

## **INTONATION**

### **What is intonation?**

Intonation and stress are closely linked. In fact, it's impossible to dissociate them. They go hand in hand.

Intonation is about *how* we say things, rather than *what* we say, the way the voice rises and falls when speaking, in other words the music of the language.

Just as words have stressed syllables, sentences have regular patterns of stressed words. In addition, the voice tends to rise, fall or remain flat depending on the meaning or feeling we want to convey (surprise, anger, interest, boredom, gratitude, etc.). Intonation therefore indicates the mood of the speaker.

There are two basic patterns of intonation in English: falling intonation and rising intonation.

In the following examples a downward arrow (↘) indicates a fall in intonation and an upward arrow (↗) indicates a rise in intonation.

Again, these are not rules but patterns generally used by native speakers of English.

Just remember that content words are stressed, and intonation adds attitude or emotion.

This explanation on intonation is intended to serve as a general guide to help learners.

It should in no way make them unnecessarily anxious!

It should be remembered that a written explanation can never be a substitute for a 'live' conversation with a native speaker.

Attitudinal intonation is something that is best acquired through talking and listening to English speakers.

### **Falling Intonation (↘)**

(The pitch of the voice falls at the end of the sentence.)

Falling intonation is the most common intonation pattern in English.

It is commonly found in statements, commands, wh-questions (information questions), confirmatory question tags and exclamations.

#### **• Statements**

- Nice to meet ↘you.
- I'll be back in a ↘minute.
- She doesn't live here ↘anymore.
- Dad wants to change his ↘car.
- Here is the weather ↘forecast.
- Cloudy weather is expected at the end of the ↘week.
- We should work together more ↘often
- I'm going for a walk in the ↘park.

- **Commands**

- Write your name ↘here.
- Show me what you've ↘written.
- Leave it on the ↘desk.
- Take that picture ↘ down.
- Throw that ↘out.
- Put your books on the ↘table.
- Take your hands out of your ↘pockets.

- **Wh- questions** (requesting information.)

(questions beginning with 'who', 'what', 'why', 'where', 'when', 'which', and 'how')

- What country do you come ↘from?
- Where do you ↘work?
- Which of them do you ↘prefer?
- When does the shop ↘open?
- How many books have you ↘bought?
- Which coat is ↘yours?
- Whose bag is ↘this?

- **Questions Tags that are statements requesting confirmation rather than questions.**

Not all tag questions are really questions.

Some of them merely ask for confirmation or invite agreement, in which case we use a falling tone at the end.

- He thinks he's so clever, doesn't ↘he?
- She's such a nuisance, isn't ↘she?
- I failed the test because I didn't revise, did ↘I?
- It doesn't seem to bother him much, does ↘it?

- **Exclamations**

- How nice of ↘ you!
- That's just what I ↘need!
- You don't ↘ say!
- What a beautiful ↘ voice!
- That's a ↘surprise!

**Rising Intonation (↗)**

(The pitch of the voice rises at the end of a sentence.)

Rising intonation invites the speaker to continue talking.

It is normally used with yes/no questions, and question tags that are real questions.

- **Yes/no Questions**

(Questions that can be answered by 'yes' or 'no'.)

- Do you like your new ↗teacher?
- Have you finished ↗already?
- May I borrow your ↗dictionary?
- Do you have any ↗magazines?
- Do you sell ↗stamps?

- **Questions tags that show uncertainty and require an answer** (real questions).

- We've met already, ↗haven't we?
- You like fish, ↗don't you?
- You're a new student ↗aren't you?
- The view is beautiful, ↗isn't it?

**We sometimes use a combination of rising and falling intonation in the same sentence.**

**The combination is called Rise-Fall or Fall-Rise intonation.**

**Rise-Fall Intonation (↗↘)**

(The intonation rises and then falls.)

We use rise-fall intonation for choices, lists, unfinished thoughts and conditional sentences.

- **Choices** (alternative questions.)

- Are you having ↗soup or ↘salad?
- Is John leaving on ↗Thursday or ↘Friday?
- Does he speak ↗German or ↘French?
- Is your name ↗Ava or ↘Eva?

- **Lists** (rising, rising, rising, falling)

Intonation falls on the last item to show that the list is finished.

- We've got ↗apples, pears, bananas and ↘oranges
- The sweater comes in ↗blue, white pink and ↘black
- I like ↗football, tennis, basketball and ↘volleyball.
- I bought ↗a tee-shirt, a skirt and a ↘handbag.

- **Unfinished thoughts (partial statements)**

In the responses to the following questions, the rise-fall intonation indicates reservation. The speaker hesitates to fully express his/her thoughts.

- Do you like my new handbag? Well the ↗leather is ↘nice... ( but I don't like it.)
- What was the meal like? Hmm, the ↗fish was ↘good... (but the rest wasn't great).
- So you both live in Los Angeles? Well ↗Alex ↘does ... (but I don't).

- **Conditional sentences**

(The tone rises in the first clause and falls gradually in the second clause.)

- If he ↗calls, ask him to leave a ↘message.
- Unless he ↗insists, I'm not going to ↘go.
- If you have any ↗problems, just ↘contact us.

### **Fall-Rise Intonation (↘↗)**

(The voice falls and rises *usually within one word*.)

The main function of fall-rise intonation is to show that the speaker is not certain of the answer they are giving to a question, or is reluctant to reply (as opposed to a falling tone used when there is no hesitation). It is also used in polite requests or suggestions.

- **Hesitation/reluctance:**

- So you'd be willing to confirm that? ...Well ... I ↘sup↗pose so ...
- You didn't see him on Monday? I don't quite ↘re↗member ...

- **Politeness-Doubt-Uncertainty:** (You are not sure what the answer might be.)

- Perhaps we could ↘vis↗it the place?
- Should we ↘cop↗y the list?
- Do you think it's ↘al↗lowed?

### **Tips for learners:**

A good exercise to improve pronunciation would be to listen to short recordings of everyday dialogues and then 'shadow read' the script, or read it along with the tape using the same stress and intonation as the speaker. Students can repeat this exercise until their voice sounds similar to the voice on the recording.

It is also a good idea to note down or record some examples of everyday conversations (either from real life or from film or television dialogues) and repeat them as often as possible, copying the stress and intonation of the speakers.

Modern English songs are also a useful way of learning English stress, rhythm and intonation. To begin with, try singing (or saying loudly) the lyrics of songs that you find easy to understand.