

What is Word Stress?

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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.viii 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.

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Analysis of Discussion Words in Elementary Book 2

(Reference: *Talk a Lot Elementary Book 2*, pp.147-151)

Aim: to identify word stress in each of the discussion words in Book 2. *Note: all of the words are nouns.*

Summary

Of the 407 discussion words in Talk a Lot Elementary Book 2, there are:

- 146 words with 1 syllable

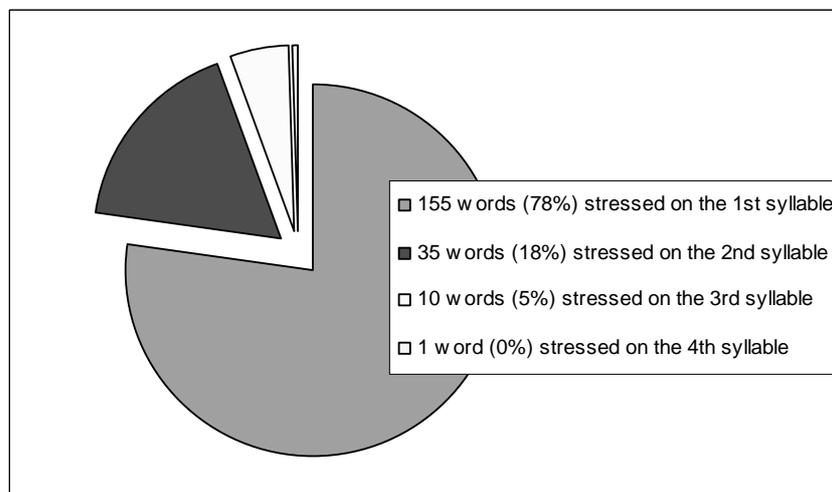
We can discount these because we know where the word stress falls – on the whole word.

- 60 phrases

We can discount these because we are looking at the word stress of individual words. If you wanted to, you could look at these phrases separately and analyse the word stress of the words, both separately and together.

There are 201 individual words with two or more syllables

- 155 words which are stressed on the 1st syllable (78%)
- 35 words which are stressed on the 2nd syllable (18%)
- 10 words which are stressed on the 3rd syllable (5%)
- 1 word which is stressed on the 4th syllable (0%)



Discussion Words

155 words (78%) stressed on the 1st syllable

including 32 compound nouns (in boxes), which we know are usually stressed on the 1st syllable

accident, **animal**, **ankle**, **arson**, **audience**, **autumn**, **badminton**, **ballet**, **baseball**, **battery**, **birthday**, **blackmail**, **boxing**, **bridesmaid**, **butterfly**, **caterpillar**, **championship**, **childhood**

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Analysis of Discussion Words in Elementary Book 2

(Reference: *Talk a Lot Elementary Book 2*, pp.147-151)

chorus, classical, coffin, colour, commentator, countryside, cricket, criminal, crocodile, cyclone, dashboard, desert, DJ, dolphin, driver, drizzle, eighty, elbow, elephant, engine, fifty, final, finger, fingerprints, flooding, flower, football, forest, forty, friendship, funeral, goldfish, guitar, hailstones, handbrake, handcuffs, hazard, headlights, hockey, hundred, hurricane, indicator, insect, instrument, jury, keyboard, kidney, labour, lion, liver, lizard, mammal, marriage, menopause, midwife, mistress, monkey, mountain, murder, muscle, music, musical, nature, nightclub, ninety, number, oboe, ocean, octopus, orange, orchestra, organ, panda, passenger, pedal, player, pregnancy, prison, punishment, purple, rabbit, racquet, radio, rainbow, raincoat, reservoir, river, rugby, sailing, saxophone, season, seatbelt, seven, seventy, shoplifting, shoulder, singer, sixty, skeleton, skiing, snooker, snowman, spider, stadium, starfish, stereo, stomach, summer, sunblock, sunglasses, sunset, suntan, suspect, swimming, teenager, temperature, tennis, terrorism, thirty, tiger, tortoise, trumpet, twenty, valley, victim, violence, volleyball, weather, wedding, widow, windscreen, winner, winter, witness, yellow, zebra, zero

35 words (18%) stressed on the 2nd syllable

accelerator, affair, appeal, arrest, athletics, biography, conductor, defendant, detective, divorce, eighteen, eleven, employment, engagement, environment, fifteen, fourteen, geography, giraffe, gorilla, musician, nineteen, Olympics, performer, piano, prediction, redundancy, sixteen, solicitor, supporter, thermometer, thirteen, tsunami, umbrella, violin

10 words (5%) stressed on the 3rd syllable

adolescence, automatic, hippopotamus, kangaroo, referee, anniversary, seventeen, separation, education, graduation

1 word (0%) stressed on the 4th syllable

qualification

Suffixes

See p.13.6 for an analysis of suffixes in discussion words from Book 2.

