

— A practical guide

Why people ask you to repeat yourself

What really breaks clarity in English, where your effort pays off, and how to hear the pattern in your own voice.



Jay Alexander Poulton

The Accent Coach

theaccentcoach.com



What this guide is for

If people understand you most of the time but you still get asked to repeat yourself more often than you would like, this guide will show you where the problem usually sits.

You are probably a working professional whose English is strong enough to do the job well, in writing and out loud. What bothers you is smaller than that and harder to describe. Someone leans in and says "sorry, one more time." A colleague repeats your point back to the room a minute later and this time everyone nods. On a call you find yourself slowing down and pushing every word out, and you can hear yourself doing it.

“Sorry, one more time.”

Most people in that position decide the problem is their pronunciation, so they go looking for the sound they are getting wrong, usually the R or the TH, and start practicing it. Sometimes that helps, though very often it does not help as much as the effort deserves, and that is discouraging in a way that makes people stop.

The reason is that clarity in English is carried by more than the individual sounds. It is carried by rhythm: which word you lean on in a sentence, which beat is strong inside a word, where you stop, and whether the ends of words arrive. Those things follow patterns, they can be learned from a page, and you can hear all of them in a recording of your own voice.

1

The word that carries the sentence

Which single word you lean on, and what it tells the listener

2

The shape of the word

Which beat is strong, and what happens to the weak beats

3

Where you stop

How you group words so a long sentence stays easy

4

The ends of words

The endings that carry your tense and your plurals

The four things this guide covers. They are in order of how much difference they tend to make, so if you only work on one, work on the first.

You will not find any phonetic symbols in this guide, and you will not find a promise to make you sound as though you were born in the United States. Every sound is described with words you already know, and the goal throughout is to be understood the first time by the people you work with.

The guide takes about twenty minutes to read. The exercise at the end takes ten and needs only your phone and a quiet room.



Listen

You can hear every example. Wherever you see a small square code like this one, point your phone's camera at it and you will hear me read the example aloud, both versions, so you can compare them by ear. You can also find all of the recordings at theaccentcoach.com/clarity-check.

At the end, you can send me one minute of your voice

The ten minute check near the end has you record a minute of ordinary speech. If you send it to me through the short form at theaccentcoach.com/clarity-check, I will listen to it myself and, within a week, tell you which of the four things in this guide is costing you most, with a practice pack for it, free of charge.



One honest note about written guides

There are parts of this work a page cannot do. Anything to do with the exact position of your tongue needs an ear on the other side of the conversation, because you cannot check it on your own. A guide that promises to fix your R in writing is promising something it cannot deliver.

Everything here was chosen because it works on paper. These are patterns and habits rather than muscle positions, so you can learn them, hear them in your own recording, and correct them by yourself.

What a listener is actually doing

A listener works out your sentence by guessing ahead and checking each guess as you speak. By the time you are three words in they have already predicted most of the rest, and they are only half listening to confirm they were right. This is why people understand each other in noisy restaurants where half the sounds never arrive at all.

Prediction needs signals, and English gives the listener two big ones. The first is which word in the sentence you lean on, because that tells them where the new information is. The second is the shape of each word, meaning which beat is strong and what happens to the beats around it. Both of these are rhythm rather than pronunciation, and both are doing more work than most people realize.

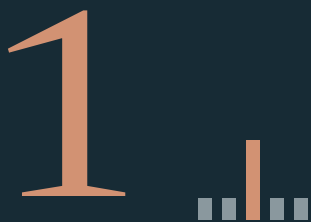
When those signals arrive, a listener can absorb quite a lot of variation in the individual sounds without noticing. When the signals go missing, they have to work out your meaning from the words alone, which is slower and more tiring, and it is that effort they are describing when they ask you to say it again.

We can ship it on **TUESday**

The listener uses the height of each word as well as the word itself, and the word at the peak is the one they take away.

One word rises above the rest, and that word is what the listener takes away. Move the peak and you change what the sentence is about, without changing a single word.

I want to be accurate about where the individual sounds fit, because a lot of guidance goes wrong here in both directions. Sounds do matter, and they matter most inside the strong beat of a word and at the ends of words. They matter least in the weak beats, where English speakers barely pronounce them anyway. The rhythm of a word is what tells you which of its sounds deserve your effort.



The word that carries the sentence

Which single word you lean on, and what it tells the listener



Every spoken sentence in English has one word that matters more than the others, and a speaker signals it by making that word a little higher and a little longer than the words around it. Listeners use the signal constantly and have never once thought about it. If you give every word the same weight, the signal never arrives, and the listener has to reconstruct your meaning from the words on their own.

This is what people mean when they describe someone as sounding flat or robotic. It is also why a sentence with perfect pronunciation can still land badly in a meeting.

