

Pronunciation Strategies: Improve Your Spoken English

The first step to improving your pronunciation of English is to take stock of your goals: what do you want to do? What would you like to improve about your pronunciation?

Set goals for yourself that are reasonable and achievable. You are more likely to achieve your objectives and improve your pronunciation if you focus not on eliminating your accent or sounding like a native speaker, but on improving your understandability and communicating more clearly.

You will want to:

- ✚ Take into consideration your personal time commitments and abilities
- ✚ Identify strategies to achieve your goals
- ✚ Create a plan with objectives and follow it
- ✚ Monitor your progress and refine your goals, objective, strategies, and plans as needed

Remember! The more you put into your language, the more you will get out of it.

Many factors can influence your pronunciation:

- ✚ Your age
- ✚ Your ability to pick up new accents (mimic things you hear)
- ✚ The influence of your first language
- ✚ How many years you have spoken “English”—pronunciation can become fossilized
- ✚ Your motivation and commitment to change
- ✚ Your contact with native English speakers

But it’s important to keep in mind that everyone can change their language patterns enough to be understood.

There are several pronunciation ‘targets’ that you can work on to improve your overall pronunciation:

- ✚ Word Stress
- ✚ Thought Groups
- ✚ Focus Words
- ✚ Final Sounds and Linking
- ✚ Speech Rhythm: Sentence Stress
- ✚ Intonation
- ✚ Consonant Sounds
- ✚ Vowel Sounds

Often, we think that focusing in the pronunciation of individual letters and sounds is the way to improve pronunciation, but working on the items further up on the list—word stress, thought groups, intonation—will better improve your ability to be understood by others.

Word Stress:

The basics:

- ✚ Words are made up of syllables

- ✚ Pretty much any word with more than one syllable, but especially content words (nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs) will stress one syllable over another
- ✚ Prefixes and suffixes can change the stressed syllable in the same root word. For example (stressed syllables are in caps):
 - ✚ PHOTograph
 - ✚ PhoTOgrapher
 - ✚ PhtoGRAPHic
- ✚ Stressed syllables are
 - ✚ Louder
 - ✚ Longer
 - ✚ Higher in pitch

Word stress significantly affects what word listeners hear in ways that can differentiate between words with very different meanings but otherwise similar pronunciation. For example:

- ✚ Look at the DEsert.
- ✚ Look at the desSERT.

- ✚ She worked on the Comedy.
- ✚ She worked on the comMITtee.

- ✚ I'm taking an Arabic class.
- ✚ I'm taking an aeRObics class.

- ✚ My aunt lives in MISery.
- ✚ My aunt lives in MisSOUri.

Two-syllable nouns and verbs may be spelled separately, but are pronounced differently. They follow a pattern that can help you figure out, based on the word's use in a sentence, how to pronounce it:

Noun (1st syllable stress)	Verb (final syllable stress)
Export	Export
Compound	Compound
Object	Object
Address	Address
Combat	Combat
Insult	Insult
Decrease	Decrease
Conduct	Conduct
Protest	Protest
Permit	Permit
Transport	Transport
Desert	Desert

Keep track of new words you want to learn to pronounce with key word cards. These should not be vocabulary words; instead, you want to choose: choose

- + Words that you have trouble pronouncing
- + Words you need to repeat often
- + Words your instructor has asked you to practice
- + Words that contain difficult consonant or vowel sounds
- + Words that contain difficult groups of sounds (clusters)
- + Words that you need in your field

When doing focused speaking practice:

- + Record yourself
- + Talk about academic topics as if you were talking to an expert
- + **Listen immediately and then again in 24 hours**
- + What do you notice about your own speech?
- + Which sounds do you have difficulty hearing?
- + Where do you pause or hesitate?
- + What vocabulary are you using?
- + **Favor frequency vs. length:**
 - + You will improve more quickly if you record yourself 10 minutes per day than if you try to do 2 hours once a week

Thought Groups

Thought groups help you divide your speech into small, easy to digest bits. They are a kind of verbal punctuation, which help you speak at a pace that is easier for listeners to understand.

Every TG has 3 characteristics:

- + One strongly-stressed word (the focus word)
- + Change in pitch
- + A pause at the end

Short thought groups make your speech easier to understand. They also help you say long strings of information (long numbers, addresses, websites, etc.) in a way that makes them easier to understand and remember.

Thought groups will follow basic stress patterns:

- + Use speech and rhythm and intonation to emphasize your meaning
- + The focus word of your thought group will change in pitch and get strong stress to call attention to what is most important
- + The focus word is usually the last content word in a thought group
- + The focus word will be an important part of speech:
 - + Noun
 - + Verb
 - + Adjective
 - + Adverb

- ✚ If there are several content words in a row the last one gets focus
- ✚ Adverbs at the end of sentences that answer the questions “where” and “when” are often unstressed
- ✚ Structure/function words at the end of thought groups are usually unstressed and fall in pitch
- ✚ Longer sentences should be divided into several thought groups
- ✚ Focus words will change based on the previous statement or question
- ✚ Speakers may stress words that would not normally receive strong stress based on the context
- ✚ Focus words are used to:
 - ✚ Highlight new information
 - ✚ Respond to a question
 - ✚ Show agreement or disagreement
 - ✚ Return a question
 - ✚ Show contrast