

Word Stress Rules

There are two very simple rules about word stress:

1. One word has only one stress. (One word cannot have two stresses. If you hear two stresses, you hear two words. Two stresses cannot be one word. It is true that there can be a "secondary" stress in some words. But a secondary stress is much smaller than the main [primary] stress, and is only used in long words.)

2. We can only stress vowels, not consonants.

Here are some more, rather complicated, rules that can help you understand where to put the stress. But do not rely on them too much, because there are many exceptions. It is better to try to "feel" the music of the language and to add the stress naturally.

A. Stress on first syllable

rule example

Most 2-syllable nouns PRESent, EXport, CHIna, TAbLe

Most 2-syllable adjectives PRESent, SLENDER, CLEVer, HAPpy

B. Stress on last syllable

rule example

Most 2-syllable verbs preSENT, exPORT, deCIDE, beGIN

There are many two-syllable words in English whose meaning and class change with a change in stress. The word present, for example is a two-syllable word. If we stress the first syllable, it is a noun (gift) or an adjective (opposite of absent). But if we stress the second syllable, it becomes a verb (to offer). More examples: the words export, import, contract and object can all be nouns or verbs depending on whether the stress is on the first or second syllable.

C. Stress on penultimate syllable (penultimate = second from end)

rule example

Words ending in -ic GRAPHiC, geoGRAPHic, geoLOGic

Words ending in -sion and -tion teleVIsion, reveLAtion

For a few words, native English speakers don't always "agree" on where to put the stress. For example, some people say teleVIsion and others say TELevision. Another example is: CONtroversy and conTROversy.

D. Stress on ante-penultimate syllable (ante-penultimate = third from end)

rule example

Words ending in -cy, -ty, -phy and -gy deMOcracy, dependaBility,

phoTOgraphy, geOLogy

Words ending in -al CRItical, geoLOGical

E. Compound words (words with two parts)

rule example

For compound nouns, the stress is on the first part BLACKbird, GREENhouse

For compound adjectives, the stress is on the second part bad-TEMpered, old-FASHioned

For compound verbs, the stress is on the second part Under-Stand