

English fluency handbook

Everything you need to know to improve your speaking skills





Table of Contents

- 01 Let your fluency journey begin
- 02 Accuracy vs. fluency: What should you focus on?
- 03 Key steps for becoming confident and fluent in English
- 04 Effective techniques for mastering vocabulary
- 05 Activities to practice your English pronunciation
- 06 Useful extra resources and exercises



Let your fluency journey begin

Your English has advanced to an intermediate level (which isn't easy – if you haven't already, you should celebrate this achievement!). You've almost reached your goal of being a fluent and confident English speaker, and now it's time to refine your skills.

When you hit this mark, you can join an international company, wow your colleagues in meetings with your confidence and vocabulary knowledge, or finally move overseas to give you and your family greater opportunities. You're so close, and we're here to help.

We asked our language-learning methodology experts, <u>English tutors</u>, and your fellow learners for their top speaking tips that'll take you from being an intermediate English speaker to working or living in an English-speaking environment with confidence. Read on to learn what they say about becoming a fluent and confident English speaker.





Accuracy vs. fluency: What should you focus on?

Let's clear something up: Fluency and accuracy are not the same thing. People use these words interchangeably, but they're different. Under some circumstances, they even work against each other.

Speaking fluency is all about smoothness.

You connect words, sentences, and ideas with ease. When you speak fluently, you don't hesitate to search for the right words or fill gaps with "um," "er," or "hmm."

You glide from one idea to the next like a skater on ice; there is no pausing or struggling with things to say.

Many students are unaware that they don't need to speak perfectly correct English to be fluent. Of course, having accurate English is fantastic.

Accuracy is when you're always searching for the perfect words or structures, and hesitation and pauses can creep in. You can slow down. Your speech can become choppy, and it can become harder for listeners to understand you. This accuracyis-all mindset often gets in the way of fluency.

With the tools and techniques from this guide, you'll learn how to gain both fluency and accuracy through gradual practice.



"When thinking about fluency versus accuracy, I always lean toward the importance of communication. While students should strive for both fluency and accuracy, the ultimate goal should be to become better communicators."

Carrie Lillie,

Senior Curriculum Developer at Preply



Key steps for becoming confident and fluent in English

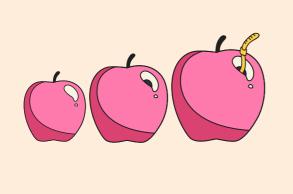
Develop a growth mindset

Just as confidence isn't set in stone, neither are speaking abilities. With hard work, effective processes, and help from others, you can master any skill.

Understanding this is called having a growth mindset. In her research about mindset, Stanford professor Carol Dweck found two categories of people:

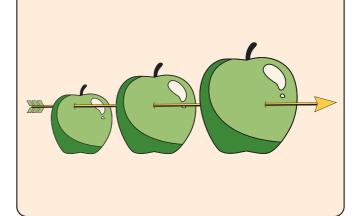
People who have fixed mindsets

think their abilities can't get better. They see a challenge and run away as quickly as possible. They think failing is a failure.



People who have growth mindsets

love challenges. They think failing isn't a failure. They think it is learning and understand that challenges and setbacks lead to improvements. They don't run away from difficult tasks (such as learning a new language).





Try this easy quiz to find out what kind of mindset you have. Do you agree with these statements? Go through the list, and add up your points.

		Agree	Disagree
01	I can't really change how smart I am.	4 points	0 points
02	When I don't understand something, I like to slow down and try to figure it out.	4 points	0 points
03	I get nervous when it comes to academic challenges.	4 points	0 points
04	People have told me I'm clever.	4 points	0 points
05	Learning is enjoyable.	4 points	0 points
06	I often feel unmotivated to learn.	4 points	0 points
07	If I'm not good at a subject, I feel unsure about it.	4 points	0 points
08	Bad grades don't make me lose hope.	-2 points	0 points
09	When I can't understand something, I get frustrated and want to give up.	-2 points	0 points
10	I think I shouldn't have to work too hard in subjects I'm naturally good at.	-2 points	0 points

Give yourself 4 points each time you answered AGREE to questions 1 to 7. Subtract 2 points for each time you answered AGREE to questions 8 to 10.

