

Lesson 6: Strong and weak forms of words

Certain words have two pronunciations. One we call the strong form, which is usually only used when the word is on its own or when it is stressed in a sentence. The other pronunciation, the weak form, is often used in a phrase or sentence if the word is unimportant and thrown away.

There is no consistent rule as to when you would use a strong or weak form. It depends on what message a speaker wishes to convey to his/her listener.

You will see from the sentences below, that we use the strong form when the word is important for the sense of the phrase. We use the weak form, on the other hand, when the word is unimportant and not stressed in a phrase.

A27 Sentences

Listen carefully and repeat the sentences, noting the pronunciation of the strong and weak forms of the word. Colloquial and idiomatic expressions are italicized. Weak forms are underlined.

1. At the end of the day, Linda was right about that.
2. To tell the truth, I'm not very keen to meet him.
3. It's as true as I'm standing here that my ex-husband has a girlfriend who is three years younger than me.
4. It's the height of bad manners to interrupt when someone is speaking.



A28

Comparisons

Listen carefully and repeat the sentences, noting the pronunciation of the strong and weak forms of the word.

1. Prepositions and pronouns

Stressed position/Strong form, pronounced with a full vowel	Unstressed position/Weak form, pronounced with /ə/
I said I want eggs and bacon! [æ]	I'll have fish and chips.
What are you driving at ? [æ]	I'm not driving at anything.
As you already know.... [æ]	it's as simple as that.
Did you really think that ? [æ]	Yes, I thought that it was alright.
What is he thinking of ? [ɒ]	He is not thinking of anything.
Where has she come from ? [ɒ]	She comes from London.
I would... but I can't. [ʌ]	We can but hope.
What are you doing that for ? [ɔ:]	It's for you.
Have you seen her [ɜ:]	I saw her just now.
Is that you ? [u:]	Who do you think you are?
Where are you going to ? [u:]	I'm going to work.
Is it us or them ? [e]	We could always ask them .

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🔊 Comparisons: Present tense verbs

Listen carefully and repeat the sentences, noting the pronunciation of the strong and weak forms of the word.

Stressed position/Strong form, pronounced with a full vowel	Unstressed position/Weak form, pronounced with /ə/ or not at all
Am I wrong? [æ]	I'm not sure.
Can we make this work? [æ]	Well, we can try.
Shall we catch this bus? [æ]	We shall have to.
Has he arrived yet? [æ]	He has just come in.
Have you finished? [æ]	Yes, I've just finished.
Had you any idea? [æ]	We'd no idea at all.
Are you sure he was there? [ɪ]	Well, he was supposed to be.
Are you leaving? [a:]	Yes, we are going now.
Were they pleased? [ɜ:]	They were very pleased.
This is definitely the solution. [e]	It's working well.

A30

🔊 Comparisons: Contractions of the verb "have"

Listen carefully and repeat the sentences, noting the pronunciation of the strong and weak forms of the word.

Stressed position/Strong form, pronounced as /hæv/	Unstressed position/Weak form, pronounced as /əv/
Might you have known this?	Well, I might've done.
Could they have lied to you?	They could've done, I suppose.
Would he have done that?	I think he would've.
Should we have left earlier?	Perhaps we should've.

A31

🔊 Passage

Listen carefully, repeating one section at a time, noting how many times we use the weak form of the word. Read the whole passage without referring to the CD, again, always working towards fluid, connected speech. The weak form of the words is underlined.

"Good morning, ladies and gentlemen,

I've lots of exciting things to tell you about our new product. Because it's so new it'll have to be referred to as "Product X". Can you hear me at the back? I can't speak too loudly in case there're industrial spies about. I would love to have brought a sample of our new secret product to show you but I couldn't because the inventor wouldn't release it, as it's very secret. So you'll have to take my word for it.



I'll try and describe it to you. It's quite simply the most dramatic and innovative invention since the electric kettle.

I hope I don't give too much away if I was to say I'm not sure how we could've managed if it hadn't been invented.

Part 2: Connected Speech Patterns

Many of you will have seen similar products on the market. That's not to say they aren't quite good but I can state, without fear of contradiction, that "Product X" is streets ahead of our competitors.

Because of the superior quality of "Product X" we shall have to launch a highly sophisticated advertising campaign. For a start, we shall probably need a celebrity, possibly someone from "Big Brother", to front a TV commercial. I can tell you no expense is going to be spared in the world-wide exploitation of our product; and, ladies and gentlemen, when we've achieved total market domination, you'll be able to stand tall and say with pride, I was there when "Product X" was launched!"

Task: Read the following idioms and colloquial expressions with examples. Note strong and weak forms. Make up your own sentences using the examples.

1. It's swings and roundabouts.

Meaning: It could work whichever way you tackled it.

We'll put both your suggestions to the board: which one will they choose? It's swing and roundabouts.

2. It's in the lap of the Gods.

Meaning: It's out of our control.

Well, I've done all I could to win this contract – now it's in the lap of the Gods.

2. It's good riddance to bad rubbish.

Meaning: It's good to get rid of something or someone of no use.

Quite frankly I can't wait to see the back of him – it's good riddance to bad rubbish!