Discussion words that are not stressed on the first syllable

The 46 words which are not stressed on the first syllable can be categorised into five groups. It would be wrong to state that these kinds of words will never be stressed on the first syllable, but it's possible to see some patterns that can be helpful to keep in mind when looking for word stress in a group of vocabulary words:

1. Nouns that come from a verb (10)

accelerator (verb: accelerate), appeal (verb: appeal), arrest (verb: arrest), conductor (verb: conduct), defendant (verb: defend), detective (verb: detect), divorce (verb: divorce), performer (verb: perform), solicitor (verb: solicit), supporter (verb: support)

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Analysis of Discussion Words in Elementary Book 2

(Reference: *Talk a Lot Elementary Book 2*, pp.147-151)

2. Foreign words that haven't yet conformed to the 1st syllable drift in English (10)

giraffe, gorilla, piano, tsunami, umbrella, violin, Olympics, hippopotamus, kangaroo, thermometer

3. "-teen" numbers which can be stressed on either syllable, depending on the context* (7)

thirteen, fourteen, fifteen, sixteen, seventeen, eighteen, nineteen

**Note: if we were counting: "Thirteen, fourteen, fifteen, etc." we would stress the numbers on their first syllables, but if we were using a number in isolation, e.g. somebody asked us "How old are you?" we would naturally reply "Nineteen", with the stress on the second syllable, rather than "Nineteen".*

4. Words which conform to their own suffix rule* (16)

**See p.15.4 for more on this*

For example:

Rule 1: the stress is always on the syllable before the suffix:

- employ-ment, engage-ment
- educa-tion, gradua-tion, qualifica-tion, predic-tion, separa-tion
- adolesc-ence
- annivers-ary
- automat-ic, athlet-ics
- geog-raphy, biog-raphy
- music-ian
- redund-ancy

...or Rule 2: the stress is always on the suffix:

- refer -ee

5. Uncategorisable – i.e. the stress is just like that for no apparent reason (3)

affair, eleven, environment

Summary of Method for Finding Word Stress in Discussion Words

- Take away one syllable words
- Take away phrases (e.g. "post office")
- Identify words with suffixes
- Identify words that are compound nouns
- Notice that most words are stressed on the first syllable
- Look for patterns within words which are not stressed on the first syllable (see 1-5 above)

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Discussion Words with Suffixes in Elementary Book 2

Of the 201 individual words with two or more syllables, 156 (78%) have suffixes, which we know are almost always unstressed. This can help us as we try to work out the word stress for each discussion word. On this page you can see all of the words with suffixes, grouped by suffix. The main groups are shown in boxes, with suffixes shown in bold.

(Reference: *Talk a Lot Elementary Book 2*, pp.147-151)

gorilla
panda
umbrella

marriage
affair

animal
classical
criminal
final
funeral
mammal
musical
pedal

organ
hurricane

defendant
elephant

caterpillar
guitar

hazard
lizard

anniversary
rugby

pregnancy
redundancy

crocodile
referee
eleven

adolescence
violence

driver
finger
flower
liver
murder
number
passenger
performer
player
river

shoulder
singer
snooker
spider
summer
supporter
teenager
thermometer
tiger
weather
winner
winter

desert
battery
forest

ballet
cricket
racquet
trumpet

hockey
kidney
monkey
valley

tsunami
musician

automatic
music

athletics
Olympics

coffin
dolphin
violin

engine
boxing
flooding
sailing
shoplifting
skiing
swimming
wedding

tennis

terrorism
rabbit
detective

ankle
drizzle
muscle
purple

employment
engagement
environment
instrument
punishment

witness

piano
radio
stereo
zero

oboe

arson
prison
season

kangaroo

accelerator
commentator
conductor
indicator
solicitor

colour
labour

widow
yellow

menopause
appeal
saxophone
octopus

orchestra
zebra

giraffe

biography
geography

mistress
arrest
jury
mountain

eighteen
fifteen
fourteen
nineteen
seventeen
sixteen
thirteen

victim

education
graduation
prediction
qualification
separation

tortoise

badminton
skeleton

eighty
fifty
forty
ninety
seventy
sixty
thirty
twenty

stadium

nature
temperature

chorus
hippopotamus

reservoir
divorce

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Working Out Word Stress – Analysis of a Newspaper Article #1

