

Intonation for Presentation

English speakers use intonation and prosody (sometimes called *stress*) to express information beyond what the meaning of the words. For example, raising the pitch of your voice can tell an audience that you are telling an important detail in the middle of an explanation, while lowering it suggests that you have completed your point. Changes in loudness and speed can also signal a contrast or the introduction of new information.

The following information will help you understand how changes in intonation and prosody can allow you to add information to your presentations beyond the meaning of words. Practice varying the speed, pitch, and loudness of your voice to make your presentations more interesting and more informative.

New Information

Put stress on nouns when they introduce new information. In other words, if you are talking about a person or a thing that you have not been talking about before, pronounce that word slightly louder and slightly longer than the other words in the sentence. After you have introduced that person or thing by mentioning it once, do not stress later mentions of the same person or thing, either with the same noun or with pronouns.

- **James Watson** and **Francis Crick** discovered the **structure** of **DNA**. Watson and Crick found that DNA has a **double helix** structure. This double helix is composed of two long **polymers**.

Contrast

When contrasting two things that are different, stress the words that name them. Similarly, when introducing information that contrasts with what you said before, or contrasts with normal expectations, stress the contrasting or unexpected information.

- **Sociolinguistic research** began in the **United States** and **Great Britain** in the nineteen-**sixties**. But in **Japan**, such research began in the nineteen-**forties**.
- Japan **exports** nearly ten million automobiles per year, but it **imports** only about a hundred and fifty **thousand**.

Note that it is possible to stress verbs to show a contrast. Be careful not to stress modal verbs such as *can*, *should*, or *might* or verbs of perception such as *look* or *seem*. Stress on verbs like these suggests a contrast with expectations, and makes your audience expect a contrasting point.

- You **can** eat natto (... but you won't like it)
- People **should** exercise (...but they don't)
- Kyoto **seems** interesting (...but it really isn't)

Intonation curves

Certain grammatical structures are associated with particular changes in intonation, particularly the pitch of your voice. Statements (ordinary sentences that end with a period) generally have falling intonation on the last word, meaning the pitch of your voice falls, often after rising slightly. Questions that can be answered with *yes* or *no* usually end with rising intonation. Other questions, those that ask *who*, *what*, *when*, *where*, *why*, or *how*, end with falling intonation, similar to statements.

- I like **apples**.↓
- Do you like **apples**?↑
- Where can I buy some **apples**?↓

When a sentence has two independent clauses, there is a slight rise at the end of the first clause and an ordinary fall at the end of the second. Similarly, when you start a sentence with an introductory phrase, use a rise at the end of that phrase. When listing several items, use a rising tone on each item in the list, but a falling tone on the last item.

- I like **apples**, ↑ but my sister likes **oranges**. ↓
- As you **know**, ↑ I like **apples**. ↓
- My brother likes, **apples**, ↑ **oranges**, ↑ **bananas**, ↑ and **grapes**. ↓

Practice

Practice saying these sentences with stress on different words. Notice how varying the stress varies the meaning of the sentence, suggesting the introduction of new information, a contrast, or information contrary to expectations.

- I don't think Tom stole the money.
- Japanese companies make popular electronic devices.
- Many young people say that they want to get married some day.