

## Intonation - pronunciation




Intonation is a complex system of meaning communicated through the rise and fall of a speaker's voice.

English speakers use it to communicate many different types of meaning:

- grammatical meaning e.g. different types of questions and statements
- status of information e.g. main or subordinate, finished or unfinished
- attitude e.g. whether we're certain or not, have doubts or reservations
- feelings e.g. whether we're confident, happy, enthusiastic, sad or bored etc.
- relational e.g. how 'open', friendly or 'closed' we are towards a listener.

### How does it work?

Like stress, intonation operates on a system of contrasts - here, the contrast is between the movement of the voice UP (↗) or DOWN (↘). Intonation can change the meaning of what a person says even when the same words are used. Look at the examples below. The same words are used but different intonation communicates a different meaning.

Example	Communicative purpose and function
 It was <u>interesting</u>	You are giving information. You are certain and confident about the information.  Statement.
 It was <u>interesting</u> (?)	This intonation could indicate that this is a question even though the grammar indicates a statement. It could also indicate that you aren't sure or that you haven't finished yet.  Question or incomplete statement.
 It was <u>interesting</u> ...	You have more to say.  Incomplete statement.

<p>↘</p> <p>It was <u>interesting</u> ...</p>	<p>You have some doubts or reservations or you want to qualify this with more information.</p> <p>You may also be referring to what has already been said or will be said.</p> <p>Reference, qualification.</p>
<p>↗</p> <p>It was <u>interesting</u></p>	<p>You want to emphasise this. Depending on the context, you may feel enthusiastic, happy or surprised. Or you may want to contrast this strongly with what someone else has said.</p> <p>Exclamation.</p>

### What will happen if I don't use intonation appropriately?

You may confuse or even irritate your listener(s). One common example of inappropriate intonation is repeatedly using high rising intonation (↗) at the end of most speech chunks and sentences. Although high rising intonation is common in casual conversation (often indicating an 'open' or friendly attitude), it should not be over-used.

Try saying the following example of over-used high rising intonation:

- I **went** to the lecture ↗/ it was **great** ↗/ the lecturer was **clear** ↗/
- she **asked** if we had questions ↗/ but **everyone** just **sat there** ↗//

If you don't finish off with a falling intonation at some point, the listener is left 'hanging', waiting for the 'story' to end. You may also give the impression that you are seeking the listener's approval or feedback.

Now try a different way of saying the same thing:

- I **went** to the lecture ↘/ it was **great** ↘/ the lecturer was **clear** ↘/
- she **asked** if we had questions ↘/ but **everyone** just **sat there** ↘//

Please note:

- speech chunks and pauses are marked with a slash / or // for a longer pause
- stressed syllables in key words are marked in **bold**
- focus words (the most important key words) have an underlined stressed syllable



- arrows mark the direction of pitch movement of the voice (e.g. ↘ for falling intonation; ↗ for rising intonation)

### **What's wrong with using a lot of high rising intonation in presentations?**

You may confuse your audience or convey the impression that you are not in control of your content. In a presentation, a series of high rising tones may communicate that:

- you haven't finished a piece of information or section of your presentation.  
This can be confusing for listeners because they need to understand each piece of information so they can build understanding as they progress through the presentation;
- you are uncertain about what you are saying.  
This can be a problem if you want to communicate your thoughts with confidence.