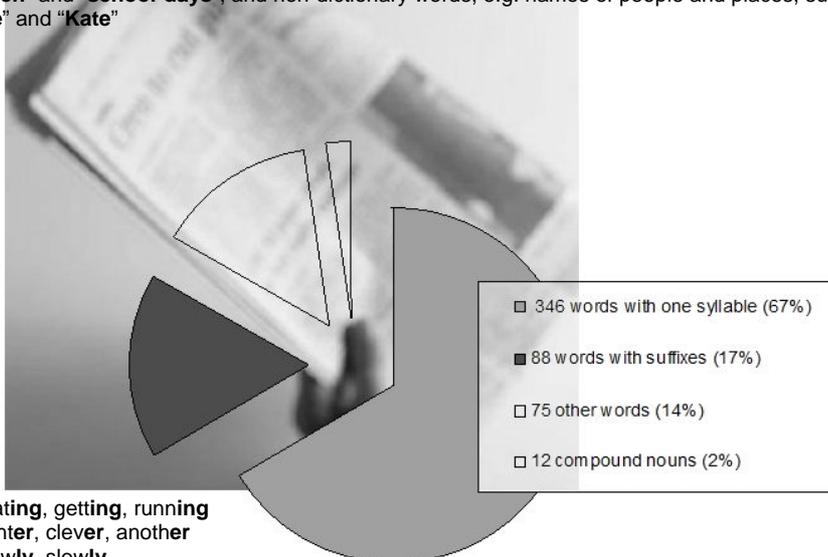
This analysis demonstrates the prevalence of one-syllable words, words with suffixes, and compound nouns in modern English. If we can identify these kinds of words, we can more easily identify word stress because:

- one-syllable words are stressed on the whole word
- suffixes are almost always unstressed
- compound nouns are almost always stressed on the first syllable

We analysed a recent article about holidays from a quality British broadsheet newspaper. 86% of the words used fell into one of the three categories above. We are unable to reprint the article here, but the results of our analysis are as follows. (Note: all examples are from the author of this book, not from the original article).

Total words in the newspaper article extract: **521**

- 67%** There are 346 one-syllable words. If it's a content word, e.g. "go" or "quick", the stress is on the whole word. If it's a function word, e.g. "the" or "at" it will (almost) always be unstressed, and if spoken aloud the weak stress form will be used, if applicable (see p.17.1 for more on weak forms)
- 17%** There are 88 words with suffixes, e.g. "wint **-er**" and "look **-ing**"
- 2%** There are 12 compound nouns, e.g. "**fortnight**" and "**grapefruit**"
- 14%** There are 75 other words, including words with prefixes, e.g. "**a-** bout" and "**com-** pete"; compound words, e.g. "**deep-frozen**" and "**school-days**"; and non-dictionary words, e.g. names of people and places, such as "**Derbyshire**" and "**Kate**"



88 words with suffixes

- | | |
|--------------|--|
| -ing | e.g. looking, eating, getting, running |
| -er | e.g. leather, winter, clever, another |
| -ly | e.g. quickly, newly, slowly |
| -y | e.g. happy, ready |
| -le | e.g. whistle, fizzle |
| -tion | e.g. examination, position |
| -ic | e.g. aromatic, automatic |

Other suffixes found in words from the article

-able, -age, -al, -ant, -bour, -by, -ed, -en, -es, -ey, -ies, -ion, -ment, -n't, -o, -or, -ous, -rict, -try, -ture, etc.

12 compound nouns

e.g. fortnight, grapefruit, sideshow, wardrobe, guidebook, etc.