If you scored:

- Less than 5, you have a growth mindset.
- Between 5 10, you have a growth mindset with some fixed ideas.
- Between 11 15, you have a mostly fixed mindset.
- Above 15, you have a solidly fixed mindset.

To develop a growth mindset, realize that it's OK to make mistakes – that's when the growth happens. Know that your spoken English will improve as long as you don't run away from the challenges.



Set realistic goals

Missing targets is a confidence killer. There's a super simple fix: Make your targets easier to hit (but not so easy that there's no challenge). This sounds a little bit like cheating, but it isn't. It's being smart by setting goals you can achieve. There are lots of ways to set goals, but a popular method to establish realistic and specific ones is the SMART approach.

Here's an example of how to make any goal a SMART goal:

01

"I'll double my English abilities in the next month."

02

"I'll learn 280 new words that are useful for my job over the next two months using the Goldlist method."

The first one is too vague. It's impossible to measure and unrealistic. This person is unlikely to achieve this goal, which will damage their confidence.

The second one is a SMART goal. It's specific, measurable, realistic, and achievable within the time limit. It clearly links to the goal of using English at work. This person has a great chance of success, which will boost their confidence for the next challenge.



"Frequently, we tend to gauge our success by evaluating our current status in comparison to the aspirations we had set for ourselves a year ago. We measure our accomplishments thus far against our ultimate goals. This phenomenon is commonplace in our daily lives. For instance, when you embark on a mountain hike, you find yourself wondering about the remaining kilometers until you reach the summit."

Sylvia Johnson,

Head of English Methodology at Preply

Bonus Tip

Use technology to help you measure your goals. When you <u>take classes on</u>

Preply, you can use the speech tracker to measure how much you speak on a weekly basis and stay on target.

Speaking tracker



You have spoken for **54 min**

Every minute speaking helps you become more fluent. Keep talking!



Be flexible with your intentions

Let's say you plan to study every day at 9 AM for 30 minutes. When life gets in the way, what's your backup plan? Instead of skipping that day's study session, add some flexibility to your plan.

Not following your plan isn't a failure. Don't be hard on yourself when things don't produce the desired result. Most importantly, don't let missed study sessions harm your mood and confidence.

Here's what to do. Say something such as I "I'll study every day at 9 AM for 30 minutes. But if that isn't possible, I'll study for 15 minutes after lunch and 15 minutes after dinner."

With this intention, you've built in flexibility to deal with any setbacks.

Breathe and stay calm

Here is a simple tip: If you struggle with nerves when you speak English, breathe slowly and deeply into your belly, not your **chest.** If you're waiting to do a **job interview** or have an upcoming business meeting in **English** and your nerves are going crazy, try some box-breathing techniques:

01

Breathe in slowly, counting to four.

02

Hold your breath, and count to four.

03

Breathe out slowly, counting to four.

04

Hold your breath, and count to four.

05

Repeat this for 10 minutes, and watch your nerves fade away.



Find a safe space to practice speaking

Create a comfortable and safe space for your practice. Make it a place where you're free to try new things, make mistakes, and be proud of your achievements. You can do it on your own by practicing where and when you are most comfortable.





"For students who are struggling to speak, I begin by speaking slowly and clearly, and asking simple questions at a comfortable level, so the student doesn't experience anxiety. After we have established a calm and relaxed environment, I begin to ask more complex questions."

Alexa P., English tutor



Speak about what you love

Here's another simple way to boost your confidence: Speak about what you know and love. Let's say you've played piano since you were a child. The experience and contextual knowledge you have gives you a great headstart in your speaking practice. When you talk about music, you're confident and have strong opinions. It makes no difference what language you're speaking because your knowledge and passion shine through.

