Word Stress Rules

Stress the first syllable of:
- Most two-syllable nouns (examples: CLImate, KNOWledge)
- Most two-syllable adjectives (examples: FLIPpant, SPAcious)

Stress the last syllable of:
- Most two-syllable verbs (examples: reQUIRE, deCIDE)
- Stress the second-to-last syllable of:
  - Words that end in -ic (examples: ecSTATic, geoGRAPHic)
  - Words ending in -sion and -tion (examples: exTENsion, retriBUtion)
- Stress the third-from-last syllable of:
  - Words that end in -cy, -ty, -phy and -gy (examples: deMOCracy, unCERtainty, geOGraphy, radiOLogy)
  - Words that end in -al (examples: exCEPtional, CRItical)

8 Word Stress Rules to Improve Your English Pronunciation

1. Nouns and adjectives with two syllables
   The rule: When a noun (a word referring to a person, thing, place or abstract quality) or an adjective (a word that gives information about a noun) has two syllables, the stress is usually on the first syllable.
   Examples:
   - table /TA-ble/
   - scissors /SCI-ssors/
   - pretty /PRE-tty/
   - clever /CLE-ver/
   Exceptions: Unfortunately, there are exceptions to this rule. It could be that a word was borrowed from another language or it could be totally random. You just have to learn these “outsiders” by heart.
   Here are three words you can start with:
   - hotel /ho-TEL/
   - extreme /ex-TREME/
   - concise /con-CISE/

2. Verbs and prepositions with two syllables
   The rule: When a verb (a word referring to an action, event or state of being) or a preposition (a word that comes before a noun, pronoun or the “-ing” form of a verb, and shows its relation to another word or part of the sentence) has two syllables, the stress is usually on the second syllable.
   Examples:
   - present /pre-SENT/
   - export /ex-PORT/
   - aside /a-SIDE/
   - between /be-TWEEN/

3. Words that are both a noun and a verb
   The rule: Some words in English can be both a noun and a verb. In those cases, the noun has its word stress on the first syllable, and with the verb, the stress falls on the second syllable.
   If you’ve been paying attention, you’ll see that this rule is a derivation from the prior two sections and notice some of the same words. However, this is a separate section since those pairs of words are relatively common in English and they’re likely to cause misunderstanding due to the same spelling.
Examples:
\(\text{present} /\text{PRE-sent}/\) (a gift) vs. \(\text{present} /\text{pre-SENT}/\) (give something formally)
\(\text{export} /\text{EX-port}/\) (the practice or business of selling goods to another country or an article that is exported) vs. \(\text{export} /\text{ex-PORT}/\) (to sell goods to another country)
\(\text{suspect} /\text{SU-spect}/\) (someone who the police believe may have committed a crime) vs \(\text{suspect} /\text{su-SPECT}/\) (to believe that something is true, especially something bad)

There are, however, exceptions to this rule. For example, the word “\(\text{respect}\)” has a stress on the second syllable both when it’s a verb and a noun.

4. Three syllable words ending in “er” and “ly”

The rule: Words that have three syllables and end in “-er” or “-ly” often have a stress on the first syllable.

Examples:
\(\text{orderly} /\text{OR-der-ly}/\)
\(\text{quietly} /\text{QUI-et-ly}/\)
\(\text{manager} /\text{MA-na-ger}/\)

5. Words ending in “ic,” “sion” and “tion”

The rule: When a word ends in “ic,” “sion” or “tion,” the stress is usually on the second-to-last syllable. You count syllables backwards and put a stress on the second one from the end.

Examples:
\(\text{creation} /\text{cre-A-tion}/\)
\(\text{commission} /\text{com-MI-sion}/\)
\(\text{photographic} /\text{photo-to-GRA-phic}/\)

6. Words ending in “cy,” “ty,” “phy,” “gy” and “al”

The rule: When a word ends in “cy,” “ty,” “phy,” “gy” and “al,” the stress is often on the third to last syllable. Similarly, you count syllables backwards and put a stress on the third one from the end.

Examples:
\(\text{democracy} /\text{de-MO-cra-cy}/\)
\(\text{photography} /\text{pho-TO-gra-phy}/\)
\(\text{logical} /\text{LO-gi-cal}/\)
\(\text{commodity} /\text{com-MO-di-ty}/\)
\(\text{psychology} /\text{psy-CHO-lo-gy}/\)

7. Compound nouns

The rule: In most compound nouns (a noun made up of two or more existing words), the word stress is on the first noun.

Examples:
\(\text{football} /\text{FOOT-ball}/\)
\(\text{keyboard} /\text{KEY-board}/\)

8. Compound adjectives and verbs

The rule: In most compound adjectives (a single adjective made of more than one word and often linked with a hyphen) and compound verbs (a multi-word verb that functions as a single verb), the stress is on the second word.

Examples:
\(\text{old-fashioned} /\text{old-FA-shioned}/\)
\(\text{understand} /\text{un-der-STAND}/\)

(https://www.fluentu.com/blog/english/english-word-stress/)