Action

Why not get your students to do a similar analysis of a short text or newspaper article? Ask them to look for:

- one-syllable words
- words with suffixes
- compound nouns

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Working Out Word Stress – Two-Syllable Words where the First Syllable is a Schwa: /ə/

There are lots of common words in English – particularly verbs – where the first syllable is a schwa: /ə/, as you can see from the table below. **Because the schwa sound is always unstressed, we know for sure that all of the following words are stressed on the second syllable.**

Note that all of the words begin with an “a”, and notice the double consonants after many of the verbs, e.g. affect.

VERBS

abate	/ə'beɪt/
abet	/ə'bet/
abide	/ə'baɪd/
abort	/ə'bɔ:t/
abridge	/ə'brɪdʒ/
abuse	/ə'bju:z/
accord	/ə'kɔ:d/
accost	/ə'kɒst/
account	/ə'kaʊnt/
accuse	/ə'kju:z/
achieve	/ə'tʃi:v/
acquaint	/ə'kweɪnt/
acquire	/ə'kwaɪə/
acquit	/ə'kwɪt/
adapt	/ə'dæpt/
address	/ə'dres/
adjust	/ə'dʒʌst/
adopt	/ə'dɒpt/
adore	/ə'dɔ:/
affect	/ə'fekt/
affirm	/ə'fɜ:m/
affix	/ə'fɪks/
afflict	/ə'flɪkt/
afford	/ə'fɔ:d/
agree	/ə'gri:/
alarm	/ə'lɑ:m/
alert	/ə'lɜ:t/
alight	/ə'laɪt/
allege	/ə'ledʒ/
allow	/ə'laʊ/
allude	/ə'lu:d/
ally	/ə'laɪ/
amass	/ə'mæs/
amaze	/ə'meɪz/
amend	/ə'mend/
amuse	/ə'mju:z/
announce	/ə'naʊns/
annoy	/ə'nɔ:/
annul	/ə'nʌl/

ADVERBS

aback	/ə'bæk/
aboard	/ə'bɔ:d/
about	/ə'baʊt/
above	/ə'bʌv/
abreast	/ə'brest/
abroad	/ə'brɔ:d/
across	/ə'krɒs/
afar	/ə'fɑ:/
afield	/ə'fi:ld/
afresh	/ə'freʃ/
again	/ə'geɪn/
ago	/ə'gəʊ/
aground	/ə'graʊnd/
ahead	/ə'hed/
ajar	/ə'dʒɑ:/
alike	/ə'laɪk/
aloft	/ə'lɒft/
alone	/ə'ləʊn/
along	/ə'lɒŋ/
aloud	/ə'laʊd/
amid	/ə'mɪd/
amok	/ə'mɒk/
among	/ə'mʌŋ/
anew	/ə'nju:/
apart	/ə'pɑ:t/
apiece	/ə'pi:s/
around	/ə'raʊnd/
ashore	/ə'ʃɔ:/
aside	/ə'saɪd/
askew	/ə'skju:/
asleep	/ə'sli:p/
astray	/ə'streɪ/
astride	/ə'straɪd/
away	/ə'weɪ/
awry	/ə'raɪ/

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Working Out Word Stress – Two-Syllable Words where the First Syllable is a Schwa: /ə/

There are lots of common words in English – particularly verbs – where the first syllable is a schwa: /ə/, as you can see from the table below. **Because the schwa sound is always unstressed, we know for sure that all of the following words are stressed on the second syllable.**

Note that all of the words begin with an “a”, and notice the double consonants after many of the verbs, e.g. affect.

ADJECTIVES

abrupt	/ə'brʌpt/
acute	/ə'kju:t/
afloat	/ə'fləʊt/
afraid	/ə'freɪd/
against	/ə'geɪnst/
aghast	/ə'gɑ:st/
alert	/ə'lɜ:t/
alive	/ə'laɪv/
aloof	/ə'lu:f/
ashamed	/ə'ʃeɪmd/
asleep	/ə'sli:p/
astute	/ə'stju:t/
averse	/ə'vɜ:s/
awake	/ə'weɪk/
aware	/ə'weə/

NOUNS

abode	/ə'bəʊd/
account	/ə'kaʊnt/
address	/ə'dres/
ado	/ə'du:/
affair	/ə'feə/
affront	/ə'frʌnt/
alarm	/ə'lɑ:m/
amount	/ə'maʊnt/
applause	/ə'plɔ:z/