Here is the same sentence three ways. The words are identical every time. Say each one out loud and notice how completely the meaning changes.

The same sentence, three ways

We can ship it on TUESday	Tuesday is the news. You are answering when .
WE can ship it on Tuesday	You are the ones who can. Another team perhaps cannot.
We CAN ship it on Tuesday	You are answering a doubt. Somebody thought it was not possible.



Listen

The same sentence carries three different meanings. Nothing changed except which word you leaned on. If your listener cannot find the peak, they get none of this.

— *Nothing changed except which word you leaned on.*

Research note

Why this one comes first

This is the best evidenced of the four. In a study published in *TESOL Quarterly*, North American undergraduates heard the same lecture delivered three ways: with the main stress in the right place, in the wrong place, and missing altogether. They recalled significantly more of the content when the stress was correct, and they also rated the speaker significantly more favorably. The words were identical, and they were understood better and received better purely because of where the weight fell. (Hahn, 2004)

Choosing the word is easier than it sounds, because it is almost always the newest piece of information. Once something has been introduced it stops being new, so the weight moves on to whatever you are saying about it.

Choosing the word, in practice

Flat	The budget is due on Friday. We reviewed the budget this morning.
Clear	The BUD get is due on FRI day. We re VIEWED it this morning.
In the second sentence the weight has moved to reviewed, because the budget is no longer new. Notice that the word budget also disappeared and became it, which is what an English speaker does automatically once something has been introduced, so the weight and the shortening travel together.	



Listen

There is one more thing worth knowing, because it is the fastest way to sound decisive rather than uncertain. The peak of a statement should fall and lengthen as you finish. A rise at the end of a statement reads as a question in English, and speakers who are concentrating hard often let their sentences drift upward without hearing it.

Uncertain	I think we should go with the second option ↗
Decided	I think we should go with the SEC ond option ↘
The words and sounds are the same in both. The first version invites someone to disagree with you. The second version closes the sentence, and in a meeting that difference is read as confidence rather than as grammar.	



Listen

The peak of a statement should fall and lengthen as you finish.

What to practice

Take any three sentences you expect to say this week. Before you say them, underline one word in each. Say it with that word raised and everything else relaxed, then say it again with the weight somewhere else and listen to how the meaning moves. Two minutes of this is enough to start noticing that you are choosing, which is most of the work.

1

2

3



2...

The shape of the word

Which beat is strong, and what happens to the weak beats

Every English word of more than one syllable has a strong beat. A listener stores words partly by that shape, which is why a familiar word said with an unfamiliar rhythm can take a moment to land.

It is worth being precise about how much this matters, because it is often overstated. If you move the strong beat but keep every vowel full and clear, listeners usually cope. They treat it as an accent feature and carry on. The version that causes real trouble is the one where moving the beat also changes the vowels, and in English that happens constantly, because the weak beats in a word become shorter and lighter as well as quieter, and their vowels often shrink to a brief, relaxed sound.



DIF frent

different (2 beats, not 3)



SEP rit

separate (2 beats, not 3)



COMF ta bl

comfortable (3 beats, not 4)

The strong beat keeps its full vowel. The weak beats shrink, and sometimes vanish. Saying every syllable with equal length and a full clear vowel is the most common way a correct word arrives in an unfamiliar shape.



Listen

Unfamiliar We need a **SEP•A•RATE** budget for each de**PART•MENT**.

Familiar We need a **SEP**rit budget for each de**PART**mnt.

Every sound in the first version is correct and carefully made, and that care is what causes the trouble, because giving each syllable a full vowel turns a two-beat word into a three-beat word that the listener has to rebuild.

There are patterns behind all of this, so you do not have to learn words one at a time. Two of them cover a great deal of ordinary conversation. When two words join to make one thing, the strength goes on the first word: a **CELL** phone, a **PROJECT** manager, a **CRED**it card. When a verb is built out of a verb plus a small word, the strength goes on the small word instead: to pick **UP**, to follow **UP**, to figure **OUT**.

The words that shift

A large group of English words move their strong beat depending on whether you are naming a thing or doing an action. Most of the words it affects are work words, so this comes up more at the office than anywhere else.

 RE cord a record (the thing)	 re CORD to record (the action)	 IN crease an increase (the thing)	 in CREASE to increase (the action)
---	---	---	---

When you name the thing, the strength goes early, and when you describe the action, it moves later. The same pattern runs through present, permit, conduct, contract, object, progress, address and project.

Mixed up We need to **RE**cord the new re**COR**D, and then I will **PRE**sent it.

In order We need to re**COR**D the new **RE**cord, and then I will pre**SEN**T it.

