**Prosody**

By [Richard Nordquist](http://grammar.about.com/bio/Richard-Nordquist-22176.htm)

**Definition:**

(1) In [phonetics](http://grammar.about.com/od/pq/g/phoneticsterms.htm) (which is the way words sound-out, like “cat” is “ka-at”), the use of pitch, loudness, tempo, and [rhythm](http://grammar.about.com/od/rs/g/rhythmterm.htm) in [speech](http://grammar.about.com/od/rs/g/speechterm.htm) to convey information about the structure and meaning of an [utterance](http://grammar.about.com/od/tz/g/utteranceterm.htm). Adjective: *prosodic*.

**Etymology:**

From the Greek, "song sung to instrumental music"

**Examples and Observations (Definition #1):**

* "There are no [capital letters](http://grammar.about.com/od/c/g/capletters.htm) or [full stops](http://grammar.about.com/od/pq/g/periodterm.htm) in speech: the job of breaking down the continuous flow into meaningful and manageable chunks is mainly done by using the resources of **prosody** (pitch, stress, loudness, tempo). To many inexperienced writers it is far from self-evident how to translate the primarily prosodic structure of speech into the [syntactic](http://grammar.about.com/od/rs/g/syntax.htm) structure of [writing](http://grammar.about.com/od/tz/g/writingterm.htm). . . .  
    
  "Speech is organized into prosodic units, marked off by [pauses](http://grammar.about.com/od/pq/g/Pause.htm) and intonation contours: they may or may not have the syntactic structure of complete [sentences](http://grammar.about.com/od/rs/g/senterm.htm). Writing, however, relies on the sentence as its basic unit."  
  (Deborah Cameron, *The Teacher's Guide to Grammar*. Oxford Univ. Press, 2007)

"The term **prosody** refers to the [stress](http://grammar.about.com/od/rs/g/Stress.htm) patterns of a [language](http://grammar.about.com/od/il/g/languageterm.htm). In [English](http://grammar.about.com/od/e/g/englishlanguageterm.htm), stress is distinctive at the level of the individual [word](http://grammar.about.com/od/tz/g/wordterm.htm) and at the level of [phrases](http://grammar.about.com/od/pq/g/phrase.htm), [clauses](http://grammar.about.com/od/c/g/clauseterm.htm), and entire [sentences](http://grammar.about.com/od/rs/g/senterm.htm)."  
(C. M. Millward and Mary Hayes, *A Biography of the English Language*, 3rd ed. Wadsworth, 2011)

* **Prosodic Signals of Two Grammatical Differences**  
  "If someone is reciting a [list](http://grammar.about.com/od/il/g/listdefinitionexamplesterm.htm) of items, we know whether the list is complete or not by the pitch of the voice. If the pitch is rising . . ., there are more items to come. If it is falling . . ., there is nothing further to come. The difference is suggested in writing by the use of a [series of dots](http://grammar.about.com/od/e/g/ellipsispunctuation.htm) instead of a [full stop](http://grammar.about.com/od/pq/g/periodterm.htm)"

I bought beer, whiskey, gin . . . I bought beer, whiskey, gin **(when you read this aloud, prosody would mean you know to let your voice trail off with the “…”).**

* **Functions of Prosody**  
  "The functions of **prosody** are manifold. . . . Prosody is for instance involved in matters such as sentence and word segmentation, syntactic phrasing, stress, accentuation, phonological distinctions in tone languages. Prosody also features pragmatic and expressive functions. A given sentence in a given context generally expresses much more than its linguistic content (the same sentence, with the same linguistic content may have plenty of different expressive contents or pragmatic meanings). Examples of expressive content are: the identity of the speaker, her/his attitude, mood, ages, sex, sociolinguistic group, and other extralinguistic features. Examples of pragmatic meaning encompass the speaker/listener attitudes (aggressive, submissive, neutral, etc.), the relationships of the speaker and her/his discourse (belief, confidence, assertiveness, etc.), and various other aspects of the specific [speech act](http://grammar.about.com/od/rs/g/speechactterm.htm) performed."

Response: ***Use the space below (or use the back) and tell me what you understand about “prosody.” Also, tell me why this would be so important when reading Shakespeare aloud?***