



Faculty of Engineering  
and Applied Science

## COMPREHENSIBILITY

While it is vital that you really know the content of your presentation, how well you know your topic will not matter if you cannot be understood while presenting. This document focuses on three elements of comprehensibility—rate of speech, pronunciation, and stress—with the goal of making the words you say as comprehensible as possible.

---

## RATE OF SPEECH

Simply put, this means how quickly words are being said. While this can refer to single words, it is normally viewed in terms of number of words in a specific period of time. In one minute, a person will say between 100 and 130 words<sup>1</sup>, but this rate increases in professional speaking situations, like a presentation, to an average of 150 words per minute<sup>2</sup>. This is likely because there should be fewer pauses and stammers than in a normal conversation.

The most obvious way to assess the rate of speech is to time oneself. This can be done using any sort of timer. A better tool, however, is to use something like Microsoft's Presentation Coach, a tool included in some versions of PowerPoint. If your version does not have it, it is also accessible on Office.com. This tool analyzes not only the rate of speech but also the use of fillers (words with little content like "like") and stammers. The preferred rate of speech in this tool is between 130 and 150 words.

Remember that the number of words in a presentation indirectly impacts the tempo. Trying to fit too much content in a timed presentation will lead to speaking too quickly, while having too few words has the opposite effect. If one averages 150 words per minute, the approximate number of words in a ten-minute presentation would be 1500. This might require paring down the number of words to suit a presentation's length.

## PRONUNCIATION

Everyone has an accent. Certain accents are more standard than others, and this should be considered when speaking publicly. If an accent involves pronunciations of sounds that differ from what is considered "standard," and this difference could impede understanding, then someone with that accent should make an effort to make their pronunciations resemble the standard ones.

As an example, many dialects of Newfoundland English contain an /h/ that is deleted from words when it appears word initially, or added to words that begin with vowel sounds. Because this is not a common linguistic feature, a speaker of such a dialect should try to pronounce these words in a more standard way when presenting; otherwise, listeners might misunderstand the message being communicated. After all, the phrase "heating the ash" means something very different from "eating the hash."

Speakers may be unaware of pronunciations that are not standard. This is true for both native and non-native speakers of English. To determine if such non-standard pronunciations exist, it would be beneficial to have a

---

<sup>1</sup> [How Fast Does the Average Person Speak? - Word Counter Blog](#)

<sup>2</sup> [How Many Words Are There in a 10 Minute Speech? - Word Counter Blog](#)

variety of people listen to the presentation before delivering it. Whereas the Presentation Coach is useful for determining rate of speech, it cannot assess phonological differences as well as a person can.

## STRESS

While stress and anxiety may come with giving a presentation, that is not what this section is about. Stress in this context means how the syllables within words and sentences are pronounced. Both words and sentences have a rhythm.

### WORD STRESS

In words, some syllables are stressed, while others are unstressed. Look at the following example:

1. CA na da
2. ca NA da
3. ca na DA

Which one matches the pronunciation of Canada? Only the first one sounds natural. The others do not, and because they differ from what is expected, they might be misunderstood. When words are unfamiliar, there is a greater likelihood for them to be mispronounced. Even with the correct sounds, the stress might be misplaced.

A dictionary can help determine proper word stress. The ' indicates the primary stress is on the syllable that follows it. With longer words, a , shows the secondary stress in on the following syllable. Examine the following listing from Oxford Learner's Dictionaries:

thermodynamics, noun [uncountable], /,θərmou'daɪ'næmɪks/

Here it can be seen that the main stress is on the *na*, and the secondary stress is on the *the*. If you say the word to yourself, you can see how those two syllables are louder and longer than the surrounding ones.

### SENTENCE STRESS

Much like words, sentences have stress. However, the rules are not as rigid with sentences because the meaning can determine which words receive stress. Content words receive stress, while function words are unstressed. Look at this example sentence:

The *vendor* *promised* to *ship* the *remainder* of the *accessories* *tonight*.

In the above sentence, the blue words are content words. Each of these will be louder and longer than the black words, which are function words. Function words are typically unstressed, so they are said quickly, and their vowels are often reduced. A good illustration of this is in this video by Rachel's English:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PrAe07KluZY>.

Emphasis can be added by exaggerating the stress on a single word. Stressing the word "ship" in the example sentence might mean distinguishing between something being sent and something being received. Stressing "tonight" could be emphasizing when something will be sent (as opposed to a different time). Function words can be emphasized in this way as well. Using emphasis appropriately can greatly enhance the delivery of messages in a presentation. On the other hand, if extra word stress is added to words without reason, it will confuse the listener. They will wonder why a word is being emphasized, so the message may be lost.