ENGLISH PRONUNCIATION · DEEP DIVE

Sentence Stress: The Beat English Runs On

Why 'The cat ate the mouse' and 'The cat has been eating the mouse' take the same time to say, which words get a beat, and how moving one beat gives a single sentence different meanings.

B1 · pronunciation · sentence stress · rhythm

content words

Nouns, main verbs, adjectives, adverbs, negatives: they get a beat.

a cup of COFFee

She left her keys on the table.

function words

Articles, auxiliaries, prepositions, pronouns: no beat.

I've been to LONdon

She has been to the doctor.

the nucleus

The strongest beat: the last content word, or the new or contrasted word.

The RED one

I didn't say HE stole the money.

PATTERN	STRESS ON	EXAMPLE
compound noun	the first part	a GREENhouse (for plants)
adjective + noun	the noun	a green HOUSE (painted green)
phrasal verb	the particle	look it UP, switch it ON
stranded preposition	the preposition (it ends the clause)	What are you waiting FOR?

1 Content or function?

Does the word in CAPITALS take a beat? Write yes or no.

1 She left her KEYS on the table. _____

2 She HAS been to the doctor. _____

3 He walked SLOWLY down the hill. _____

4 He put it ON the shelf. _____

5 WHERE did you put it? _____

6 I'm NOT going to argue. _____

7 I gave THEM the keys. _____

8 We waited TWENTY minutes. _____

9 Bread AND butter, please. _____

10 I'd like THAT one, please. _____

2 Find the nucleus

Write the one word that carries the main stress (the nucleus).

1 I'm going to the shops. → _____

2 Which bag is yours? The red one. → _____

3 I grow tomatoes in the greenhouse. → _____

4 Please look the word up. → _____

5 Not the blue one, the green one. → _____

6 What are you waiting for? → _____

7 It was an interesting talk. → _____

8 I didn't take it, Tom did. → _____

3 Wrong beat

The CAPITALS show where the speaker put the stress. Rewrite the sentence with the stress in the right place (in capitals).

1 I HAVE been to London.

2 I AM going TO the shops.

3 I grow tomatoes in the GREEN HOUSE.

4 Please LOOK up the word.

5 What DO you want?

6 Which bag is yours? The red ONE.

Remember English is stress-timed: the beats come at regular intervals, and the small words in between are squeezed to fit.

4 Move the beat

"I didn't say he stole the money." Which word is stressed for each meaning? Write it.

[1] _____ Somebody else said it, not me. [2] _____ That's not true: I never said it. [3] _____ I only suggested it; I didn't say it. [4] _____ I said someone stole it, but not him. [5] _____ I said he borrowed it. [6] _____ He stole something else. [7] _____ He stole some of the money, not all of it. [8] _____ (Normal, neutral meaning: which word?)

5 Beat or no beat?

Sort the kinds of word.

nouns · main verbs · adjectives · negatives · articles · auxiliaries · pronouns · conjunctions

take a beat	no beat

Where are the answers?

The answers, with an explanation for each one, are in the LinguaBite app. Open this Deep Dive and scroll to Downloads at the bottom of the article: once you have downloaded this worksheet, its answers appear there after a couple of days, so you do the exercises first. You can choose 1, 2 or 3 days in the app's Settings.

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