What are **Thought Groups?** [Audio 1]

- In English, speakers and writers divide sentences into smaller sections or "chunks" called "thought groups".
- A thought group is a group of words which go together to express an idea or thought.
- **Each thought group has at least one emphasized word.**
- The forward slashes (/) in this sentence show the thought groups with emphasized words in bold:

  Last *weekend*,/Ronnie and Sally went *hiking*/for three *hours*/up Mount *Seymour*/in North *Vancouver*.

**Why** do we use Thought Groups? [Audio 2]

Thought Groups allow speakers to:

- make meaning **clear:**
  Example: I *failed* my exam/ because I was *too tired* to study.
- **emphasize** important information:
  Example: "*To be* or *not* to be./ *That* is the question."
  (Shakespeare)
- signal **changes** of ideas or mood
- **breathe** in the middle of long sentences!

Thought Groups allow listeners to:

- **process** the speaker's information
- **organize** the speaker's meaning
Click [here](#) to read and listen to an interesting interview about thought groups with an English teacher! Go to the bottom of the page for the listening icon.

**How do writers use Thought Groups?**

Writers use **punctuation** to divide sentences into thought groups:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Punctuation</th>
<th>Punctuation Mark</th>
<th>Thought Group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>period</td>
<td>.</td>
<td>longest pause</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>colon</td>
<td>;</td>
<td>long pause</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>semi-colon</td>
<td>;</td>
<td>medium pause</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>comma</td>
<td>,</td>
<td>shortest pause</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**How do speakers use Thought Groups?**

 Speakers use **grammar** to divide sentences into thought groups. [Audio 3](#)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grammar unit</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Short sentences</td>
<td>This chicken tastes fantastic! I'm so hungry.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Noun phrases                  | *Ahmed and Warut:* Ahmed and Warut/ went to the hockey game./
|                               | *The older man in my class:* The older man in my class/ has very sophisticated ideas./
| Verb phrases                  | *have been studying:* Morad and Mingrui/ have been studying at the ELI/ for two sessions./
|                               | *should have called:* Szu-Chen,/ you should have called me this morning./
| Prepositional phrases         | *for a couple of years:* Martina has been playing piano/ for a couple of years./
|                               | *down the street:* Myung Hee lives in a white house/ down the street./
| Verb + pronoun                | *bring it:* Can you bring it/ to the picnic?/
|                               | *turn it on:* Danwei turned it on/ this morning./
| Subordinate Clauses           | *when:* When the earthquake hit Haiti,/ hundreds of thousands of people were killed./
| Parenthetical phrases:        | parentheses (     ) or dashes - - -
|                               | *(the teacher in room 213)/ is teaching a lesson on the environment/ to her 500SL class./
|                               | - - : Let's meet at the bus stop -/ the one at 16th and Heather-/ at 9 am./
Warning: English speakers divide sentences into thought groups according to the meaning they want to communicate. Two different speakers may divide the same sentence differently.

How do speakers pronounce thought groups?

- Speakers **PAUSE** at the end of thought groups. Shorter thought groups & less important information have shorter pauses; longer thought groups and more important information have longer pauses. Speakers do NOT pause in the **middle** of a thought group unless they want to emphasize something special.

- The **words** within a thought group are **pronounced together smoothly**.

- The speaker’s **pitch** rises slightly, then **falls** at the end of a thought group.

- **Content** words* usually mark the end of a thought group.

See the Stress: Introduction to Sentence Stress Module for an explanation about content and function words.

Audio 4

Practice! Listen to the thought groups in this short story. Pay attention to the pauses and changes in pitch.

Kaisheng,/ who is from China,/ came to Vancouver/ six months ago/ to study English./ He has progressed from level 300/ to level 500/ in all his skills:/ reading,/ writing/ and speaking./ After he finishes level 600,/ he hopes to enter UBC/ to study in the MBA program/ and graduate in two years./ When he returns to China,/ he wants to set up his own/ import-export business./
Thought Groups can **change meaning**!  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Where we pause can change the meaning of a sentence, even when the words are the same! Examples:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| ✓ 1a) four-hour-long/ exams/  
  = The exams took four hours. |
| 1b) four/ hour-long exams/  
  = The four exams took one-hour each. |
| ✓ 2a) It was really hot outside./ The temperature was 40 degrees./  
  = It was very hot outside (40 degrees). |
| 2b) It was really hot./ Outside,/ the temperature was 40 degrees./  
  = It was very hot (inside and outside). The temperature outside was 40 degrees.. |
| ✓ 3a) The teacher said,/ "That student is hard-working."/  
  = The student is hard-working. |
| 3b) "The teacher"/ said that student,/ "is hard-working."/  
  = The teacher is hard-working. |

Now try the exercises.