Bonus Tip

Speaking about what you know and love isn't only good for confidence; it's great for motivation and habit-building too.



"My tutor George understands my goals and interests, allowing me to learn the language in a way that suits me. During our lessons, he brings in articles, movies, and music that I find engaging. This helps us exchange ideas and makes me feel invested in future lessons. It's a sustainable approach that keeps me motivated."

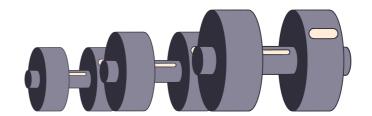
Kardelen, Preply student





Practice, practice and practice once more

Here are three things you can do on your own to improve your speaking skills:



Repeat it three times

This super-simple activity boosts your speaking fluency.

Repeat the same speech three times, and wipe out hesitation, pauses, and thinking time.

Here's how you do it:

01

Choose a question: Any question is OK (but if you need help choosing one, check out our useful resources on asking English questions). Base it on your language level and goals.

02

Attempt 1: Answer your question, and as you're speaking, look things up or check your notes. Don't worry about fluency too much on the first try. Focus on what you say, not how well you say it.

03

Attempt 2: Answer the same question again. Don't blame yourself if you still need to pause or look things up. Your aim isn't perfect fluency. The goal is to be more fluent than in attempt 1.

04

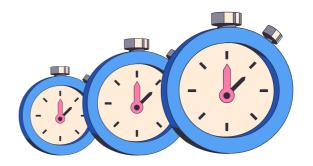
Attempt 3: This is what you've been working toward. Answer the same question, but focus on fluency. Try to be as smooth as possible without pausing or looking things up.

Three attempts are often enough, but if you need four or five, go for it. Follow these steps, and you'll see the hesitation in your speech fade away.



4/3/2 speaking

If you've completed the previous activity a few times and are ready for something a little more challenging, say hello to 4/3/2 speaking.



4/3/2 speaking is similar to the previous activity but has added time control. Setting strict time limits is a great way to improve fluency.

Here's how it works:

01

Choose a topic or question: Any topic or question is fine. Prepare what you want to see. Make sure you have enough subject matter to talk about for four minutes. 02

Attempt 1: Set a timer for four minutes. Answer your question while trying to speak as smoothly as possible. The focus is on speed and meaning, not accuracy. Don't worry about making grammar or vocabulary mistakes.

03

Attempt 2: Set a timer for three minutes. Answer the same question, and don't change the content of your speech. Fit your speech within the time limit by being smoother and not shortening it.

04

Attempt 3: Now, set a timer for two minutes. You know the drill: Same question, same content, but smoother – as smooth as silk. You'll be amazed to see how much you can fit into two minutes of talking when you're fluent.

Keep trying with different questions and topics. You can also change the time controls to 5/4/3 or even 3/2/1.

If it's easy to fit what you want to say within the time limits, it isn't challenging enough. The goal here is to speed up and smooth out your speaking. If you only speak for one minute, the time limit has no effect. Include enough details to feel challenged.



Reflect

When you're speaking with someone, you get immediate feedback. If they understood you, you spoke well. If they didn't understand you, you went wrong somewhere. When you self-study, you can't get this immediate feedback.

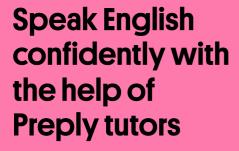
Record your speeches, and reflect later. Listen for any parts that are difficult to understand. Then, think about why you struggled.

Identify the problems, and use them to guide you through the rest of this speaking skills self-study tool kit.

If there is too much hesitation, keep working on these fluency activities. If your pronunciation is causing problems, jump to the pronunciation section of this guide.

Bonus Tip

Working with a tutor is an easy way to get immediate feedback. You can find a tutor that is your ideal match, speak about what you love, and make the online class your safe place to practice speaking.





