

Pronunciation, intonation and word stress

After you have planned and prepared your pitch or presentation, the next step is the PRACTICE. Sadly, many people underestimate the importance of this stage of creating a presentation! However, after a presentation is done and the presenters are asked about what they would do differently next time, the answer is all too often, “Practise more”!

A critical aspect of practice is working on pronunciation, particularly of keywords, and appropriate word stress and intonation. While you are practising, try these activities.

1. Practise individual words

Deliver the presentation aloud to yourself. It is important that you practise giving your presentation aloud, so that you need to say the words you intend to use. As you talk, think of the pronunciation of the words you are using.

Are there words that you are not entirely sure how to pronounce correctly? If so, check the pronunciation in some of the online resources available, such as

- Howjsay website: <https://howjsay.com/>
- Oxford Learner's Dictionaries: <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/>
- Cambridge dictionary: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/>
- Merriam Webster Dictionary: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/>

When you are checking how to pronounce a word, pay special attention to which part of the word is pronounced with most prominence. Can you hear the difference in the ways in which the word “project” is pronounced? 'prəʊdʒɛkt for the noun and prə'dʒɛkt for the verb.

Are there words that you know, in theory, how to pronounce, but you just cannot seem to articulate them correctly? If so, here are some activities you can try:

- Listen to the pronunciation of the word in one or more of the pronunciation resources listed above.
- Say the words aloud slowly several times.
- Notice the sounds of the individual syllables and which part of the word is stressed.
- Try to work out what makes the word hard to pronounce for you – is it some sound combination or a particular sound?

2. Practise intonation in longer chunks of text

Speak aloud, recording your voice. Afterwards, play back the recording and listen to the sound of your voice.

- Do you emphasise the most important parts of the message by putting stress on the most essential words?
- Is your voice flat and monotonous, or does it sound lively?

To practise, you can search online for two or three presentations by proficient speakers of English. Watch the presentations in short chunks, pausing to repeat what you have just heard, and paying attention to the melody of the speakers' voices, which words they emphasise, and why. Later, record a short part of your own presentation again, and play back the recording. Do you notice any difference?

3. Use volume, speed and pauses

You can use your voice to signal what is really important in your message. When you want the listeners to pay special attention, you can, for example:

- Make a micro-pause before any part you really want the audience to hear.
- Slow down a little (or sometimes even speed up for dramatic effect).
- Increase or lower the volume of the important part of the message. Sometimes the audience listens better if they have to listen hard to hear what you have to say.

Now record another short part of your own presentation again, this time using these strategies to emphasise the most essential parts of your message. Play it back and check how it sounds.

4. Pay attention to word stress

When you are actually presenting, you will be focusing on getting your message across. At this point, you will want to put the emphasis on the most important parts of the message as it seems to you at that point in time. If you were to emphasise a different part of the message, the meaning would be different.

Can you notice the difference between these three different ways of pronouncing the same words (stress on the word in bold)?

- **This** is a useful tip. (This one, not that one)
- This **is** a useful tip. (Don't tell me that it isn't.)
- This is **useful** tip. (Not unusable, like some others)

5. Practise with a partner

Find a partner who will listen to you giving (part of) your presentation. Ask them for some feedback about your pronunciation and how you use your voice.

First, have them listen and let them speak freely to you about their first impressions. Did they understand everything? Did they notice any mispronounced words? Do they have any comments on the way you use your voice?

Then, tell them about any concerns you have and let them listen again. Do they have any further tips for you?