

Content words and Function words

There are some general rules as to which words, or parts of speech, are usually stressed. They are called **content words** and they carry a lot of new information. Therefore they are given more weight in pronunciation. Content words include:

| | |
|-----------------------------|---------------------------------|
| NOUNS | kitchen, Peter, honesty |
| MAIN VERBS | open, build, laugh, shout |
| ADJECTIVES | beautiful, interesting, general |
| ADVERBS | often, carefully, beautifully |
| NEGATIVE AUXILIARIES | don't, can't, aren't |

Non-stressed words are called **function words** or **structure words**. They have little meaning on their own, but they show grammatical relationships in and between sentences. Therefore we give them less emphasis in pronunciation. They include:

| | |
|---------------------------------|--------------------------|
| DETERMINERS | a, the, my, that |
| AUXILIARY VERBS | am, were, have, had |
| PREPOSITIONS | before, of, under, among |
| CONJUNCTIONS | but, and, instead, while |
| PRONOUNS | they, she, him, it |
| "TO BE" AS THE MAIN VERB | am, is, are |

Example

Read this sentence out loud:

A diligent student can learn convincing pronunciation.

And then this one:

He can come on Sunday as long as he doesn't have to do any homework in the evening.

A **diligent student** can learn **convincing pronunciation**.

He can **come** on **Sunday** as long as he doesn't have to **do** any **homework** in the **evening**.

Both sentences take about **the same time** to say since there are **five stressed words** in each sentence.

Now **practise with any text** by, say, underlining all the content words first. Then read aloud, focusing on stressing the underlined words and gliding over the non-stressed words. **Awareness of and sensitivity to this difference between content words and structure words will quickly improve your pronunciation.** Listen to native speakers and focus on how they stress certain words. By **shaking off Finnish stress patterns** and **adopting English ones instead**, you will be well on your way to **convincing English pronunciation**. No mean feat, eh?