Amanda G. **★** 5.0

English tutor

Speaks English (Native), French (Advanced) +2

★ 4.8



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Effective techniques for mastering vocabulary

Worrying about accuracy can get in the way of your confidence and fluency. We've been trained to think accuracy is most important, but it's only one piece of the language-learning puzzle. Your goal as a language learner is to be fluent, confident, AND accurate.

We can break accuracy down into three sections: Vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation. Let's look at vocabulary first.

To understand 95% of English, you need the 3,000 most frequent word families. That sounds like a lot, but it's only about 10% of the number of words that an average native speaker knows.

To deal with simple, everyday conversations, you don't need many words, but you want to do more than that. You've already reached an intermediate level, so your target should be the 3,000 most frequent words. Let's break down some of the best ways to learn them.

Bonus Tip

Preply's Head of English Methodology, Sylvia Johnson, suggests that you learn words in sentences and not on their own. Learning vocabulary in sentences provides context and a deeper understanding of word usage, making it easier to remember and apply words in real-life situations.





Understanding a word: What you need to know

Let's unpack what it means to know a word first (because it isn't as simple as you think). Take a deep breath because this is a long list. To understand a word, you need to know:

Its spelling Its meaning(s) Its pronunciation Its conjugations Its part of speech Its connotations (if any) Its collocations Its opposites Its synonyms

Phew! That's a lot of information you need to learn. Luckily for you, you don't need to learn every word in the language.

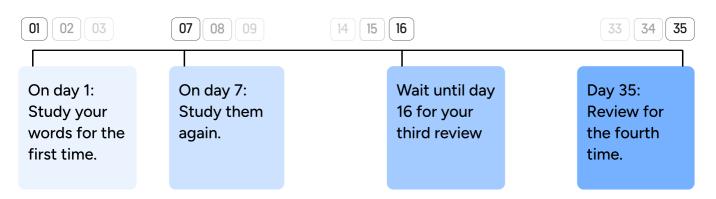




Spaced repetition

Forget studying a word list like crazy for a few days before moving on to the next. Space out your reviews. This gap between reviews is what keeps vocabulary fresh in your mind. If you've ever prepared for a test, you know how easy it is to forget everything you learned. Spaced repetition stops that from happening.

Let's look at one of the original spaced repetition algorithms:



Bonus Tip

Use Preply's app for spaced repetition. You can add words on the flashcard tool directly from your classes, or you can add them manually. Enhance your English learning experience while acquiring new vocabulary on the go.

Download the app and start learning new words everyday







The Goldlist method

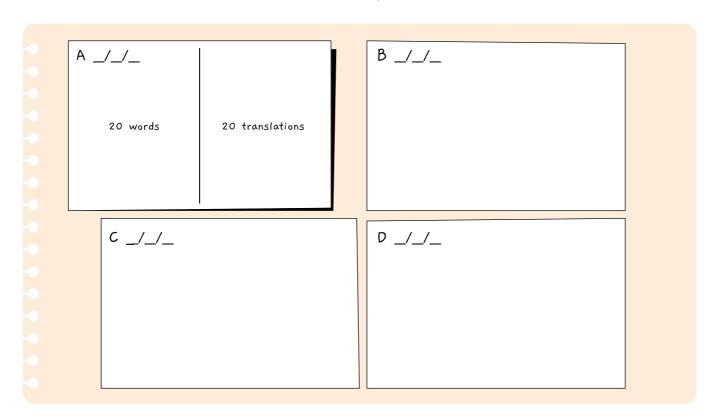
The Goldlist method is a type of spaced repetition. Get a notebook. Divide a double page into four boxes: A, B, C, and D. Split A into two columns. In the left column, write 20 new words or phrases you want to learn and, in the right column, their translations. Write the date at the top of the page.

No matter how much you want to, don't look at this page again for a little while. For 13 more days, repeat this process with 20 new words. Don't look at any of your lists again (yet).

When you have 14 lists, start reviewing them. On day 15, go back to your first list. Test yourself to see if you remember the words. Write the ones you don't remember in box B with the date. On day 16, go back to your second list; on day 17, your third list; and so on.

