

You say, "potato", I say, "potahto": Accent trainer's view

Independent small business owners and individuals in larger companies must use effective communication skills to sell products and services. Today's global marketplace allows us to communicate and conduct business throughout the world and our daily lives are enriched with a multitude of cultures and accents. The business environment provides ample opportunities to interact with individuals who speak "American English" as a second language.

The 2000 Census projects that by the year 2050, the percentage of Asian individuals in the U.S. United States will grow from the present 3 percent to 8 percent, the percentage of Hispanic individuals will grow from 13 percent to 24 percent and the percentage of African Americans will grow from 13 percent to 14 percent. This trend in diversity and multiculturalism will have a significant impact on the workplace.

Adequate mastery of American English will "level the playing field" for all business people. Many individuals who are proficient in English vocabulary and grammar are still plagued by the inability to be clearly understood. The problem is not a language barrier, but an accent barrier. An accent means that the individual is utilizing the rhythm and melodic patterns as well as the muscular tension of the tongue and lips of their native language.

This leads to altered intonation (melody of speech), pronunciation difficulties and the breakdown of communication between speaker and listener. This can compromise rapport with customers and colleagues, disrupt trust and credibility, and cause the potential loss of business.

Both American and foreign-born individuals must assess how they are communicating as they represent their business. Those who speak English as a second language have an additional challenge in communication. Aside from the

pronunciation difficulties that can interrupt clarity of speech, there are many rules that must be learned to help to decipher the idiosyncratic patterns of American English. Once these rules are understood, clear and effective communication is possible.

The intonation challenge

Speakers of English as a second language often retain the melody and stress pattern of their first language. Some people speak in a monotone (flat) voice while others speak extremely quickly with excessive and unnatural pitch changes. In American English, words are not said with equal stress; one syllable or part of the word requires emphasis.

This can be accomplished by saying the stressed syllable with a higher pitch, a louder volume and longer vowel.

Learning how to properly stress a syllable in a word or a word in a sentence can feel overwhelming to a non-native speaker. However, if you can learn the rules that guide North American speech patterns, you will be able to speak more effectively, confidently and clearly. The following are some important rules to help you navigate the complexities of spoken American English. Of course, with every rule, there will be exceptions.

Rule #1: Compound Nouns

A compound noun is comprised of two distinct words that are joined together to create a word with a new meaning. They can be written as one new word, e.g. **checkbook**; they may be two separate words, e.g. **parking** lot; or they may be hyphenated, e.g. **take-out**.

Our language is filled with compound nouns. Think about how we have business meetings, coffee breaks, conference rooms, parking tickets, parking meters, business plans, business trips and conference calls.

Stress the first word of a compound noun with higher pitch, louder volume and a longer vowel.

Rule #2: Proper nouns

Proper nouns refer to people's names, geographical locations and other titles. In two-word proper nouns, stress the second word.

For example, we may introduce ourselves as Marjorie **Whittaker** from Brookline, **MA**, have lunch in Chestnut **Hill**, work in Middlesex **County**, have an appointment at Dana **Farber**, see Dr. **Matuson**, vacation on Cape **Cod**, shop at Quincy **Market**, and read the Wall Street **Journal**.

In two-word proper nouns, stress the second word.

Rule #3: Acronyms and Initializations

Acronyms and initializations are shortcuts for frequently used words. In American English, we use a multitude of these "abbreviations." Each type of business has an exhaustive list of its own. The primary stress is on the last letter of the abbreviation/initialization. We may receive our **MBA**, **CPA**, **Ph.D.** or **RN** degree; invest in an **IRA**; buy stock in **IBM** or **GM**; watch **HBO**, **ABC** or **ESPN**; or discuss business matters with the **CFO**, **CEO** or **VP**.

Give primary stress to the last letter of the abbreviation.

Rule #4: Numbers

Stating numbers can be confusing, if we don't abide by the correct stress pattern. When counting, stress the first syllable in "teen" numbers such as **thirteen**, **fourteen**, **fifteen**. When counting, stress the first part of "ten" numbers such as **thirty**, **forty**.

However, when discussing quantity and time, stress the second part of the "teen" numbers, e.g.

GUEST COLUMN**LYNDA WILNER & MARJORIE WHITTAKER**

fourteen dollars vs. forty dollars.

If you follow this rule, an appointment at 8:50 or 8:15 won't be misinterpreted. Errors of this type can cost us time and money.

Stress the appropriate syllable when counting and/or describing time, currency and measurements.

Rule #5: Heteronyms (multiple meaning words)

English is also filled with word pairs that are spelled the same way, but can be nouns, adjectives or verbs with different meanings and different stress patterns. For 2-syllable words, stress the first syllable for nouns and the second syllable for verbs.

If you stress the wrong syllable, it can be very confusing to your listener, e.g. Lynda **projects** that she will complete her **projects** by the due date. Stress the first syllable for nouns and the second syllable for verbs in 2-syllable multiple meaning words.

These preceding examples are just a few of the many rules that can add clarity to your speech. Mastering these rules will help you reduce misinterpretations and assure successful communication in the workplace and in social settings. Successful communication leads to successful business.

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