Say each pair slowly a few times and the pattern starts to feel obvious rather than memorized. If you are ever unsure in the moment, keeping the strength early is the safer guess, because shifting it later than it should be causes listeners more trouble than shifting it earlier.



Listen

Keeping the strength early is the safer guess.

Research note

A note on how much this matters

Research on misplaced word stress finds that the damage comes mostly from the vowel changes that travel with it, rather than from the shift itself. A word with the beat in the wrong place but every vowel intact is usually still understood. That is why this section spends more time on *what happens to the weak beats* than on memorizing which syllable is strong. (Field, 2005; and later work on stress and vowel quality)

3 ... / ...

Where you stop

How you group words so a long sentence stays easy



English is spoken in short groups of words with small breaks between them, and each group holds one piece of the idea. Those breaks are punctuation the listener uses to sort your sentence into parts. When they fall in sensible places a long sentence is easy to follow. When they fall oddly, or not at all, even a short sentence becomes work.

Two things go wrong here, for opposite reasons. Some people speak in one unbroken line, worried that stopping will make them sound unsure. Others break after almost every word because they are concentrating hard on each one. Both are tiring to listen to, and both are easy to catch in a recording.

Chopped into nine groups

I spoke

to the vendor

yesterday

about the

delivery dates

and she said

the second shipment

would be

delayed

Grouped into three

I spoke to the vendor yesterday

about the delivery dates

and she said the second shipment would be delayed



Listen

The words and the speed are identical, and the second version takes far less effort to follow. Each group in the second version holds a complete piece of the idea, so the breaks are doing useful work instead of interrupting.

The useful instruction is to put the breaks where the idea has a natural seam, however many pauses that turns out to be. Most sentences show you where those seams are if you read them once before speaking, and in a meeting you can feel them coming.

4.

The ends of words

The endings that carry your tense and your plurals

Many languages put little weight on the final consonant of a word, and speakers of those languages often carry the habit into English without hearing it. In English the ends of words carry information that nothing else in the sentence repeats, so when they go quiet the listener loses grammar rather than just sound.

This one rarely causes a full misunderstanding. It causes something quieter and more damaging, which is a listener who is slightly unsure what you meant and does not ask. They decide you probably meant the obvious thing and move on, and you never find out that half your sentence arrived without its tense.

Unclear

I finish the report last week and send it to the client.

Clear

I finish**ED** the report last week and sent**T** it to the client**S**.

The words are identical apart from four endings. Without them a listener cannot tell whether this already happened or is still to come, and cannot tell whether there was one client or several.



Listen

The past tense ending is harder than it looks because it is not always the same sound. Saying a full extra beat on all of them is a common overcorrection, and it makes speech sound careful and slightly old fashioned.

A full extra beat

After a T or D sound

want•ed

need•ed

start•ed

decid•ed

A soft D

After most other sounds

call**d**

open**d**

arrived**d**

answer**d**

A light T

After K, P, S, SH, CH, F

ask**t**

work**t**

help**t**

finish**t**

One spelling has three different endings. Only the first group adds a syllable. The other two attach to the word you already have, which is why they disappear so easily and why over-pronouncing them sounds wrong.



The ends of words carry information that nothing else in the sentence repeats.

Two things that matter less than you think

I want to be straight with you about two things, partly because they will save you effort and partly because you have probably been told the opposite by somebody selling something.

a Chasing one signature sound

The R and the TH get more attention than any other part of English, and more than they earn. If your V leans slightly toward a W, or your TH lands closer to a D, a listener almost always recovers the word from the sentence around it. You will sound like someone who grew up speaking another language, which you are, and you will be understood.

Sounds still deserve attention, and the rhythm tells you which ones. The sounds worth your time are the vowels inside your strong beats, because that is where a wrong sound actually changes the shape of the word, and the consonants at the ends of words, because those carry grammar. A month spent on the R in isolation buys less than a month spent on those two.

The R is also the single hardest thing to teach in writing, because it is entirely about where your tongue sits and you cannot see your own tongue. If you want to work on it, work on it with someone who can hear you.



b Speaking slowly

Almost everyone who has been asked to repeat themselves has tried slowing down, and it usually disappoints. That is worth understanding, because it explains a frustration a lot of people carry.

Slowing down helps if the problem was that you were rushing. It does not help if the problem is one of the four in this guide, and it can make two of them worse. When people slow down they tend to give every word the same careful weight, which flattens the sentence and removes the signal the listener was relying on. They also tend to add a small break after each word, which chops the sentence into pieces.

Slower	I. Would. Like. To. Discuss. The. Budget. With. You.
Clearer	I'd like to discuss the BUD get with you.
The second version is faster and much easier to follow. It has one clear peak, it runs as a single group, and it uses the ordinary contraction a listener expects to hear. The first version is slower and harder, which is the opposite of what the speaker intended.	



