

HOW CAN I USE MY VOICE TO SPEAK CLEARLY?

Whether you are giving a presentation or having a conversation with friends, there are strategies you can use to make it easier for others to understand you and stay engaged in what you are saying. The way you use your voice can either hinder or support the communication of the ideas you want to convey. Consider the following questions about **speed, stress, tone, pitch, and pausing** if you speak English as an additional language, if you speak a dialect of English that may be unfamiliar to your audience, or if you've ever received feedback that you could communicate more clearly. Understanding these features is key to using your voice effectively.

► How will increasing my emphatic stress help me communicate more effectively?

In English, emphatic stress is crucial. Emphatic stress is how we listen for meaning; if we don't hear the stress, we don't know what to pay attention to and the meaning may be lost. To use emphasis, pause in appropriate places, slow down on important terms, and change your pitch when speaking. We can also use it to draw attention to organizing language ("First of all," "The next thing we'll look at").

Emphatic stress helps listeners focus on the most important words in a sentence. For example, if you say "I am a graduate student in the Math Department," **graduate student** and **Math Department** are the key words. If that is all we hear, we still understand; if all the words sound the same, it is harder for listeners to identify the main content.

A great strategy to boost your emphasis is mimicking a video of a speaker who uses clear emphatic stress. By noticing and taking steps to imitate their patterns, you can become more aware of how to increase your use of stress and emphasis when speaking.



► How does changing my tone and pitch help listeners follow me?

Tone and pitch are important components of emphatic stress, and they convey essential information in English. Intonation, or the patterns that pitch follows when speaking, provides structure to what you are saying and helps you convey confidence and knowledge on a topic. Though it is context-based, English usually follows a rising and falling pattern, with important words at a higher pitch and the last word of a sentence at the lowest pitch.

Intonation is used to indicate interest, disinterest, or questions. The tone and pitch you use can make the difference between sounding sincere or being sarcastic, even if your words do not change. [Try shadowing](#) to practice varying your pitch, which will make it easier for listeners to identify key ideas you are sharing and how you feel about them.

As a feature of speech, intonation helps listeners process when you have finished an idea and when you are transitioning to a new one. Remember to drop your pitch at the end of (most) sentences, so listeners can more easily follow you. By using a variety of pitch, going up in pitch on important words, and clearly dropping your pitch at the end of your sentences, you will improve your clarity when speaking.

▶ How will slowing down help others understand me more easily?



Practice speaking more slowly and pausing after each sentence. Fast talkers are harder to follow because their words may run together. Depending on how you use stress and intonation or how you pronounce certain sounds, speaking quickly can make it much harder for listeners to understand what you're saying, jump in with questions, or process what they are hearing. One way to slow down is by **lengthening the stressed syllable** in important words. Be sure to slow down by putting more emphasis on key words and pausing after complete thoughts and at the end of sentences.

▶ How does pausing in expected places help others follow what I'm saying?

Pauses convey important meaning in English. When you pause, you're helping listeners know when you have finished a thought, when you are making a list, and when you are highlighting important information.

In writing, punctuation is used to help readers process ideas more easily; in speaking, the mixture of pausing and intonation creates the "oral grammar" listeners need to understand the message. If you pause in an unexpected place, such as mid-phrase, it's like adding extra punctuation which may interfere with your message. Moreover, if you don't pause when speaking, it's the equivalent of removing all punctuation. Listeners may be able to follow you, but it takes more effort, and they are more likely to misinterpret what you're saying.

If you need time to think, pause at a natural break, such as the end of a sentence. Also, not all pauses are equal in length; you may pause slightly before an important term or when you are separating parts of your sentence, and you will pause longer when you have finished an idea or sentence.

Additional Resources

- Listen, practice and review American English pronunciation patterns with [Rachel's English](#).
- Review [how to pause within sentences](#) to improve comprehensibility.
- Watch [Julian Treasure's TED talk](#) on how to speak so that people will want to listen.
- Search for a specific term or phrase on www.youglish.com. When you find a speaker who you think applies useful strategies, practice imitating larger sections of their video.
- Take a Bok Seminar on [Communication & Language](#) to practice these skills!

