

# Inflection

The continuous rising and falling of pitch, or notes, when speaking is referred to as **intonation**. The change of pitch *within* a vowel or diphthong sound itself is called **inflection**.

Most of us inflect constantly in our daily lives in order to make ourselves clearly understood, to transmit our point of view, and to get what we want. Inflection is one of the keys to expressiveness. Some actors have difficulty applying this natural response to text. The following may be useful.

(a) A change in pitch, sliding from a lower to a higher note within a vowel sound, constitutes a **rising inflection**. Most often, this change of pitch reflects questioning:

↗  
yeeEEES?

or imply hesitation, insincerity, surprise, uncertainty, suspense, etc.

(b) If the pitch within the vowel or diphthong slides from a higher to lower note, it is referred to as a **falling inflection**:

↘  
NOOooo!

and can reflect finality, condemnation, belligerence, bossiness, avoidance, etc.

(c) If the pitch is sustained or elongated without inflecting either up or down, this is referred to as a **level inflection**:

→  
Weeell!

and can express indecision, disinterest, wariness, etc.

(d) Finally, any combination of rising and falling notes within the vowel or diphthong sound is referred to as a **double** or **circumflex inflection**, which can include rising, then falling, as in:

↗ ↘  
heeEEEey

or falling, then rising, as in:

↘ ↗  
HEEeeeEY

This can offer a wonderful expression of flirtation, sarcasm, evasion, reluctance, even *double-entendre* (two ways of interpreting what is being said, one of which is usually 'naughty' – and very popular in Shakespeare).

MARIA. *My lady will hang thee for thy absence.*

↗ ↘

CLOWN. *Let her hang me! He that is well hang'd in this world  
needs to fear no colors.*

(Twelfth Night: I, v, 3)

### AUDIO 6 ► inflection on operative or key words

↘ ↗

What! my dear Lady Disdain, are you yet living?  
(Much Ado About Nothing: I, i, 123)

↘

My pride fell with my fortunes.  
(As You Like It: I, ii, 260)

↘ ↗      ↘ ↗      → ↘      ↘

Eleven widows and nine maids is simple coming-in for one man.  
(The Merchant of Venice: II, ii, 162)

Notice how your inflection shifts as you speak the words on the following page from various points of view. For example, speak the word:

'why'

really *questioning* to get an answer. . . why? Then speak the same word again, this time *challenging* the person to give you a good reason, once again *flirting* for attention, and yet again, *ignoring* the listener and their response. Your inflections were probably very different in each case.

Speak the following words allowing inflection to aid in communicating your point of view. Choose a meaning for yourself or, if you wish, follow the point of view suggested by the sentence in parenthesis—without actually reading the sentence out loud.

**PHRASES inflecting within the vowel or diphthong of key words**

1. so (What do you think? *or* What of it!)
2. see (I knew I was right. *or* Doesn't this look great?)
3. fame (I'm not interested in fame! *or* I long for fame.)
4. fine (Can't you see it's not fine? *or* I feel great! )
5. oh (Maybe I know, maybe I don't. *or* You scared me!)
6. mine (Are you crazy; that's not mine. *or* Eat your heart out.)
7. stay (I wish you would leave. *or* Never leave.)
8. how (Nothing is possible. *or* I don't understand.)
9. those (Do you think I would want those? *or* I choose those.)
10. true (Great guess, you sexy thing. *or* That can't be true.)

An upward inflection is *not* required at the end of a sentence when the question asked is rhetorical and the answer implied, as in: "Well, isn't it a nice day?"

**SOUND CHECK: inflecting on lists.** Speaking lists with an upward, level, or even double inflection can be a useful way of subtly communicating that there is a list in progress. Downward inflection usually communicates finality and is especially useful on the last item, but can be misleading if used after every item.

Read the following lists using a downward inflection before each comma. Notice how the train of thought is interrupted and the meaning obscured. Then read again, using an upward, level, or double inflection before each comma and a downward inflection to finish the sentence.

**SENTENCES inflecting on lists**

1. No dogs, cats, birds, or reptiles allowed inside.
2. We need lettuce, tomatoes, and pears for the salad.
3. Bob, Lisa, Cathy, Janice, and Dave haven't paid yet.
4. David, Daniel, Dylan, Don, or Douglas: who are you?
5. She had her hair washed, dried, and set for forty dollars?

6. We saw London, Paris, Rome, and Venice; then flew home.
7. Was our appointment for Monday, Tuesday, or Wednesday?
8. Knives, forks, spoons, salt, pepper, and napkins are included.
9. Loud yelling, screaming, swearing, and cursing are forbidden.
10. The machine accepts nickels, dimes, quarters, or silver dollars.

**NEUTRAL AMERICAN TEXT inflection.** *Speak the following, allowing inflection to aid in communicating your point of view. Remember to lift the inflection on lists.*

Who's there?

(King John: V, vi, 1)

Oh, not at all.

(Ibsen: Ghosts)

How now, my lords? What, all unready so?

(1 Henry VI: II, i, 38)

Do you not remember, lady, in your father's time, a Venetian, a scholar and a soldier, that came hither?

(The Merchant of Venice: I, ii, 112)

The day is hot, and the weather, and the wars, and the King, and the Dukes; it is no time to discourse.

(Henry V: III, iii, 106)

Oh, that's a brave man! he writes brave verses, speaks brave words, swears brave oaths, and breaks them bravely.

(As You Like It: III, v, 40)

You're bolder, more honest, deeper than we are, but think, be just a little magnanimous, have pity on me.

(Chekhov: The Cherry Orchard)

They say there is divinity in odd numbers, either in nativity, chance, or death.

(The Merry Wives of Windsor: V, i, 3)

You have beauty, grace, nobility, charm—when it pleases you—and the flame you rouse in a man won't ever be put out.

(Strindberg: Miss Julie)

From **SHADOW—A PARABLE**

*Edgar Allan Poe*

The year had been a year of terror, and of feelings more intense than terror for which there is no name upon the earth. For many prodigies and signs had taken place, and far and wide, over the sea and land, the black wings of the Pestilence were spread abroad. To those, nevertheless, cunning in the stars, it was not unknown that the heavens wore an aspect of ill; and to me, the Greek Oinos, among others, it was evident that now had arrived the alternation of that seven hundred and ninety-fourth year when, at the entrance of Aires, the planet Jupiter is conjoined with the red ring of the terrible Saturnus. The peculiar spirit of the skies, if I mistake not greatly, made itself manifest, not only in the physical orb of the earth, but in the souls, imaginations, and meditations of mankind.

From **ALICE IN WONDERLAND**

*Lewis Carroll*

Tied around the neck of the bottle was a paper label, with the words "DRINK ME" beautifully printed on it in large letters.

It was all very well to say "Drink me," but the wise little Alice was not going to do *that* in a hurry. "No, I'll look first," she said, "and see whether it's marked '*poison*' or not"; for she had read several nice little stories about children who had got burnt, and eaten up by wild beasts, and other unpleasant things, all because they *would* not remember the simple rules their friends had taught them: such as, that a red-hot poker will burn you if you hold it too long; and that, if you cut your finger *very* deeply with a knife, it usually bleeds; and she had never forgotten that, if you drink much from a bottle marked "poison," it is almost certain to disagree with you, sooner or later.

However, this bottle was *not* marked "poison," so Alice ventured to taste it, and finding it very nice (it had, in fact, a sort of mixed flavour of cherry-tart, custard, pine-apple, roast turkey, toffy, and hot buttered toast), she very soon finished it off.