Every time you review a list, write the words you don't remember in the next empty box. Remember to leave a two-week gap between reviews, and review each list four times.

This is going to take a couple of months, but you'll see the words you can't remember decrease each time you do it. By the end, you'll have mastered most of the 280 words.

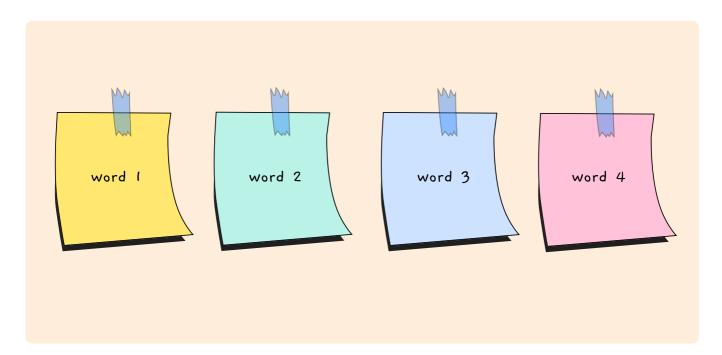




Get a deeper understanding of new words

You can go even deeper with your vocabulary study than memorizing meanings. When you learn a new word, try to visualize it. You can create a mental image. You can draw a picture. You can do a Google Image search, or even add stickers or Post-it notes with images all around your home – whatever works best for you. Being able to visualize new words is a great way to make them memorable and deepen your understanding.

Another way to get a deeper understanding of new words is to paraphrase them. Write their meaning in your own words, or explain what the words mean out loud. You could even teach your fellow language learners what they mean.





Extensive reading and listening

Extensive reading and listening are proven ways of increasing your vocabulary knowledge. Take a bunch of interesting and easy-to-understand texts (reading or listening), and consume a lot of them. You should be able to fly through the content. If it's hard and boring, it'll be a long grind to finish them. Read books, listen to podcasts, or watch sitcoms -whatever interests you.

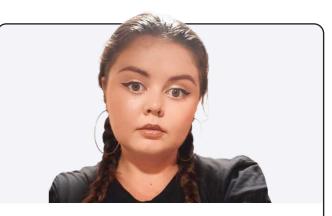
When you get through a lot of content, you encounter words, phrases (and grammar) several times. This helps you remember them. If you read a long and difficult text, you won't encounter the words often enough.

You don't need to worry about studying the words. By getting a lot of input, you'll learn indirectly.



"To expand students' vocabulary, I recommend watching sitcoms like Friends that can help you pick up common phrases used in conversations."

Maya Reeves, English tutor



"I work in an English-speaking company, and every day at work is a practice session for me. Since my company is multinational, I'm accustomed to [listening to] different accents and pronunciations. Without even realizing it, I pick up new words and phrases every day."

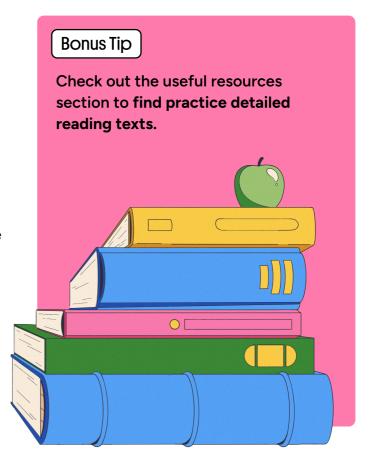
Maryna Nietkova, Preply student



Detailed reading

Another great way to learn vocabulary is detailed reading. Unlike extensive reading, select challenging materials. These can be short texts, and you don't need many of them. The goal here is to analyze the language as you read. With extensive reading, you learn the language indirectly.

With detailed reading, you learn the language directly. Have a notebook ready, and follow the steps above to memorize the new words you find.





