

Word stress, vowel clarity and Focus Words

Clear Speech by Judy Gilbert

A. English words with more than one syllable have a main stress. Listen and repeat the following words.

1. Asked _____	7. Economic _____
2. Wanted _____	8. Photograph _____
3. Hamburger _____	9. Photography _____
4. Customs _____	10. Photographic _____
5. Customers _____	11. Ideal _____
6. Economy _____	12. Idealistic _____

Listen one more time. How many syllables does each word have? Which syllable is stressed?

B. Clear Vowels

Listen to this word. Which "a" has a clear vowel sound? BANANA

Only the stressed "a" is said with a clear sound. A stressed syllable is extra clear and extra long.

C. Reduced Vowels - Schwa /ə/

The other two vowels in BANANA are **reduced** to a very short, unclear sound. This is the **schwa** sound.

- There is no letter for this sound, but the dictionary symbol is /ə/
- All of the vowel sounds in English can be reduced to schwa.
- Schwa is the most common sound in English.

D. The contrast between **clear** and **reduced** vowels (Schwa)

Listen. Notice the difference between schwa and the sound of a stressed vowel.

1. Travel /travəl/	6. Kansas /Kənsəs/
2. pilot /pɪlət/	7. Alaska /ələskə/
3. ticket /tɪkət/	8. Nebraska /Nəbrəskə/
4. pencil /pənسل/	9. Canada /Cənədə/
5. advice /ədvɪsə/	10. America /əmərɪkə/

E. Focus Words—Each English sentence has words with more focus than other words

Focus = Emphasis Basic emphasis pattern:

- Content words are **emphasized**.
- Structure words are **de-emphasized**.

Basic Emphasis Words				
Content words (emphasized)	nouns (cat)	main verbs (runs)	adverbs (quickly)	adjectives (happy)
<u>question words</u> (who, what, where, when, why, how)				
Structure words (No emphasis)	pronouns (he, she)	prepositions (of, to, at)	articles (a, the)	"to be" verbs (is, was)
<u>conjunctions</u> (and, but) <u>auxiliary verbs</u> (can, have, do, will)				

When content words are emphasized and structure words are de-emphasized, the contrast helps the listener to hear the important words. Therefore, it helps make your English clearer.