

Word stress and sentence rhythm

English A1

What this topic teaches

Chinese gives every syllable almost the same time. English does not: it squeezes the small words and makes the important ones LOUD and long. This topic trains the two levels of English rhythm: one loud part inside each word, and the beat of loud words inside each sentence.

- Every English word has one main **stressed syllable** : the loud, long, clear part. Long words can also have a smaller second beat (*UN-der-STAND*).
- Every English sentence has a **rhythm** : the important words carry the beat.
- Memory hook: English is a drum, not a piano. Hit the beats; hurry between them.

One loud part per word

Say your own name with each syllable equally loud. Now say it the English way: one part up. That lift is word stress, and it changes meanings.

Two-syllable word	Loud-first (noun/adj)	Loud-second (verb)
record	a REcord (a thing)	to reCORD (an action)
present	a PREsent (a gift)	to preSENT (to give)
import	the IMports	to imPORT

- The loud syllable is longer, higher and clearer; the soft syllables hurry.
- Wrong stress can hide a word completely: say *HOTel* instead of *hoTEL* and many listeners will not recognise it.

■ A first try

Clap the loud part.

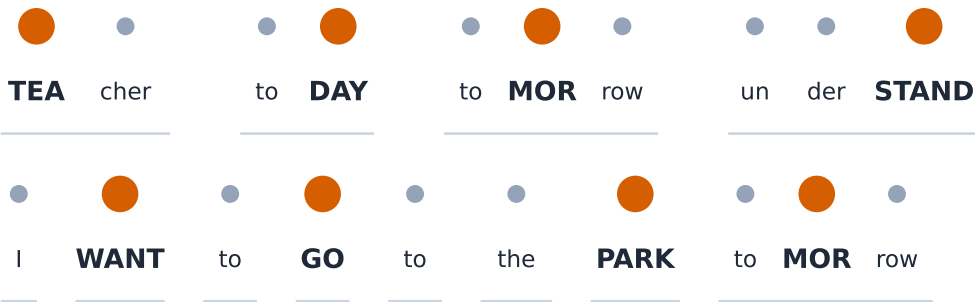
- TEA-cher, STU-dent, MORN-ing
- to-DAY, a-GO, be-HIND
- CHIna, toMORrow, underSTAND

The sentence beat: content words drum, structure words hurry

English sentences keep the **content words** loud: the nouns, main verbs, adjectives, most adverbs and question words. The **structure words** hurry past: a, the, to, of, is, at, for.

Sentence	The beats (loud words)
I want to go to the park tomorrow.	WANT GO PARK to-MORROW
She is happy about the news.	HAP-py NEWS
Can you help me with this bag?	HELP BAG (<i>can</i> and <i>me</i> stay soft)

- A long sentence can take about as long as a short one with the same beats: English trades soft words for time.



Big dots are loud: one per word, and the content words carry the sentence’s beat

- The soft words do not disappear: they hum between the beats (*fer, ter, inna*).

■ Say it aloud with a clap

- I WANT to GO to the PARK to-MOR-row. (clap on the capitals)
- The TEST is on FRI-day, not to-DAY.
- WHERE are the KEYS to the CLASS-room?

The music question: up or down at the end?

Statements fall at the end; yes-no questions rise. The melody rides on the stressed words.

- *The class is here.* (down at the end: finished, a statement)
- *Is the class here?* (up at the end: asking)
- Wh-questions fall again: *Where is the class?* (down)

Watch out: traps for Chinese speakers

- Do not give every syllable equal time: that is the flat, even rhythm that marks a beginner.
- Do not swallow ALL the soft words: they hum, they do not die.
- Stress the wrong part of a long word and listeners may not recognise it: the main beat is *underSTAND*, not *UNderstand*.

Check yourself

Answer first, then read the explanation.

1. Which syllable is loud in *tomorrow*? In *teacher*? – **to-MOR-row** and **TEA-cher**.
2. Name the kinds of content word that carry the sentence beat. – **Nouns, main verbs, adjectives, most adverbs and question words**.
3. Which sentence ends up, and which ends down: *Is he ready?* / *He is ready*. – ***Is he ready?*** goes **up** (a yes-no question); ***He is ready***. goes **down** (a statement).
4. Clap the beats: *I need to buy a ticket for the train*. – **I NEED to BUY a TICK-et for the TRAIN**. Four claps.

■ Practice: find the loud part

1. Mark the loud syllable: *banana, computer, breakfast, hospital, after, again*.
2. Clap the beats: *My brother lives in a small town near the sea*.
3. Up or down at the end? *Do you like rice?* / *What time is it?* / *I like rice*.

Answers. 5 **ba-NA-na, com-PU-ter, BREAK-fast, HOS-pi-tal, AF-ter, a-GAIN**. 6 **My BRO-ther LIVES in a SMALL TOWN near the SEA**. 7 *Do you like rice?* **up** (yes-no); *What time is it?* **down** (a wh-question); *I like rice*. **down** (a statement).

■ Practice: the same spelling, two stresses

Read each sentence aloud. Decide whether the word in bold is a thing (loud first) or an action (loud second).

1. *My uncle gave me a **present** for my birthday*.
2. *I want to **record** my voice on my phone*.
3. *China **imports** a lot of soya beans*.
4. *Who has the world **record** for the 100 metres?*

Answers. 8 **PRE-sent**, a thing (a gift). 9 **re-CORD**, an action. 10 **im-PORTS**, an action: the verb, with *he/she/it* -s. 11 **RE-cord**, a thing.

■ Practice: read a dialogue on the beat

Clap on the capitals, and let the small words hurry between the claps.

A: WHERE are you GO-ing?

B: To the LI-bra-ry. I NEED a BOOK for my ES-say.

A: Can I COME with you?

B: SURE. We can GO af-ter LUNCH.

Then check the melody: *Where are you going?* falls (a wh-question); *Can I come with you?* rises (a yes-no question); B's answers fall (statements).