

Word Stress Rules in English (FOR BCECE LE)

What is Word Stress?

When we speak, we **stress (emphasize)** certain parts of a word. In **compound words** (two words joined together), the part we stress changes depending on the **type of word combination**.

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.

Stress in Two-Syllable Words

[If a word has only two syllables]

Word Type	Rule	Example Words
Nouns	Stress on the first syllable	T Able, W INdow, D Octor
Adjectives	Stress on the first syllable	C LEver, H APpy, Q UIet
Verbs	Stress on the second syllable	re L AX, en J OY, re T URN

1. Nouns and Adjectives – Stress on the 1st Syllable

Why?

Nouns/adjectives usually begin strong (more important), while verbs stress the action (end).

Rule:

If the word is a **noun** (name of person, place, thing) or **adjective** (describing word), stress usually comes on the **first part** of the word.

Examples:

Word	Type	Stressed Syllable	Sentence Example
T Able	Noun	TA	"Put it on the T Able."
C LEver	Adjective	CLE	"He's a C LEver boy."
W INdow	Noun	WIN	"Open the W INdow, please."
H APpy	Adjective	HAP	"She looks H APpy today."

2. Verbs – Stress on the 2nd Syllable

Rule:

If the word is a **verb** (action word), stress usually comes on the **second part**.

Examples:

Word	Type	Stressed Syllable	Sentence Example
ex PORT	Verb	PORT	"India ex PORTS goods."
re LAX	Verb	LAX	"Just re LAX and enjoy."
de CIDE	Verb	CIDE	"We'll de CIDE later."
for GET	Verb	GET	"Don't for GET your bag!"

3. Noun-Verb Pairs – Different Stress

Rule:

Some words **change their meaning** depending on the stress.

- 🖱️ **Noun** → stress on the **1st syllable**
- 🖱️ **Verb** → stress on the **2nd syllable**

Examples:

Word	Noun Use	Verb Use
RE cord	"Play the RE cord ."	"I will re CORD the video."
CON tract	"Sign the CON tract ."	"Muscles con TRACT when cold."
IM port	"This is an IM port item."	"We im PORT oil from other countries."

Word Stress in Compound Words

Rule:

Compound words are **two words joined together**, and the **stressed part depends on the type** of compound.

Main Rules of Word Stress in Compound Words

Type	Stress Position	Example	Sentence
Noun + Noun	Stress the 1st word	BLACK board	"Please clean the BLACK board."
Adjective + Noun	Stress the 1st word	GREEN house	"He owns a GREEN house."
Verb + Preposition	Stress the 2nd word	under STAND	"I under STAND what you mean."

1. Noun + Noun (Stress 1st Syllable)

These are **two nouns** joined together to form one new meaning. When two nouns come together to make one meaning, the stress usually falls on the **first** noun.

Compound Word	Stressed Part	Example Sentence
TOOTH brush	TOOTH	"My TOOTH brush is old."
FOOT ball	FOOT	"We played FOOT ball after school."
CLASS room	CLASS	"The CLASS room was quiet."

NOTE book	NOTE	"She forgot her NOTE book."
POST man	POST	"The POST man rang the bell."
LUNCH box	LUNCH	"He packed his LUNCH box."
SUN light	SUN	" SUN light entered the room."
HAIR cut	HAIR	"He got a new HAIR cut."
DOOR bell	DOOR	"The DOOR bell rang."
BIRTH day	BIRTH	"Today is her BIRTH day!"

2. Adjective + Noun (Stress 1st Syllable)

An **adjective** describes the noun. Together, they form a single compound idea. If an adjective comes before a noun, again stress is on the **first** part.

