

How to pronounce English place names

A guide by Jason Anderson



In most English place names, the word stress falls on the **first** syllable. The **last** syllable is weak, with an /ə/ or /ɪ/ sound, and some consonants are **silent**. The stressed syllable is underlined below:

1. Yorkshire, Worcestershire, etc.: 'ire' is pronounced /ə/
2. Birmingham, Buckingham, Tottenham, etc.: 'ham' is pronounced /əm/
3. Brighton, Taunton, etc.: 'ton' is pronounced /tən/
4. Borough, Peterborough, Middlesborough, etc.: 'rough' is pronounced /rə/
5. Plymouth, Bournemouth, etc.: 'mouth' is pronounced /məθ/ or /məf/
6. Oxford, Stratford, etc.: 'ford' is pronounced /fəd/
7. Leicester, Gloucester, etc.: 'ce' is silent, and 'ster' is pronounced /stə/
8. Chiswick, Warwick, etc.: 'wick' is pronounced /ɪk/
9. Norwich, Greenwich, etc.: 'wich' is pronounced /ɪtʃ/

Exceptions are rare and most also have rules:

10. Place names including 'St.' (short for 'Saint', and pronounced /seɪnt/) usually have the stress on the 1st syllable of the next word (e.g. St. Pancras, St. Paul's, St. Albans)
11. Place names with 3 or more hyphenated words, when pronounced in full, usually have the stress on the last word (e.g. Weston-Super-Mare, Southend-on-Sea, Stratford-upon-Avon).
12. Place names of 2 words that are not hyphenated usually have the stress on the 1st syllable of the second word (e.g. Milton Keynes, West Bromwich).
13. Place names of 4 or more syllables usually have the stress on the 2nd or 3rd syllable (e.g. Northumberland, Wolverhampton).

Practice Activity

Try pronouncing these words. Good luck!

1. Lancashire
2. Preston
3. Portsmouth
4. Watford
5. Worcester
6. Berwick
7. Northamptonshire
8. Exmouth
9. Cheltenham
10. Stoke-on-Trent
11. Farnborough
12. Bognor Regis



How to pronounce English place names: Teacher's Notes

While students won't get the pronunciation of every place name correct, their pronunciation will be much improved by following the rules provided. Word stress alone will improve intelligibility significantly. Note that there are few tricky vowels in the stressed syllables of some of the words above:

Worcestershire /wʊstəfə/

Taunton /tɔːntən/

Bournemouth /bɔːnmə/

Leicester /lestə/

Greenwich /ɡrenɪtʃ/

Answers to the practice activity:

1. Lancashire /lænkəʃə/
2. Preston /prestən/
3. Portsmouth /pɔːtsməθ/
4. Watford /wɒtfəd/
5. Worcester /wʊstə/
6. Berwick /berɪk/
7. Northamptonshire /nɔːθæmptənʃə/
8. Exmouth /eksməθ/
9. Cheltenham /tʃeltnəm/
10. Stoke-on-Trent /stəʊkəntrent/
11. Farnborough /fɑːnbərə/
12. Bognor Regis /bɒgnəriːdʒɪs/

Note:

There is a number of exceptions where the stress breaks the rules (e.g. Northhampton, Torquay) and in 'Ipswich' the 'w' is pronounced.