Listen

What helps is putting the weight in the right place and stopping in the right places, and those two things together will make you sound calmer than slowing down ever did.

The ten minute check

Reading about this is useful. Hearing it in your own voice is what makes it stick, and most people find it uncomfortable for about thirty seconds and then extremely clarifying.

You need your phone, a quiet room and the worksheet that came with this guide. Do not prepare and do not practice the passage first. The point is to catch your ordinary habits, and a rehearsed version hides them.

Last Thursday I presented our quarterly report to the leadership team. We had analyzed the numbers for three weeks, and the results surprised almost everyone. Our largest customer increased their orders by forty percent, mostly because we improved the delivery process in September. I asked the project manager to follow up with the vendors, and she promised to send an update before the end of the month. It was a good meeting. People asked real questions, and I answered all of them without notes.



Listen

That passage looks ordinary and it is built carefully. It contains the compound nouns, the shifting words, the shrinking weak beats, the past tense endings and the natural stopping points that the four sections described. Whatever your pattern is, it will show up somewhere in those five sentences.

Four steps

1

Record yourself reading the passage below.

Once, at your normal speaking speed, the way you would read something aloud in a meeting. If you stumble, keep going rather than starting again.

2

Then record one minute with no script.

Describe what you did at work yesterday. This second recording matters more than the first, because your habits show up most in the one you are not looking at.

3

Wait an hour before you listen.

This sounds fussy and it really does help. Listening straight away, you hear what you meant to say. An hour later you hear what you actually said.

4

Listen four times, once for each question on the worksheet.

Give each pass one job, and you will catch far more than by listening once and worrying about all of it.

— *An hour later you hear what you actually said.*

The four questions

Listen to both recordings once for each question, and score yourself on the worksheet as you go. Be ordinary about the scoring rather than harsh, because the number matters much less than noticing which of the four is lowest.

1

One: the word that carries the sentence

Listen for the peak in each sentence. In "the results surprised almost everyone", one word should be clearly higher and longer than the others. If you cannot point to it, your listener cannot either. Check the ends of your statements too, and notice whether they fall or drift upward.

2

Two: the shape of the words

Listen to the longer words: presented, quarterly, leadership, analyzed, surprised, customer, increased, delivery, September, project manager. There are two things to check: whether each one has a clear strong beat, and whether the weak beats shrink or every syllable comes out the same length with a full vowel.

3

Three: where you stopped

Count roughly how many small breaks you made in the first sentence. Two or three is comfortable. Six or more means you are chopping. None at all, delivered in one continuous line, means your listener is doing the sorting your voice should have done.

4

Four: the ends of the words

This is the hardest to hear in your own voice, so listen for specific words rather than a general impression. Take presented, analyzed, surprised, increased, asked and answered, then the S on numbers, results, orders, vendors and notes. Does each ending arrive?

If you can, ask someone

Send the one minute recording to a colleague who speaks English as a first language and ask one specific question: "were there any moments where you had to work to follow me?" That question gets you a useful answer. Asking someone how your accent sounds gets you a polite one.

What to do with what you found

You should now have a lowest score, and that is the one to work on first. Trying to correct all four at once is the most common reason people give up in the second week, because nobody can hold four things in mind while also thinking about what they are saying.

Whichever one you landed on, the approach is the same and it is unglamorous. Take a short passage, mark it up on paper for the one thing you are fixing, read it aloud slowly enough to get it right, then read it again at normal speed, then record a minute of unscripted speech and see whether any of it carried over. Ten minutes is enough, and doing it most days matters far more than doing it for a long time.

 *Doing it most days matters far more than doing it for a long time.*

What you can do on your own

All four things in this guide respond well to working alone, because you can hear each of them in a recording once you know what to listen for.

What usually needs another ear

Anything to do with the position of your tongue is different, because the one thing you cannot do is hear yourself the way another person hears you. That covers the American R, the vowels in cat and cot and cut, the L at the end of a word, and any sound that has become so automatic you can no longer notice it. Those are the ones where working alone tends to produce confident practice of the wrong thing, which is worse than not practicing.



Send me your recording

If you have done the ten minute check, you already have the only thing I need. Send me the one minute unscripted recording and I will reply within a week to tell you which of the four is costing you most, with a short practice pack for it.

There is nothing to book and nothing to pay. Scan the code or go to theaccentcoach.com/clarity-check to upload it, or record a fresh minute on the page.



[theaccentcoach.com/
clarity-check](https://theaccentcoach.com/clarity-check)

If you would rather talk it through, you can find me at theaccentcoach.com.



Jay Alexander Poulton

The Accent Coach · ICF Executive Leadership Coach