Compound Word	Stressed Part	Example Sentence
GREEN house	GREEN	"He works in a GREEN house."
FULL moon	FULL	"It's a FULL moon tonight."
BLACK bird	BLACK	"I saw a BLACK bird in the sky."
SOFT drink	SOFT	"Would you like a SOFT drink?"
DRY cleaning	DRY	"I sent my clothes for DRY cleaning."
HARD cover	HARD	"That's a HARD cover book."
HIGH school	HIGH	"He goes to HIGH school."
HOT sauce	HOT	"This HOT sauce is spicy."
COLD war	COLD	"We studied the COLD war."
SHORT cut	SHORT	"I took a SHORT cut home."

3. Verb + Preposition → Stress the 2nd Syllable

These often look like **phrasal verbs**. The stress is on the **preposition** (2nd part). These look like phrasal verbs. In these, we put stress on the **second part** (the preposition).

Compound Word	Stressed Part	Example Sentence
under STAND	STAND	"I under STAND now."
take OFF	OFF	"The plane will take OFF soon."
give UP	UP	"Never give UP on your dreams."
check IN	IN	"Let's check IN early."
put OFF	OFF	"They put OFF the meeting."
break DOWN	DOWN	"My car broke DOWN again!"
bring UP	UP	"She brought UP a new topic."
turn ON	ON	"Turn ON the fan, please."
log IN	IN	"You need to log IN first."
run AWAY	AWAY	"The dog ran AWAY from the yard."



Word Stress Rules with Prefixes & Suffixes

 Syllable-focused | Simple Language | Clear Examples

Rule 1: Most Prefixes Don't Change the Stress

Stress stays on the root/base word.

Prefixes like *un-*, *re-*, *dis-*, *mis-* are usually **unstressed**.

Word	Total Syllables	Stressed Syllable	Example Sentence
UNhappy	3	2nd (HAP)	He looks un-/HAP/py.
REwrite	2	2nd (WRITE)	Can you re-/WRITE it?
DISlike	2	2nd (LIKE)	I dis-/LIKE it.
MISunderstand	4	3rd (STAND)	Don't mis-/un-/der-/STAND me.
PREview	2	2nd (VIEW)	Let's pre-/VIEW the show.

Tip: Ignore the prefix when finding the stress.

Rule 2: Suffixes Often Shift the Stress

A. Suffix : -ic / -tion / -sion / -ssion / -ical

Stress on penultimate syllable (penultimate = second from end)

Stress the syllable before the suffix

Word	Syllables	Stressed Syllable	Example
education	e-du- CA -tion	3rd	Edu/ CA /tion
decision	de- CI -sion	2nd	De/ CI /sion
permission	per- MIS -sion	2nd	Per/ MIS /sion
technician	Tech- NI -cian	2nd	Tech/ NI /cian

Word	Syllables	Stressed Syllable	Example
graphic	GRAPH -ic	1st	GRAPH /ic
dramatic	dra- MA -tic	2nd	Dra/ MA /tic
poetic	po- ET -ic	2nd	Po/ ET /ic

C. Suffix : **-ity**

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

Stress 3rd syllable from end

Word	Syllables	Stressed Syllable	Example
ability	a- BIL -i-ty	2nd	A/ BIL /i/ty
responsibility	re-spon-si- BIL -i-ty	4th	Re/spon/si/ BIL /i/ty
activity	ac- TIV -i-ty	2nd	Ac/ TIV /i/ty

D. Suffix : **-ian / -cian / -sian**

Stress comes before the suffix

Word	Syllables	Stressed Syllable	Example
musician	mu- SI -cian	2nd	Mu/ SI /cian
technician	tech- NI -cian	2nd	Tech/ NI /cian
magician	ma- GI -cian	2nd	Ma/ GI /cian

E. Suffix : **-graphy / -logy / -nomy / -metry**

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

Stress is 3rd from the end

Word	Syllables	Stressed Syllable	Example
geography	ge- OG -ra-phy	2nd	Ge/ OG /ra/phy
biology	bi- OL -o-gy	2nd	Bi/ OL /o/gy
economy	e- CON -o-my	2nd	E/ CON /o/my
geometry	ge- OM -e-try	2nd	Ge/ OM /e/try

