



Complex word stress³

Complex words are of two major types:

- i) words made from a **stem** (basic word form) with the addition of an **affix** (either **prefixes** or **suffixes**), and
- ii) **compound words**, which are made of two (or occasionally more) independent English words.

i.a) Suffixes and stress

1. Suffixes carrying primary stress themselves

“-ade”		escap <u>ade</u>	
“-ee”		refuge <u>ee</u>	
“-eer”		mountaine <u>er</u>	
“-ese”		Portug <u>ese</u>	
“-ette”		cigaret <u>ette</u>	
“-esque”		picture <u>esque</u>	
“-ation”		examin <u>ation</u>	

2. Suffixes that do not affect stress placement

“-able”		comfort - comfortable	
“-age”		anchor - anchorage	
“-al”		refuse – refusal	
“-ard”		drunk - drunkard	
“-ance” “-ence”		appear – appearance exist – existence	
“-en”		wide – widen	
“-er” (adj. or n.)		big – bigger ; lead - leader	
“-ess”		lion - lioness	
“-est”		big – biggest	
“-ful” (adj.) ⁴		wonder – wonderful	
“-ing”		amaze – amazing	

³ Adapted from Cruttenden, A.(1997) “The Word”, Chapter 10 in *Gimson’s Pronunciation of English*. Great Britain, Arnold Int and Roach, P.(2000) “Complex Word Stress”, Chapter 11 in *English Phonetics and Phonology*. UK, CUP

⁴ “-ful” (noun) mouthful, spoonful



“-ish”(adj.) ⁵		devil – devilish	
“-ism”		alcohol – alcoholism	
“-ist”		separate - separatist	
“-ize”		circular – circularize	
“-like”		bird – birdlike	
“-less”		power – powerless	
“-ly” (adv.)		hurried – hurriedly	
“-ment” (noun) ⁶		punish – punishment	
“-ness”		yellow – yellowness	
“-ous”		poison – poisonous	
“-fy”		glory – glorify	
“-wise”		other – otherwise	
“-y” (adj. or noun)		fun – funny	
“-y” (or “-ie”) e.g. “-ary” “-ery” “-ory” “-cy” “-acy” “-ty”		aunt – auntie (infml.) custom - customary pot – pottery explanation – explanatory bankrupt - bankruptcy private – privacy difficult - difficulty	

3. Suffixes that influence stress in the stem

“-ate” (verb) ⁷		Operate	
“-eous”		advantage - advantageous	
“-graphy”		photo - photography	
“-al”		medicine - medicinal	
“-ic”		climate – climatic	
“-ion”		perfect – perfection	
“-ious”		injure – injurious	
“-ity”		tranquil – tranquillity	
“-ive”		reflex – reflexive	

⁵ This is the rule for adjectives, verbs with stem of more than one syllable always have the stress on the syllable immediately preceding “-ish”, e.g. replenish, demolish

⁶ “-ment” (verb) experiment, compliment || **Exceptions:** coment, lament, torment, ferment

⁷ “-ate” (adj.) separate, accurate, moderate



When the suffixes “-ance” (“-ence”), “-ant”, “-ary” are attached to single-syllables stems, the stress is almost always placed on the stem.

When the stem has more than two syllables, the stress is on one of the syllables in the stem. If the final syllable of the stem is strong, that syllable receives the stress. Otherwise the syllable before the last one receives the stress.

“-ance”		im <u>port</u> ance vs. in <u>her</u> itance	
“-ant”		im <u>port</u> ant vs. <u>cus</u> tomary	
“-ary”		cent <u>en</u> ary vs. <u>m</u> ilitary	

i.b) Prefixes and stress

Prefixes applied to free stems do not generally affect stress placement.

“de-”		defoliate	
“dis-”		disagree	
“in-”		incorrect	
“il-”		illegal	
“im-”		immature	
“ir-”		irreverent	
“mal-”		malfunction	
“mis-”		misunderstood	
“pseudo-”		pseudoscientific	
“re-”		redesign	
“sub-”		substandard	
“un-”		unnecessary	

**ii) Compound words****1. Compounds functioning as nouns**

`guidebook, `shopping centre, `bull's eyes, `windsurf, `pickpocket, `shoplifting, `burn-out, `check-in

Exceptions: apple `pie, chocolate `biscuit, Christmas `pudding, London `Road (cf. `Oxford Street), acid `rain, junk `food, fifty p. `change, bay `window, Channel `ferry, kitchen `sink, morning `paper, office `party, trade `union

2. Compounds functioning as adjectives and verbs

a. adjectives: `seasick, `carefree, `sunlit

but sky-`blue, stone-`dead, tax-`free, stone-`deaf, easy-`going

b. verbs: `babysit, `headhunt, `sidetrack

but out`number, over`sleep, under`go

3. Pseudo-compounds

homo`phobic, `microwave, `telegram, `antithesis, `circumflex, ka`leidoscope, `prototype

Variation in the accentual patterns of words

ˈthirˌteen but ˈthirteen ˌpence

ˈWestˌminster but ˈWestminster ˌAbbey

ˈfullˌgrown but ˈfullgrown ˌman

ˈafterˌnoon but ˈafternoon ˌtea

Vowel # 1 – Prefixes, suffixes and endings

“de-”		Dehumanize	
“re-”		Remake	
“pre-“		pre-judge	
“-ee”		Employee	
“-ice”		caprice , police	
“-ine”		machine, rutine	
“-ique”		unique, antique, oblique	

Vowel # 2 or Schwa? - on non-final unaccented syllables

“-ity”		Quality	
“-itive”		Positive	
“-ily”		Happily	
“-ate”(adj. or n.) ⁸		fortunate, chocolate	

⁸ “-ate” (verb) evaluate, congratulate, separate



“-ible”		Possible	
“-em”		Problem	
“-ess”		Useless	
“-ace”		Palace	
“-age”		Manage	
/k,g,tʃ,dʒ/ + “-et”		Pocket	
“-let”; “-ret”		bracelet; claret	
“be-” ⁹		begin, between, become	
“de-”		deposit, deny, device	
“se-“		sedition, select	

Schwa – Endings

“-am” “-em” “-om” “-um”		madam problem custom vacum	
“-some”		handsome	
“-ture”		furniture, future, temperature	
“-us”		circus	

⁹ But believe, belong, behave