

Using your Voice in Presentations

Their voice is arguably the most powerful instrument speakers possess when giving a presentation. It is the means which enables them to convey the meaning and sentiment of their message. This can be done by what is known as chunking but also requires appropriate intonation, stress and pauses. For most native speakers this comes naturally. Learners of English, on the other hand, need to understand what these techniques involve to enable them to contribute additional meaning to their words.

Native speakers tend to break up sentences into chunks when they speak. Expressing ideas in chunks, or thought groups, makes it easier for the listener to process the information they receive. Studying the way utterances are shaped by chunking should help English language learners to improve their own oral skills and sound more similar to mother tongue speakers. The sentences that follow are taken from the TED talk *Understanding the rise of China* by the economist Martin Jacques.

1. Read the following short sentence and the information that follows.

The world is changing with truly remarkable speed.

This could be read all in a single block, but it could also be broken down into two chunks, with a short pause in the middle. The second option would normally lead to the realisation of (or at least to the perception of) two stresses, both in final position of each chunk. Pauses articulate thought groups and, in the main, tend to have stress at or toward the end of chunks.

The world is 'changing with truly remarkable 'speed.

2. Now read the second sentence.

If you look at the chart at the top here, you'll see that in 2025 these Goldman Sachs projections suggest that the Chinese economy will be almost the same size as the American economy.

Here is one way this sentence might be broken up into chunks. Practice reading the text aloud.

*If you look at the chart at the 'top here
you'll see that in '2025
these 'Goldman Sachs 'projections
suggest that the 'Chinese economy
will be almost the 'same 'size
as the 'American economy.*

In this realisation, stresses generally fall at the end of chunks, as expected. There is, however, also a clear example of contrastive stress when the economies of China and America are compared, thus justifying the “leftward” shift in stress. As a rule, stress that does not come in or near final position in a chunk will be perceived as emphatic.

3. Read the sentence below and then mark the stresses in the chunked version which follows.

And if you look at the chart for 2050 it's projected that the Chinese economy will be twice the size of the American economy.

*And if you look at the chart for 2050
it's projected that the Chinese economy
will be twice the size
of the American economy.*

4. Do the same for the following two sentences.

And the Indian economy will be almost the same size as the American economy. And we should bear in mind here that these projections were drawn up before the Western financial crisis.

*And the Indian economy
will be almost the same size
as the American economy.
And we should bear in mind here
that these projections
were drawn up before the Western financial crisis.*

5. Now chunk the following passage and also insert the appropriate stress marks.

A couple of weeks ago, I was looking at the latest projection by BNP Paribas for when China will have a larger economy than the United States. Goldman Sachs projected 2027. The post-crisis projection is 2020. That's just a decade away.

6. Go to www.ted.com and listen to the speaker's use of pauses, stress and intonation in his talk.

Lesley Hazleton: *On Reading the Koran*

1. Read the transcript below, and decide how you would chunk the text if you read it aloud. Annotate the text, indicating where there should be short or long pauses.
2. Identify the points where your pitch would fall and mark the words you would stress.
3. Practise and read the text aloud. Record yourself and listen to your recording.
4. Now go to https://www.ted.com/talks/lesley_hazelton_on_reading_the_koran and listen to the extract below (from 0:47 to 2:07) and see whether your version matches Lesley Hazleton's delivery.
5. Try reading the text again, imitating as closely as possible her chunking, stress and intonation. Record yourself once more and listen to your recording critically.

[...] I know many well-intentioned non-Muslims who've begun reading the Koran, but given up, disconcerted by its otherness. The historian Thomas Carlyle considered Muhammad one of the world's greatest heroes, yet even he called the Koran, "As toilsome reading as I ever undertook, a wearisome, confused jumble".

Part of the problem, I think, is that we imagine the Koran can be read as we usually read a book – as though we can curl up with it on a rainy afternoon with a bowl of popcorn within reach, as though God – and the Koran is entirely in the voice of God speaking to Muhammad - were just another author on the best-seller list.

Yet the fact that so few people do actually read the Koran is precisely why it's so easy to quote – that is, to misquote. Phrases and snippets taken out of context in what I call the highlighter version, which is the one favoured by both Muslim fundamentalists and anti-Muslim Islamophobes.

So this past spring, as I was gearing up to begin writing a biography of Muhammad, I realised I needed to read the Koran properly – as properly as I could, that is.[...]