F. Suffixes: -cy / -ty / -phy / -gy / -al

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

Stress is **3rd from the end**

Word	Syllables	Stressed Syllable	Example
democracy	de-MO-cra-cy	2nd	de/ MO /cra/cy
dependability	de-pen-da-BIL-i-ty	4th	de/pen/da/ BIL /i/ty
photography	pho-TO-gra-phy	2nd	pho/ TO /gra/phy
geology	ge-OL-o-gy	2nd	ge/ OL /o/gy
critical	CRI-ti-cal	1st	CRI /ti/cal
geological	ge-o-LOG-i-cal	3rd	ge/o/ LOG /i/cal

F. Suffix : -ee / -ese / -ette

Stress on the LAST syllable

Word	Syllables	Stressed Syllable	Example
employee	em-ploy-EE	3rd (last)	Em/ploy/EE
Japanese	ja-pa-NESE	3rd (last)	Ja/pa/NESE
cigarette	cig-a-RETTE	3rd (last)	Cig/a/RETTE

G. Suffixes That Don't Affect Stress

Suffixes like **-ly, -ness, -less, -ful, -ment** → keep the original stress

Words ending in **-ly** : Stress the first syllable (e.g., QUICK-ly)

Word	Syllables	Stressed Syllable	Example
quickly	QUICK-ly	1st	QUICK/ly
kindness	KIND-ness	1st	KIND/ness
payment	PAY-ment	1st	PAY/ment
hopeful	HOPE-ful	1st	HOPE/ful
careless	CARE-less	1st	CARE/less

Summary Table (All Rules)

Prefix/Suffix	Stress Position	Example	Syllables	Stress
un-, re-	Same as base word	unhappy	un- HAP -py	2nd
-tion / -sion	Second-to-last syllable	education	ed-u- CA -tion	3rd
-ic	Second-to-last syllable	dramatic	dra- MA -tic	2nd
-ity	Third-from-last syllable	ability	a- BIL -i-ty	2nd
-ian / -cian	Second-to-last syllable	musician	mu-si- CI -an	3rd
-graphy / -logy	Third-from-last syllable	geography	ge- OG -ra-phy	2nd
-ee / -ese / -ette	Last syllable	employee	em-ploy- EE	3rd
-ly / -ness / -ful	Same as base word	kindness	KIND -ness	1st
-ive	Second-to-last syllable	creative	cre- A -tive	2nd
-al	Second-to-last syllable	revival	re- VIV -al	2nd
-ize / -ise	Same as base word	realize	REAL -ize	1st
-able / -ible	Same as base word	comfortable	COM -fort-a-ble	1st

-ment	Same as base word	government	GOV -ern-ment	1st
-hood / -ship	Same as base word	friendship	FRIEND -ship	1st

Quick Explanation:

- Last syllable = suffix itself is stressed
- Second-to-last syllable = stress is on 2nd syllable from the end
- Third-from-last syllable = stress is on 3rd syllable from the end
- Same as base word = suffix doesn't affect stress

Practice Questions

Part A: Mark the Stressed Syllable

1. Responsibility
2. Photographer
3. Rewriting
4. Economy
5. Technicians
6. Carefully
7. Electricity
8. Magician
9. Dramatic
10. Education

👉 Part B: Fill the Blanks

Word	Suffix	Stressed Syllable	Rule Applied
Dramatic	-ic	_____	Stress before suffix
Carefully	-ly	_____	No change
Technician	-cian	_____	Stress before suffix
Education	-tion	_____	Stress before suffix
Japanese	-ese	_____	Stress on final syllable

ANSWERS

Part A: Mark the Stressed Syllable

👉 Find and **mark the syllable** that is stressed in each word.