Here are our top picks of suitable content:

Graded readers

Short Stories in English: Intermediate (B1 - B2) by Olly Richards

Cambridge English Readers (Levels 4 and 5)

Penguin Graded ELT Readers (Levels 4 and 5)

Macmillan Readers (intermediate and Upper Intermediate)

Oxford English Readers (Levels B1 and B2)

Podcasts

6 Minute English

All Ears English

English Outside the Box

The English We Speak

ESLPod

Check out our guides to the 14 best podcasts for English learners and the 5 best business English podcasts for more ideas.

Influencers

Jo (@jo_franco) Instagram photos and videos

Chris Delapp - Instant English (@instantenglishuk) Instagram photos and videos

Lindie Botes - Language Coach (@lindiebotes) Instagram photos and videos

EnglishWithZack (@zackhub101) TikTok

British English Pronunciation Teacher (@pronunciationwithemma) **Instagram photos and videos**

Movies/TV shows

Friends

My Next Guest Needs No Introduction With David Letterman

Stranger Things

Trevor Naoh: I Wish You Would

Brene Brown: The Call to Courage

Check out our guide to the 8 best Netflix shows for language learning for more ideas.

TED talks

Try something new for 30 days - Matt Cutts

5 ways to listen better **Julian Treasure**

Susan David: The gift and power of emotional courage | TED Talk

The Beauty of What We'll Never Know | Pico Iyer | <u>T</u>ED

How to learn any language easily | Matthew Youlden | **TEDxClapham**



Activities to practice your English pronunciation

As previously mentioned, you don't need perfect pronunciation to be a great English communicator. Your goal should be to speak clearly, not perfectly. As long as the listener can understand you, you're all good. So, show off your accent (and your amazing English).

Let's explore at how to practice clear pronunciation.





The elements of pronunciation

English pronunciation is tricky - especially when combined with its funky spellings. Words like daughter and laughter, break and weak, and rough and cough make no sense when you see and hear them for the first time.

You can't trust spelling to give you a clue on how to say many English words.

But, that's not all you need to worry about. These elements also affect understandability:

- Word stress Some words are spelled exactly the same but the meaning depends on which syllable has stress. For example, pre-SENT vs. PRE-sent.
- Sentence stress Usually content words (nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs) have stress and the grammar words don't. But this is English, so of course it isn't so simple. Take a look at how giving certain words stress changes the meaning of these sentences:

Sentence	Meaning
I don't think she would do that.	I don't think that but other people do.
I don't <i>think</i> she would do that.	I don't think she would do that, I know she would.
I don't think <i>she</i> would do that.	I don't think she would do it, but other people would.
I don't think she would do that .	I don't think she would do that, but she'd do something else.



- Connected speech: When you first learn English, it sounds like everything's jumbled together. Well, it kind of is.
 When a vowel sound follows a consonant sound, the words join together (in a = ina). When two similar consonants follow each other, they join together (big garden = bigarden). Some vowels join together too, but you have to add a consonant sound (do a = dowa).
- Intonation: The tone of voice rises and falls depending on what the speaker is saying. Some questions go up, for example, and some go down.



"For me personally, learning with a tutor is the most efficient way of mastering English. I appreciate the personal touch that this type of learning offers because it is highly customized to my individual needs and preferences. This not only enhances my understanding of the subject but also allows me to establish a genuine human connection with my tutor, making the learning experience more engaging and enjoyable."

Tamara, Preply student





Listen to improve pronunciation

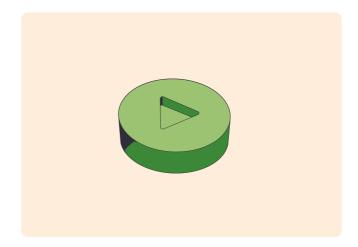
You might think the best way to practice pronunciation is to speak. But your first method should be to listen to a lot of content. That's because clear pronunciation starts with an awareness of sounds.

Do narrow listening

Narrow listening is a kind of extensive listening, which you already know is great for learning vocabulary. It's also great for learning pronunciation. As it's extensive, you need to do a lot of it. But narrow listening is, well, narrow. You only listen to specific topics or specific speakers.

