Sentence Stress Summary (part 1)

*When you use the predictable rhythm of English, it is easier for native speakers to understand you.*

The combination of stressed & unstressed syllables and words creates the rhythm of English.

Just like there are specific syllables we stress in words, there are also specific words we stress in our sentences.

English sounds more natural when you combine short & long syllable words in your sentences.

Ex: Big black dogs chase small white cats. vs. A big black dog is chasing a little cat. (Dauer, 1993, pg. 84)

English is a stress-timed language. The time it takes to say a sentence in English does not depend on the number of words in the sentence, but the number of STRESSED words in the sentence. Ex: **Boys eat treats** vs. The **boys** will have **eaten** the **treats**.

The words that are stressed in a sentence depend on the intention or meaning of the message. However, you can generally divide words into two categories:

**Content Words** (stressed) & **Function Words** (unstressed).

**CONTENT WORDS:** most important words in the sentence.

Stressed: *longer, louder*, with a *higher pitch*, and *full pronunciation*.

**Nouns:** person, place, or thing (mother, store, pencil)

**Verbs:** action words (jump, go)

**Adjectives:** describing words (beautiful, angry)

**Adverbs:** when, where, how (quickly, before)

Content words carry the most meaning in a sentence. If you were only to say the content words, your listener would still be able to understand the general idea of your message.

When you stress words, you are telling your listener that those words are the most important ideas in your message.
FUNCTION WORDS: show grammatical meaning, but not as important.
Unstressed: quicker, quieter, with a lower pitch, and reduced pronunciation.

Pronouns: replaces a noun (he, she, they)
Prepositions: shows spatial relationship (around, below, on top, under)
Articles: (a, the, and)
Helping Verbs: (might, should)
“to-be” Verbs: (am, are, is, was)

There isn’t an exact way to use sentence stress. The words we decide to stress in a sentence depend on the meaning.

See ‘Sentence Stress part 2’ for more rules on how to use stress to change the meaning of a message.
Sentence Stress Worksheet (part 1)

The combination of stressed & unstressed syllables and words creates the rhythm of English.

Which sentence sounds more natural in English?
1. Big black dogs chase small white cats.
2. The big black dog is chasing the little cat.

Sentences that use short & long syllable words.
1. Pancakes make a good breakfast.
2. Are you going to call me this evening?
3. Have you seen Susan’s new haircut?
4. Chocolate is my favorite candy.
5. I enjoy gardening on sunny days.

Use the same stress pattern while saying these sentences.
1. TWINkle, TWINkle, LITtle STAR
2. KEvin CAME to FIX my DOOR
3. WHEN will STEven PAY the BILL?
4. I would LOVE to EAT that CAKE

CONTENT WORDS: most important words in the sentence.
Stressed: longer, louder, with a higher pitch, and full pronunciation.
Nouns: person, place, or thing (mother, store, pencil)
Verbs: action words (jump, go)
Adjectives: describing words (beautiful, angry)
Adverbs: when, where, how (quickly, before)

FUNCTION WORDS: show grammatical meaning, but not as important.
Unstressed: quicker, quieter, with a lower pitch, and reduced pronunciation.
Pronouns: replaces a noun (he, she, they)
Prepositions: shows spatial relationship (around, below, on top, under)
Articles: (a, the, and)
Helping Verbs: (might, should)
“to-be” Verbs: (am, are, is, was)
Practice Sentences: set 1
Underline the content (stressed) words in these sentences.
(see description of content words on previous page)
1. An apple a day keeps the doctor away.
2. Chewing mint gum can freshen your breath.
3. Vegetables and fruits are healthy.
4. Driving in snow is difficult.
5. Spending time with family can be stressful.
6. Please buy more bread and milk.
7. Drinking water is good for you.
8. Tomorrow is my 80th birthday!
9. Cats enjoy sleeping in warm places.
10. My dentist appointment is tomorrow.

Practice Sentences: set 2
Underline the content (stressed) words in these sentences.
1. Ben will go to the store to get fried chicken.
2. Christmas and Thanksgiving are my absolute favorite holidays.
3. She scheduled the next meeting for Thursday morning.
4. Apple pie is one of Jill’s very favorite foods.
5. Lawyers can make a lot of money.
6. Rainy weather will usually make me feel sleepy.
7. Wendy is an accountant.
8. Nancy found the perfect pair of shoes.
9. Panda bears will always eat bamboo.
10. When can we meet up for lunch?

Practice Paragraph:
My new apartment is perfect for me and my family. The rent is cheap and I can have pets there. The living room walls are painted light blue and the kitchen is painted yellow. There are 2 bedrooms and 1 bathroom that are small but very cozy. Fortunately, the kitchen and living room are large. I enjoy cooking in a nice big kitchen and playing with our 4-year-old is fun in a spacious living room.
Sentence Stress Practice
Say the bolded words longer, louder, with a higher pitch, and full pronunciation.

America is a melting pot of many cultures. Many immigrants from different lands have helped shape this unique country. Its earliest settlers were the Native Americans whose unique contributions can still be seen today.

Native Americans have influenced American culture through language. Believe it or not more than 2,000 words found in American English today have been shaped by Native Americans. Almost half of our state names come from Native American words. For example, Minnesota comes from a Dakota Indian word that means “sky-tinted water.”

Native American influence can also be seen in our agriculture. Various tribes taught the early European settlers how to grow crops in a new climate and soil. Corn was one of those crops. It is a major crop even today. A lot of our corn is eaten by people. It is also used to feed farm animals like cows and pigs. Corn is also used to produce ethanol which is one kind of fuel we use for our cars.

Let’s not forget the important role Native Americans have played in shaping America’s unique and diverse culture.
Sentence Stress Poem

Sick (shortened version)
by: Shel Silverstein

“I cannot go to school today,”
Said little Peggy Ann McKay.
"I have the measles and the mumps,
A gash, a rash and purple bumps.
My mouth is wet, my throat is dry,
I’m going blind in my right eye.
My tonsils are as big as rocks,
I’ve counted sixteen chicken pox
And there’s one more--that’s seventeen,
And don’t you think my face looks green?
My elbow’s bent, my spine ain’t straight,
My temperature is one-o-eight.
My brain is shrunk, I cannot hear,
There is a hole inside my ear.
I have a hangnail, and my heart is--what?
What’s that? What’s that you say?
You say today is...Saturday?
G’bye, I'm going out to play!"

**the stress pattern in this poem does not follow the rules of stress. This poem is used to demonstrate stressed & unstressed words in sentences.**