

Talk a Lot

Focus on Connected Speech

What is Word Stress?

Every word in English has one syllable with a stronger stress than that of the others. English is a stress-timed language, which means that we speak with rhythm, pronouncing the stress in each content word. For example, in the word “teacher”, the first syllable is stressed and the second syllable is unstressed. (See p.12.1 for more on content words.) The strong stress always falls on a vowel sound. But which syllable and sound is stressed in each word?

There are many complicated and obscure rules for finding word stress in English words, like:

“Two-syllable adjectives (without prefixes) are always stressed on the first syllable (or sometimes the second if the word begins with a vowel), unless there is an “R” in the month, or it’s later than 8pm in the evening on a market day (during a wet fortnight in Wales)...” etc.

OK, I’m only joking, but perhaps you can see what I’m trying to say here! Students can, of course, explore word stress in more detail at their leisure (the bibliography on p.x could help). However, in this handbook I would like to highlight a few dead-cert rules:

1. First Syllable Drift

In English most words tend to be stressed on the first syllable. Around 83% of the 1,000 most commonly-used words have Germanic origin, which is where this tendency comes from¹. For example, of the 201 single discussion words with two or more syllables in Talk a Lot Elementary Book 2, 154 were stressed on the first syllable – that’s 77%. For more analysis of discussion words from this book, see p.13.3.

2. Suffixes

Suffixes are the end parts of words, like -able (**believable**), -ful (**helpful**), -ing (**eating**), -ment (**arrangement**), etc. Suffixes are almost always unstressed, so if students find a two syllable word with a suffix, e.g. “playing”, they can be 99% sure that the first syllable is stressed: **playing** = /'pleɪj.ɪŋ/ As if this information wasn’t already a big enough help for working out word stress, there are many common suffixes where the strong stress is always on the preceding syllable, for example: -able, -ation, -asion, and -ment. For more examples, see p.15.4. As with most things in English grammar there are a few exceptions to the rule, e.g. words ending in certain suffixes are always stressed **on** the suffix (see p.15.4). For example, words ending in “-ee”, like referee /ref.ə'ri: /, are always stressed on the suffix. For more on suffixes see p.15.1.

3. Compound Nouns

Compound nouns are nouns (things) that consist of two words together, for example: baseball (base + ball), guidebook (guide + book), popcorn (pop + corn), and wheelbarrow (wheel + barrow), etc. Compound nouns are almost always stressed on the first syllable, so if students find a new word which is a compound noun, like “strawberry”, they can be 99% sure that the first syllable is stressed: strawberry = /'strɔ: b.ri: / There are, of course, a few exceptions to

¹ M. Celce-Murcia, D. M. Brinton, J. M. Goodwin, *Teaching Pronunciation*, CUP, 1996, p.133

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the rule, for example: loudspeaker /laʊd'spi:k.ə/ and policewoman /pə'li:s.wʊ.mən/, which are both stressed on the second syllable. For more on compound nouns see p.16.1.

4. Prefixes

Prefixes are the beginning parts of words, like **anti-** (which means *against*), **multi-** (which means *many*), **pre-** (which means *before*), and **tele-** (which means *remote*). There aren't really any word stress rules for prefixes: sometimes they are stressed, sometimes they are not. We can see some patterns, though, for example a group of two-syllable *homographs* which can be both verbs and nouns, and which are stressed on the first syllable if they're nouns, and on the second syllable if they're verbs (see p.14.3). Despite prefixes not helping us much with working out word stress, it's generally good for students to learn how to identify them, partly because they can give clues about the meanings of words (e.g. "mini" = small, so "minibus" = small bus). There are some activities about prefixes in section 14 (from p.14.1).

In summary then, most words in a normal English sentence will fall into one of three categories:

- i) one-syllable words – the stress falls on the only vowel sound in each word
- ii) words with suffixes – for two syllable words the stress falls on the first syllable; for longer words, we know that the suffix is almost always unstressed
- iii) compound nouns – the stress almost always falls on the first syllable

For examples of this, see the analysis of discussion words from Talk a Lot Elementary Book 2 on p.13.3, and the analysis of a newspaper article on p.13.7. Students can use this information to help them when working out word stress. When you factor in that most English words are stressed on the first syllable it's possible to correctly guess the word stress of many words that you don't already know. In short, if a student is unsure of where the word stress falls, and they don't have time to look up the word and check the stress mark in their dictionary, they should go for the first syllable to have a good chance of getting it right.