Here's how it would look practically. Let's say you're interested in art, and your favorite painter is Rembrandt. The highlight of your trip to Amsterdam was visiting the Rijksmuseum. You want to learn more about him. This is the perfect topic for narrow listening. Find audio of native English speakers talking about Rembrandt, and listen to it a lot.

Like extensive reading and listening, a lot of the learning will happen indirectly. You can also listen more carefully, paying attention to the sounds you hear. Try to distinguish individual sounds. Record yourself speaking about the topics, compare your speech to the native speakers, and listen for differences.





Listen to music

Rhythm is a huge part of English pronunciation. Stress, weak forms, and connected speech combine together to make music, so it makes sense that a great way to learn a language is by listening to songs. You can use music as a way to learn grammar and words, but, where it really shines is pronunciation.



Choose your favorite artist, listen to their songs, and be aware of stress, rhythm, and connected speech. Here's a handy collection of English songs broken down into levels of difficulty.

Listen to audiobooks

Audiobooks are another great way to improve your pronunciation. We love stories – just look at how popular TV shows are nowadays. Great stories are engrossing. You can't stop until you know what happens at the end.

Because they're so fun, stories are great for learning. It's easy to stay motivated when you're invested in a story. Listening to audiobooks gives you the chance to hear great stories and native pronunciation. There are tons of places where you can find audiobooks, and many of them are free. Here are some of the best:

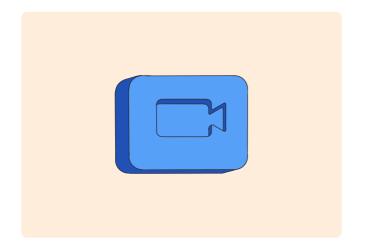
- Audible
- Audiobooks.com
- Kobo
- Libro.fm
- Scribd

Choose a story you're interested in. Listen. Enjoy. And be aware of the sounds you hear.

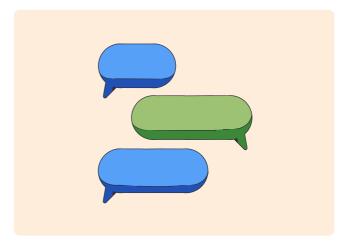


Pronunciation practice

Now that you're aware of and can recognize the sounds and elements of English pronunciation, it's time to get practicing. Forget doing tongue twisters or other speaking drills. Instead, do this:



Find someone to talk to. Record yourself talking to them, and listen. Did they understand what you were saying? Their reactions show you if your pronunciation is clear. If they don't understand, you went wrong somewhere, so listen carefully to what you said.



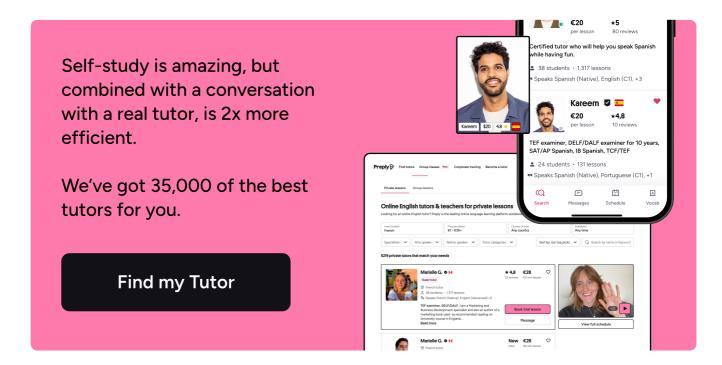
Find a fluent speaker saying the same thing, and listen for the differences. Remember, you don't need perfect pronunciation. You need to be understandable.



Become a fluent and confident **English speaker with Preply**

The keys to being a good English speaker are fluency, confidence, and accuracy. It's a tricky balance. By thinking too much about accuracy, you can damage your confidence and fluency. By not thinking about accuracy at all, your listeners won't understand you.