Word	Answer	Explanation
Responsibility	re-spon-si- BIL -i-ty	Suffix "-ity" → stress is 3rd from the end
Photographer	pho- TOG -ra-pher	Stress falls before "-er" → on TOG
Rewriting	re- WRITE -ing	Prefix "re-" is unstressed
Economy	e- CON -o-my	"-nomy" → stress is 3rd from the end

Technicians	tech- NI -cian-s	"-cian" → stress just before suffix
Carefully	CARE -ful-ly	"-ly" doesn't affect stress
Electricity	e-lec-tri- CI -ty	"-ity" → stress 3rd from the end
Magician	ma- GI -cian	"-cian" → stress before suffix
Dramatic	dra- MA -tic	"-ic" → stress before suffix
Education	e-du- CA -tion	"-tion" → stress before suffix

✓ **Part B: Fill in the Blanks**

Word	Suffix	Stressed Syllable	Rule Applied
Dramatic	-ic	MA	Stress before suffix
Carefully	-ly	CARE	No change
Technician	-cian	NI	Stress before suffix
Education	-tion	CA	Stress before suffix
Japanese	-ese	NESE	Stress on final syllable

✓ **Directions (Q. 136–140) PYQ 2024**

For each given word, different sets of letters are underlined for identifying the correct syllable for stress. Select the correct option.

136. DEVELOPMENT

(A) **DEVELOPMENT** ✓

(B) DEVELOPMENT

(C) DEVELOPMENT

(D) DEVELOLOPMENT

Syllable Breakdown: de-vel-op-ment

137. PSYCHOLOGICAL

(A) PSYCHOLOGICAL

(B) PSYCHOLOGICAL

(C) PSYCHOLOGICAL

(D) **PSYCHOLOGICAL** ✓

Syllable Breakdown: psy-cho-log-i-cal

 **Rule:** Words ending in “-ical” are stressed on the **syllable just before** the suffix, so the stress is on “**GI**”.

138. SOLIDARITY

(A) SOLIDARITY

(B) SOLIDARITY

(C) **SOLIDARITY** ✓

(D) SOLIDARITY

Syllable Breakdown: sol-i-dar-i-ty

 **Rule:** Words ending in “-ity” typically have stress on the **third syllable from the end** — here, it’s “**AR**”.

139. PERCENTAGE

(A) PERCENTAGE ✓

(B) PERCENTAGE

(C) PERCENTAGE

(D) PERCENTNTAGE

Syllable Breakdown: per-cent-age



Rule: Words ending in “-age” often have stress on the **2nd syllable**, especially in common nouns like “percentage”.

140. VOLUMINOUS

(A) VOLUMINOUS

(B) VOLUMINOUS

(C) VOLUMINOUS

(D) VOLUMINOUS ✓

Syllable Breakdown: vo-lu-mi-nous



Directions (Q. Nos. 121–125) PYQ 2023

Identify the syllable which is stressed in the given word which may have fewer than 4 syllables.

121. Radiator

(A) **1st** ✓

(B) 2nd

(C) 3rd

(D) 4th



Syllable Breakdown: RA-di-a-tor

122. Abbreviated

(A) 1st

(B) 2nd ✓

(C) 3rd

(D) 4th

 **Syllable Breakdown:** a-BRE-vi-a-ted

123. Authoritarian

(A) 1st

(B) 2nd

(C) 3rd

(D) 4th ✓

 **Syllable Breakdown:** au-tho-ri-TAR-i-an

 **Rule:** Words ending in **-ian** or **-ian/-ion** often place stress on the syllable **just before** the suffix, especially in longer words.

124. Incredibly

(A) 1st

(B) 2nd ✓

(C) 3rd

(D) 4th

 **Syllable Breakdown:** in-cred-I-bly

125. Amended

(A) 1st

(B) 2nd ✓

(C) 3rd

(D) 4th

Syllable Breakdown: a-MEN-ded

 **Rule:** In many past-tense verbs ending in **-ed**, the stress falls on the root syllable (e.g., **mend**), which is the **second** syllable here.

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