



EnglishiExcel International

Word Stress Rules

There are two very simple rules about word stress:

1. **One word has only one stress.** (One word cannot have two stresses. If you hear two stresses, you hear two words. Two stresses cannot be one word. It is true that there can be a "secondary" stress in some words. But a secondary stress is much smaller than the main [primary] stress, and is only used in long words.)
2. **We can only stress vowels, not consonants.**

Here are some more, rather complicated, rules that can help you understand where to put the stress. But do not rely on them too much, because there are many exceptions. It is better to try to "feel" the music of the language and to add the stress naturally.

A. Stress on first syllable

rule	example
Most 2-syllable nouns	PRESent, EXport, CHIna, TAbLe
Most 2-syllable adjectives	PRESent, SLEnDer, CLEVer, HAPpy

B. Stress on last syllable

rule	example
Most 2-syllable verbs	preSENT, exPORT, deCIDE, beGIN



There are many two-syllable words in English whose meaning and class change with a change in stress. The word **present**, for example is a two-syllable word. If we stress the first syllable, it is a noun (gift) or an adjective (opposite of absent). But if we stress the second syllable, it becomes a verb (to offer). More examples: the words **export**, **import**, **contract** and **object** can all be nouns or verbs depending on whether the stress is on the first or second syllable.

C. Stress on penultimate syllable (penultimate = second from end)

rule	example
Words ending in -ic	GRAPHic, geoGRAPHic, geoLOGic
Words ending in -sion and -tion	teleVIsion, reveLAtion

For a few words, native English speakers don't always "agree" on where to put the stress. For example, some people say **teleVIsion** and others say **TELevision**. Another example is: **CONtroversy** and **conTROversy**.

D. Stress on ante-penultimate syllable (ante-penultimate = third from end)

rule	example
Words ending in -cy , -ty , -phy and -gy	deMOcracy, dependaBILity, phoTOgraphy, geOLOgy
Words ending in -al	CRItical, geoLOGical

E. Compound words (words with two parts)

rule	example
For compound nouns , the stress is on the first part	BLACKbird, GREENhouse
For compound adjectives , the stress is on the second part	bad-TEMpered, old-FASHioned
For compound verbs , the stress is on the second part	underSTAND, overFLOW