

Practice for Stress and Emphasis

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Stress is the degree of prominence of a syllable within a word or a word within a phrase or sentence.

The syllable or the word is generally made louder, longer, and higher in pitch than neighboring syllables or words.

You stress syllables because English is a subtle language, and by doing this you increase intelligibility. There are obvious differences between convict and convict, between project and project. You stress words to make meaning and feeling clear.

1. Read these aloud, stressing the underlined syllable:

- | | | | |
|----|-------------------|-----------------------|--------------------------------------|
| a) | <u>li</u> -brary | con- <u>clu</u> -sive | dis- <u>crim</u> -i- <u>na</u> -tion |
| | re- <u>bel</u> | <u>ev</u> -i-dence | va- <u>ca</u> -tion |
| | <u>re</u> -bel | <u>prob</u> -a-bly | <u>Mis</u> -sis- <u>sipp</u> -ian |
| | <u>cav</u> -al-ry | <u>po</u> -di-um | <u>re</u> -pub-li- <u>ca</u> -tion |

Read these sentences, observing the differences in meaning as you stress underlined words:

- b) Is that the idiot you wanted me to date?
- c) Is that the idiot you wanted me to date?
- d) Is that the idiot you wanted me to date?
- e) Is that the idiot you wanted me to date?
- f) Is that the idiot you wanted me to date?

Emphasis is the degree of prominence given to a phrase or thought grouping. An important phrase, or one containing a key idea, can be made louder and higher-pitched than neighboring words. Sometimes it works if you speak softer and lower the pitch on the phrase you wish to emphasize.

Raise the pitch and turn up your volume on the underlined phrase as you try this one:

I forgot to call you. I refuse to apologize.

Repeat, but this time lower the pitch and speak as softly as you can on the key phrase. Which one works better?

Remember: The key or idea words that most truly reveal the meaning and thought of a passage are the nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs. The shorter words -- pronouns, prepositions, conjunctions -- are generally skimmed over. You'll find important exceptions to all of the foregoing, however.

2. Read each sentence in this exercise twice. The first time, emphasize the underlined sections. The second time, emphasize another section. Do you notice differences in meaning?

- a) Nobody wants to kiss when they're hungry.
- b) Don't travel with anything you can't carry at a dead run for a half mile,
- c) We die only once, and for such a long time.
- d) If you haven't got any socks, you can't pull them up.
- e) Love is what happens to men and women who don't know each other.
- f) Don't worry about avoiding temptation. As you grow older, it starts avoiding you.
- g) You can fool some of the people all of the time, and all of the people some of the time; but you can't fool all of the people all of the time.

h) Marriage is a lot like the army; everybody complains but you'd be surprised at the large numbers that re-enlist.

3. Your best friend has just starred as Ophelia or Hamlet in a campus production of *Hamlet*. After the performance you go backstage and say to the person, "You were great! What a performance!" with these suggested meanings:

- a) Your friend was outstanding.
- b) Your friend was outstanding. The others in the cast were atrocious.
- c) Your friend was fair.
- d) Your friend was awful.
- e) Your friend was outstanding, and you didn't think he or she could do it.
- f) Your friend was a fine actor — several years ago.
- g) You slept through the entire performance and you're asking your friend how effective he or she was.

4. Read these one-liners twice. In your first reading, ignore the obvious emotional nature of the material. Deliberately give a flat and cold reading. In your second reading, respond with as much sincerity, vitality, and animation as possible:

- a) I'm frightened!
- b) Am I happy!
- c) She's dead! You're sure?
- d) I hate him.
- e) I'm sad.
- f) I'm suspicious of her.
- g) My, how eerie it is.
- h) I guess I'm in love.
- i) Get out of here.
- j) Please don't leave me.
- k) You're the murderer!
- l) Surprise!
- m) They're going to run me for Prime Minister! Me? Me?
- n) I can't stand it another minute.
- o) You're too late — he just died.
- p) This is the strangest thing that ever happened to me.
- q) That's disgusting.
- r) Go ahead! I dare you!
- s) I'm getting sick and tired of your nagging.
- t) I passed math? You must be kidding.
- u) Fasten your seat belts. We just ran out of fuel!
- v) Who could be knocking at the door at this hour of the night?
- w) You won't believe this! I've just won the twenty million-dollar lottery!