

# Making intonation visible

Daniel Pell uses PowerPoint to give effective feedback.



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I spend a lot of class time working on intonation, sentence stress, and how tonic syllables affect both sound and meaning in sentences. Adrian Underhill provides us with a wonderful range of discovery and practice ideas for this in the 'Classroom Toolkit' sections of *Sound Foundations*. However, giving feedback that is immediately understandable and provides a record they can take away to practice is tricky. Cue PowerPoint!

It may not swoop and fly like Prezi,

but PowerPoint has features which make it a great tool for providing feedback on sentence-level pronunciation. If you think about it, the purpose of a good slide is to make important ideas stand out—the function of stress and intonation in a sentence is similar. What we do with our voice, in that sense, is what we do visually with a PowerPoint slide; and the program gives us a range of different formatting tools all geared toward increasing the 'visibility' of ideas.

## Making intonation visual

The following are steps I use in classroom teaching and one-to-one tutoring to focus learners' attention—visually and aurally—on how the voice is used to highlight information in speaking.

### Step 1: Identify stressed words

Open PowerPoint and create a blank slide. Write an example sentence, or one provided by a student. Increase the font size so that it is fairly big (24–36pt). Read the sentence with appropriate stress on key words. Ask the students to identify the *first* word which has emphasis. Double click on this word, then click the 'Increase Font Size' button to make that word a little larger than those around it. Double-click the 'Format Painter' , then re-read the sentence, asking the students which other words are stressed. When they point them out click on each word and it will automatically increase in size. (See Figure 1.) If students have their own computers during the lesson, they can do this themselves. Using the Format Painter, I've found students can identify the stressed words in an entire paragraph while listening at normal speed, since it is simply a matter of clicking each word while they listen.

Paris is a wonderful city to visit in spring.

*becomes*

Paris is a wonderful city to visit in spring.

Figure 1

### Step 2: Identify un-stressed words

To increase students' awareness of how prominence affects the sound of words, double click on the first word which is spoken as a reduced form in a sentence. Use the 'Decrease Font Size' button once or twice to make the word appear smaller than those around. Repeat this step to shrink unstressed syllables within the 'stressed words'. (See Figure 2.) At this point you may also want to rewrite some words so that they reflect how they actually are pronounced (including liaison, assimilation, vowel reduction, elision, etc.), or introduce some IPA characters.

*becomes*

Paris i:zə **WON**derful city to **VIZ**it in **spring**.

Figure 2

### Step 3: Identify tonic syllables

The visual now largely reflects how a sentence sounds in English. Some of our words really are 'bigger and smaller' (or more specifically, louder, longer and higher), all the time, in every phrase we say. Beyond that, there are words which stand out to reflect their importance, even more than the others, with a significant effect on meaning and intonation. Again, Adrian Underhill has wonderful activities suggested for introducing and practicing with these *tonic syllables*. For these, I use both bold and an even larger font size. Read the sentence again, asking the students to identify the most stressed syllable(s). Double click on the word, and click 'Bold'. Then highlight just the actual syllable of the tonic, and use the 'Increase Font Size' button several times to make this really stand out. (See Figure 3.) Now you are seeing English as it actually sounds!

*becomes*

Paris i:zə **WON**derful city to **VIZ**it in **spring**.

Figure 3

The description of the activity above is largely teacher driven—but if students have access to a computer during class then this can be easily adapted so that they are doing the work of reformatting the sentence based on a model, either recorded or read by the teacher, taking dictation to a new level. Likewise it can be assigned as homework, and checked in class by reading out the various versions created by students. This can logically lead to a lesson on how placing the tonic in different positions affects the meaning of the sentence.

## Students learn to identify the 'key words' in their own speech

The activities above help students to understand the sounds and effects of stress and un-stress in a sentence. Once that concept becomes clear to them, the next area where they will need help is figuring out, on their own, which words ought to be stressed. Textbooks often break this down into rules, guidelines, and lists of the word forms which typically receive stress or do not. I personally find that the placement of stress is so connected with meaning that a lot of students can do it naturally given the right set up and encouragement. (A kinesthetic activity for this is to tell the students to imagine they are angry, and ask them where in the sentence they would bang their fist on the desk when saying it!) However, PowerPoint again lends itself to this kind of exploration and discovery.

Take a sentence from a student presentation for a university-level course. 'If you were going to make this sentence into a slide', I say, 'how would you format it?' (See Figure 4.) The act of choosing a header and making a bullet point list is, in many ways, related to the mental process that occurs when we place emphasis in a sentence. Compare the 'bullet point' format in Figure 4 with the visual representation of the same sentence in Figure 5.

*'The purpose of Korea's public service railway is to reach out to citizens and be proactive about solving their problems.'*

*becomes*

Korea's public service railway: Purpose

- reach out to citizens
- be proactive
- solve their problems

Figure 4

The **purpose** of Korea's public service railway is to **reach out** to citizens and be **proactive** about solving their problems.

Figure 5

As with the previous technique, this can be done interactively in front of the students, but it can be done just as easily by students themselves, given an example sentence.

## Additional ideas

PowerPoint is packed with features for improving visual formatting. If bold doesn't seem to make the point clearly enough, try using the 'Convert to Word Art' feature on your tonic syllables. (Tonic syllables *really* stand out if they're three times larger, in glossy-orange with a drop-shadow!)

Remind students of rising and falling tone by using the 'Superscript' and 'Subscript' buttons (combined with 'Increase Font Size'). Spread out the letters of longer words, or squeeze them together for short words with the 'Character Spacing' button. Clean it all up again with the 'Remove Formatting' button. And of course there is a range of drawing features for arrows, shapes, and so on, which can be put to good use.

What makes PowerPoint better suited to these tasks than a Word Doc is the ease with which text can be manipulated on the page and automatically resized. This allows you to add and update on the fly. It also lets you use the technique easily in the classroom—or during an individual tutoring session—to interactively create a presentation.

Lastly, it is worth remembering that as students use this method to learn about intonation and the sounds of English, they are learning to speak more clearly, and to create and deliver more effective presentations, by exploring the relationship between ideas, visuals, and sound. Happy ppt-ing!

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## Reference

Underhill, A. 1994. *Sound Foundations*. Oxford: Macmillan.

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