbs** (e.g. put on), **adjectives** (e.g. sliced), **adverbs** (e.g. quickly), **numbers**, **wh- question words** (e.g. what), and **negative auxiliary verbs** (e.g. isn’t). Function words are words that are essential to make the sentence grammatically correct, but that don’t have any intrinsic meaning on their own, i.e. without content words. They are words such as **pronouns** (e.g. she, them), **auxiliary verbs** (e.g. “are” in “They are going...”), **prepositions** (e.g. in, on), **articles** and **determiners** (e.g. a, the, some), **conjunctions** (e.g. and), **quantifiers** (e.g. many), and the **verb “be” when used as a main verb**. English native speakers may automatically *listen to* the content words in a sentence whilst *absorbing* the function words almost subconsciously.
- ii) The strong stresses fall on the content words in a sentence while the weak stresses fall on the function words. If a word has a strong stress in a sentence it is spoken with more emphasis and volume, and more slowly than a word with a weak stress.
- iii) The time between the stressed content words tends to be the same, regardless of how many function words there are between them.

But does sentence stress matter? It’s a difficult area – why not just leave it out? It can be a difficult concept for students to understand – particularly if their first language is not stress-timed, but **syllable-timed**, i.e. in their first language all of the syllables in a sentence are spoken with more or less equal stress (e.g. French or Japanese). Native speakers of English speak quite naturally with sentence stress but if you asked one why they did this they would perhaps be unaware that they were even doing it, and at a loss to explain the rules (unless they had specifically studied the subject). Nevertheless, it is an important aspect of spoken English because **when a student doesn’t speak with sentence stress – or uses incorrect sentence stress – they can be hard to understand, or difficult to listen to, even when what they’re saying is grammatically correct and really interesting** – a situation that can be quite frustrating for students. Understanding sentence stress can also help students to get more out of listening to spoken English.

From p.12.6 you can see the sentence stress in all of the sentence block starting sentences from Books 1 and 2. The words in black are content words, and one of their syllables has a strong stress, whilst the words in grey are function words, and they have weak stress. There are many different ways that teachers can highlight sentence stress during the course of each lesson; below there are a handful of suggested activities to get the ball rolling. Let’s use a starting sentence from the “Music” topic in Book 2 as our first example.

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- The students have to form starting sentences or sentence blocks when they are given only the content words, or only the function words, and a given verb form.
- The students listen to songs, poems, or limericks and identify the content and function words; then practise repeating the lines with a partner or within the group.
- The students have to recite all the stressed words in a sentence block from memory.
- The students compile a list of content words and function words from a number of different sentence blocks, and put the words into groups according to their use, e.g. “noun”, “main verb”, “adjective”, “pronoun”, “conjunction”, “article”, etc.
- Mumbling game: the students have to say a starting sentence or sentence block, not omitting the function words completely, but mumbling them so that they are barely heard. This can demonstrate quite well how native speakers of English stress the content words – the words which have meaning – but glide over the function words as if they were of little or no importance. (Yet the function words are critically important, particularly in an English language examination situation, because they are the glue sticking the content words together.)
- The teacher writes the content words from one sentence on separate cards (you could use the template on p.12.29 of this book) and the students have to put them in order, then fill in the missing function words.
- Using some, or all, of the starting sentences (from p.12.6), students could look at the content words (in black) and record all of the:

- a) suffixes
- b) compound nouns

- Use the worksheets from pp.12.6-12.27 to create a staged lesson. For example:
 1. give students some sentence block starting sentences from Book 1 or Book 2
 2. ask them to **circle all of the content words** in each sentence
 3. give them pp.12.6-12.8 (or 12.17-12.19) so that they can check their answers
 4. ask them to **underline the stressed syllables** in each content word on these pages
 5. give them pp.12.9-12.11 (or 12.20-12.22) so that they can check their answers
 6. ask them to **write the vowel sound above each stressed syllable** on these pages
 7. give them pp.12.12-12.16 (or 12.23-12.27) so that they can check their answers

Note: The number of sentence block starting sentences that you use will depend on the level of your students and how confident they are with the concepts. This work could also be given for homework.

A Note about Emphasis

Sentence stress can vary according to what the speaker wishes to emphasise. If we wish to stress a particular word or phrase in a sentence, we should make several of the preceding syllables unstressed, so that the syllables that we do stress are emphasised. Let's look at a few examples:

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i) Alan was taking a box of five hundred brown envelopes to the stockroom when he slipped on a wet floor.

[Neutral – no special emphasis; content words (black) have stressed syllables (underlined), whilst function words are unstressed.]

ii) Alan was taking a box of five hundred brown envelopes to the stockroom when he slipped on a wet floor.

*[It is important **how many** brown envelopes Alan was taking; “box” is unstressed, so that “five hundred” is more prominent.]*

iii) Alan was taking a box of five hundred brown envelopes to the stockroom when he slipped on a wet floor.

*[It is important **where** Alan was taking the box of brown envelopes. “five hundred brown envelopes” is unstressed, so that “stockroom” is more prominent.]*

...and so on.