

Thought Groups

Clear Speech by Judy B. Gilbert

English speakers use emphasis to help others understand them better. Remember, each word has a stressed syllable and each sentence has **focus words**. That means that some words in a sentence are stressed because they are more important than others. One other very important way to be understood better and easily is to use **thought groups**.

A **thought group** is a group of words that belong together. A thought group can be a short sentence or part of a longer sentence. Look at the example and listen.

EXAMPLE: I'd like six oranges, and two wedges of cheese.

NOTE: In written English, punctuation marks such as commas, periods, and question marks show you where a thought group ends and where you should **pause** when reading.

A. Listen to these sentences and notice how pauses are used between the thought groups.

1. I'd like six oranges, and two wedges of cheese.
2. When you get there, call me, and I'll come get you.
3. "Let's go for a walk," I said. But she replied, "I'm busy."

Practice saying the sentences above. Pause after each thought group. Use the punctuation as cues.

Rule: There is often a pause at the end of a thought group that shows the thought group is finished.

B. Pair Work: Signaling the end of a thought group.

Student A: Say sentence a or b. Then ask the question under the sentence.

Student B: Respond with the appropriate answer on the right.

EXAMPLE:

Student A: "John," said the boss, "is absent."
"Who was speaking?"

Student B: "The boss."

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| 1. | a. John said, "The boss is absent."
b. "John," said the boss, "is absent."
Question: Who was speaking? | John
The boss |
| 2. | a. Alfred said, "That clerk is lazy."
b. "Alfred," said that clerk, "is lazy."
Question: Who was speaking? | Alfred
That clerk. |
| 3. | a. The teacher said, "That student is lazy."
b. "The teacher," said the student, "is lazy."
Question: Who was speaking? | The teacher
That student |
| 4. | a. Lisa said, "My dog is intelligent."
b. "Lisa," said my dog, "is intelligent."
Question: Who is speaking? | Lisa
My dog |

C. Saying a series of items

Practice saying these sentences. Be sure to pause after each comma.

1. The shirt is red, blue, and green.
2. The pants are red, blue, green, and yellow.
3. They saw a Ford, a Toyota, and a Honda.
4. We have a computer, a fax, and a scanner.
5. The zoo has elephants, tigers, bears, and lions.
6. His suitcase contains socks, ties, shirts, and some books.

Practice: There is more than one way to make thought groups. Native speakers can (and will) say things differently. Look at the following passages and how they are divided, even though the passage is the same.

Thought group 1

Once upon a time, there was a beautiful princess who lived in a big castle with her father, the king, and her mother, the queen. Even though she had everything she asked for, she was not very happy.

Thought group 2

Once upon a time there was a beautiful princess who lived in a big castle, with her father the king and her mother the queen. Even though she had everything she asked for, she was not very happy.

Read the following passage and decide for yourself where you think the thought groups should be. Add punctuation marks (, . ! ?) where needed to make your thought groups. Remember all the rules you learned about **focus words and stress**.

A Bad Day

This has been the most terrible day Everything went wrong First of all I couldn't find my house and car keys Then I knew I was going to be late for school so I drove too fast and a cop gave me a speeding ticket When the officer asked for my driver's license I realized that I had left it at home As a result the fine will be higher After that I got a flat tire and had to change it which took even more time Finally when I arrived at school I remembered that it was a holiday and the school was closed What a terrible day

After you have marked your thought groups, practice the passage with a friend. Be sure to pause and take your time as you read.