Word Stress in American English

English is a stress-timed language, which means that we give meaning to our sentences by the words or syllables that we stress in the sentence.

What does it mean to stress a word?

In this case, it has nothing to do with worrying about a deadline at work. Stress on a word when speaking means to say it with a higher pitch, louder volume and longer vowel. So remember higher, louder, longer when you want to emphasize a word in a sentence.

Use a rubber band as a guide to help you visualize the stressed word. Stretch the rubber band between your fingers as you say the word higher, louder, and longer. Now say three words in a row, stressing only one of them.

In general, we stress content words, usually nouns, and not function words. Think of the most important words in the sentence that are needed to communicate your meaning, and those are the content words. We usually stress new information, opinion words such as looks like, smells like, or tastes like, and contrast or opposite words such as like/hate or big/small when both words are used in the same sentence.

Changing the word that is stressed can also communicate subtle differences in meaning. For example, look at the sentence Would you like to go out to dinner? Say it 4 times, each time emphasizing a different word. How does it change the meaning of the sentence?

There are several word stress rules that you can memorize to help you.

**Rule #1:** Stress the first word in a compound word or set phrase.
A compound word is two words put together to make a new word, such as keyboard, paycheck, fireplace, headache, book store, or White House.

**Rule #2:** Stress the second word, the noun, in an adjective + noun descriptive phrase.
For example: green house, chocolate cake, tall tree, and fast car.

**Rule #3:** Stress the second part of the verb in a phrasal verb.
This is particularly important when the phrase can be used as either a compound word or a phrasal verb, because the stress pattern changes the meaning. For example: make-up, take out, turn off, and break down.

**Rule #4:** Stress the second word on all proper nouns, such as names of countries, states, cities, sports teams, attractions, and people’s names.

**Rule #5:** When counting, stress the first syllable in teen numbers and the second syllable in numbers above twenty. However, on every tenth number, the stress goes on the first syllable. For example, twenty, thirty, forty, fifty.