

Intonation

Intonation Patterns

There are three basic pitches in English – these are normal, high, and low. There is also a very high pitch, which is used to express strong emotions such as surprise, anger, or fear. (The very high pitch will not be covered in this text).

- The normal pitch is where the voice usually is.
- High is where the voice rises to indicate information focus.
- Low is where the voice falls, usually at the end of sentences.

In most conversations the voice is normal at the beginning of the sentences, rises at the information focus word (or syllable), then falls back to normal, and drops to low at the end of the sentence. Look at the intonation patterns below.

There are different intonation patterns used for different types of sentences. The intonation pattern for statement, commands, and WH questions is basically the same – the voice starts at a normal pitch, rises at the intonation focus word, falls back to normal after the intonation focus word, and falls to low at the end of the sentence. With yes/no questions and requests, the pitch starts at normal and rises at the end of the sentence.

What Does Intonation Mean?

If we're talking about the definition of intonation in English, what we're talking about really is pitch and the use of rhythm in speech. And the pitch and the rhythm start to add feeling and intention, because the meaning is really revealed in the language that we're using and the construction of our sentences. But the way we feel about what we're saying is indicated through the use of pitch and the use of rhythm. So I guess we're talking in a musical sense about how we're using our voice as a musical instrument. That's a good intonation definition.

Examples of Rising and Falling Intonation

A rising intonation pattern would simply be a rise in the human voice; it would be a change in pitch; a glide in the pitch of our voice upwards.

Examples of Rising Intonation: #1 Questions

We tend to use this rising intonation pattern when we're asking questions. So the pitch of our voice tends to go up. For instance:

- 'when does the meeting start?' – '...start?' rises up, it comes up in the voice
- 'would you like a cup of tea?' – '...tea?' rises up

The question is a sort of way of sending out an invitation for some kind of response from whoever you're speaking to.

We do sometimes use a falling intonation, which I'll talk more about in a moment, for some sorts of questions, but typically speaking we tend to use this rising intonation for questions.

Examples of Rising Intonation: #2 Lists

Another instance in which we would use this upward or rising inflection would be on lists. So if I'm saying:

- 'I'd like some eggs, some milk, some cheese and some bread.'

Each item is spoken with a rising intonation, and we would use a falling intonation on 'bread' to say that we've finished the list.

So on lists and most questions we would use this rising intonation pattern.

Examples of Falling Intonation: #1 Statements and Exclamations

A falling intonation or downward intonation pattern, would simply mean that the pitch of the voice drops down. So I would say, for instance, if I'm making a statement or exclamation:

- 'that's wonderful'

...that's one instance in which I would use a falling intonation.

Examples of Falling Intonation: #2 Commands

Commands is another situation, so I would say:

- 'put that down!'
- 'go over there'
- 'stand against the wall'
- 'put that over there'

...all of which would have falling intonation.

Statements, commands and exclamations, those are the three instances in which we use this falling intonation.

Examples of Falling Intonation: #3 Ends of Sentences

And we also tend to use this downward inflection (as I said with lists) at the end of our sentences, at the end of our content. So when we're indicating that we've finished what it is that we want to say, again we tend to use this falling intonation.

BONUS: Circumflex Inflection

Aside from rising and falling intonation, there is something called a Circumflex Inflection. And you don't need to remember that name, it's a posh name, Circumflex Inflection. It basically stands for a pitch that rises, falls and then rises at the very end.

When do we use it?

Rising and falling intonation is used quite a lot especially in British English, and it's typically used when we're in the middle of our content, we're in the middle of what we're saying and we're

indicating to the listener. And once we do finish we use a falling intonation. So in the end: it goes up, down, up or rise, fall, rise.

- “I try to do that now / while I’m talking / what it suggests to you / is that I haven’t quite finished yet / and you’ll know when I’m finished / because I’m going to use this downward inflection / and it falls.”




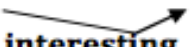

If you’re in the middle of your conversations, and you don’t want anyone else to butt in or interrupt you, using this circumflex inflection will be a way to say ‘hey there, I haven’t finished what it is that I’m talking about, don’t interrupt me yet, but now I’ve finished and you can reply’.

In Conclusion...

A **rising intonation pattern** would be used typically for **questions** or for **lists**.

A **falling intonation**, this downward intonation tends to be used for **exclamations**, **statements** and **commands** and **at the end of our sentences**.

But there is this extra **circumflex inflection**: rise, fall, rise. And we typically use it when we’re in the middle of our conversations and at then end of each phrase, at the end of each segment. We use this circumflex inflection to say that we haven’t finish yet but when we do finish we use a falling intonation and it falls.

Example	Communicative purpose and function
 It was interesting	You are giving information. You are certain and confident about the information. This is a statement.
 It was interesting (?)	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 interesting ...	You have more to say. Incomplete statement.
 It was interesting ...	You have some doubts or reservations or you want to qualify this with more information. You may also be referring to what has already been said or will be said.
 It was interesting!	You want to emphasise this. Depending on the context, you may feel enthusiastic, happy or surprised. Or you may want to contrast or contradict what someone else has said. Exclamation