

Intonation Patterns

1. End of a statement

In most statements, English speakers come down at the very end to let the listener know that they are finished. They also tend to put some stress on the last content word in the phrase before they come down, but we will look at that in some more detail later.

Example: I just got a new job. 

2. Question Intonation

When we use "wh" questions, we tend to go down in pitch, and when we ask yes/no questions, we tend to go up. These are just tendencies, so you will find many cases where this is not true. Remember that we can make yes/no questions by changing word order, or by changing intonation. Changing intonation is actually very common, and is the first kind of question that children learn. It can also express disbelief or surprise.

Example: Did you go to the store? = You went to the store? 

3. List intonation

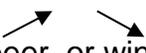
In much the same way as we conclude a neutral statement, we tell listeners that we are finished with a list by coming down sharply on the last item. We rise on all of the items preceding the final one.

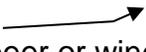
I'll bring pizza, beer, donuts, wine, and pretzels. 

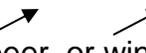
You can often tell which one is the last item if it is the only one preceded by "and", but this won't always work.

4. Choice questions

Notice that there is a difference between the following sentences:

Would you like beer, or wine? 

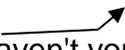
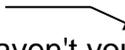
Would you like beer or wine? 

Would you like beer, or wine...? 

If you come up on the first item, and down on the last, you are offering a choice between the items. If you just go up after the last item, you are asking a yes/no question, so your listener doesn't have to decide between the two offerings. Finally, if you don't come down at all, your intonation will signal that it is an unfinished list, implying that there are even more options available.

5. Tag Questions

We often use tag questions (i.e. didn't you? wasn't it?) after a statement. There are two basic patterns.

You've done this before, haven't you?  You've done this before, haven't you? 

If we go up in pitch at the end, we are asking a real question, or we are unsure about the statement. We are often expecting an answer. If we step down in pitch at the end, then we are just confirming the statement. It is not a real question, and we are not expecting an answer. This is really just a way to involve the listener in the conversation. Generally, this type of intonation pattern is more common, but it is also difficult for many non-native speakers.

6. Emphasis

In theory we can put stress on any word in a sentence, and there are many reasons to shift stress depending on context. Here are a few examples:

To answer a question: Who went to the store? **I** went to the store.

To correct information: A. She got married in 1998. B. No, it was **1997**.

To agree with someone: A. He plays guitar really well. B. He **does** play guitar well!

7. Question Word Intonation

Look at the following dialogs.

A: He lives in Spain.


B: Where?

A: Spain

A: He lives in Spain.


B: Where?

A: Madrid

Rising intonation means "Where did you say he lives?" (I didn't hear you, or I can't believe it) and falling intonation means "Where in Spain does he live?"

8. Rhetorical Questions

When we are asking questions that we already know the answer to, we use another intonation pattern. These are often used as a technique during presentations.

Example: And how long have we been providing specialized delivery services to  businesses throughout the country? We've been on the job for over 30 years.

9. Parentheticals

We use a special pattern when we are adding extra information in the middle of a sentence. We often call these parentheticals because the sentence will still make sense if you take out the added information.

Example: My father, who just retired last year, loves to play golf whenever he can.
Note that “My father loves to play golf whenever he can” is also a complete sentence.

10. Dependent Clauses

When a dependent clause comes at the beginning of a sentence we usually go up before the comma. If the clause comes at the end, we usually come down.

Example: If I have time, I'll call her.

I'll call her if I have time.