If you follow the tips in this guide, your goal of being a fluent English speaker will get closer. Embrace the challenge and you'll be speaking more fluently and confidently than you ever have before.





Useful extra resources and exercises

Speaking questions



Need a little inspiration finding speaking questions to practice with? Here are some ideas:

- Common job interview questions
- Interesting conversation questions

Detailed reading texts



When you read these texts, analyze the language. Think about the grammar and vocabulary you see. If there's anything you don't understand, figure out what it means. Take your time with this. There's no rush.



Text 1: Preparing for job interviews

Researching the company is the best way to learn about what the company does and who they are looking for, as well as its culture, values, and mission. It is also helpful to determine whether the company is a good fit for you and your goals.

Most employers realize that candidates apply for multiple job offers. However, they still want to find out why you chose to apply for a job with them instead of their competitors. And they want to know if you are passionate about the opportunity.

Visit the company's website to find out who the important people are in the organization. Look for information about the culture, mission and values. Learn about their clients, products, services and key competitors.

Keep in mind what you've learned, and you'll be better prepared to respond to questions by showing the connection between your values and the company's values. By doing this, you will present yourself as a strong candidate.

Questions:

Why is it important to research the company you are interviewing with?

A: It is a great way to avoid tricky questions during the interview.

B: It is not important.

C: It is a great way to learn about the company and see if it fits your goals.

What do employers want to know?

A: If you have applied for other jobs

B: If you have good research skills

C: If you are truly passionate about the position

How will researching the company help you during the interview?

A: It will help you answer questions about your salary expectations.

B: It will help you answer with their values, culture, and mission in mind.

C: It will help you answer questions about your previous job.



Text 2: Weaknesses, failures, and learning curves

When interviewers ask you about weaknesses, failures, and mistakes, they want to see how you handle setbacks and challenging situations. Show them you take responsibility for your mistakes and that you're capable of learning from those experiences.

Choose a real failure or mistake that was a one-time error (rather than a pattern or a huge disaster) and that you were able to fix. When talking about weaknesses, show self-awareness and talk about steps you take to improve.

Always focus your answer on a positive outcome. Give examples of what you did to fix your mistake and prevent repeating it, or the actions you take to overcome your weakness. Most importantly, highlight what you have learned and how you've improved.

Don't blame others for your mistakes. Don't respond by saying you've never made a mistake or that you don't have any weaknesses. No one is perfect. Admitting failures and shortcomings shows you're humble, self-aware, and willing to learn from them.

Questions:

What do interviewers want to know when they ask you about mistakes?

A: They want to make sure you never make mistakes.

B: They want to know how you respond to failure and your ability to learn from it.

C: They want to know how you respond to other people's mistakes.

What kind of mistake should you talk about?

A: A disaster that impacted the company for years

B: A mistake you were able to fix and did not repeat

C: A minor error without any consequences

What should you focus your answer on?

A: The negative consequences of the experiences

B: The reasons why you made the mistake

C: How you used the experience to improve yourself



Text 3: How to answer problem-solving questions

I used a 5-point structure to solve a problem. First and foremost, I listen to the customer and understand the problem. We need to collect the correct information to move forward.

Then, I ask myself if I can find a stop-gap solution while working on the main problem. Next, I'll try to solve the main problem with my team. A colleague might be able to give a different perspective.

Then, we do a root-cause analysis to find out where the problem comes from. Finally, we implement the solution for the customer.

However, we don't end there. We now have an opportunity to see if other customers have similar problems but haven't reported them. This allows us to strengthen the trust within our customer base.

Questions:

How does the candidate get the necessary information?

A: Read the 5-point structure

B: Write to their boss

C: Listen to the customer

What is another way to say 'stop-gap' solution?

A: Main

B: Temporary

C: Permanent

Who could give a different point of view?

A: The customer

B: Their boss

C: A teammate

Correct Answers

Text 1: C, C, B • Text 2: B, B, C • Text 3: C, B, C

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