

SILENT LETTERS

Silent letters

In many English words, you will come across some letters that are spelled yet not pronounced. These unpronounced but visible letters are known as **SILENT LETTERS**. They occur a lot in the English language and usually make life difficult for the new learner.

“According to Kent Jones, Education Committee, Esperanto Society of Chicago, ‘More than 60% of (English) words have silent letters.’”

Reasons for 'silent' letters

- Distinguishing whole from hole, plum from plumb, hour from our, etc. In other words, distinguish between words that sound similar
- Showing long vowels rid / ride, 'hard' consonants guest/gest . i.e. they sometimes help to show long vowels or hard consonants
- Connecting different forms of the same word resign/resignation. i.e. They connect root words with affixes.
- They give insight into the meaning of a word.
- They give clues as to where the stress should be in a word.

How do silent letters arise?

- Historical Change: the sound has dropped out of the word over time but the spelling has not changed: light, hope, and knot. In other words, pronunciation changes occurring without a spelling change. The <gh> spelling was in Old English pronounced /x/ in such words as light.
- Addition of Letters: the letter was added to make the spelling more 'French' or 'Latin': debt, victual, and island. Letters are occasionally, inserted in a spelling to reflect Latin cognates. The in debt and doubt was inserted to reflect Latin cognates like debit and dubitable.
- Difficult Sound Combinations: The sound combination difficult to say: handkerchief, sandwich

- Borrowings: the word was originally borrowed from another language, complete with spelling: champagne, khaki, myrrh
- Sound distinctions from foreign languages may be lost, as with the distinction between smooth and roughly aspirated in Ancient Greek, represented by <r> and <rh> in Latin, but merged to the same [r] in English. Similarly with <f> / <ph>, the latter from Greek phi.
- Clusters of consonants may be simplified, producing silent letters e.g. silent <th> in asthma, silent <t> in Christmas. Similarly with alien clusters such as Greek initial <ps> in psychology and <mn> in mnemonic.

Examples of silent letters

A	artistically, dramatically, stoically, musically, romantically, logically
B	climb, numb, plumb, comb, thumb, tomb, Woolacombe, crumb, debt, doubt, subtle
C	acquit, victual, Jacques, acquire, czar, indict, Connecticut, muscle, scissors, Tucson
D	grandson, handkerchief, sandwich, handsome, landscape, Windsor, Wednesday
E	rite, fame, serve, enclose, bridge, more, careful, clue, lonely, vogue, hope, corpse, fate
F	halfpenny
G	though, light, align, gnash, reign, champagne, diaphragm, high, gnaw, ghost, intaglio
H	hour, hurrah, Pooh, khaki, Gandhi, heir, Birmingham, exhaust, Thames, exhibition
I	business
J	(none)
K	know, knead, knot, knife, knickers, knell, knight, Knox, Knowles, blackguard, knock
L	salmon, psalm, almond, calf, half, folk, yolk, Colne, Norfolk, chalk, calm, talk
M	mnemonic
N	autumn, solemn, condemn, damn, hymn, monsieur, column
O	People, colonel

P	corps, pneumonia, pseudo, ptomaine, psychology, ptomaine, coup, receipt, Thompson
Q	(none)
R	myrrh, diarrhoea (in British English all r's are 'silent' before consonants as in card or before silence as in car)
S	island, isle, viscount, apropos, aisle, debris, bourgeois, Illinois, Basle, bourgeois, fracas
T	ballet, ricochet, Christmas, gourmet, tsunami, thistle, rapport, asthma, listen, castle, soften
U	guest, questionnaire, guitar, catalogue, guilt, tongue, colleague, guide, dialogue
V	(none)
W	sword, greensward, answer, Greenwich, Norwich, write, two, wrist, writ, whore, whole
X	faux pas, Sioux
Y	(none)
Z	rendezvous, laissez-faire, chez

The rules of silent letters

* **Silent B**

Rule 1: B is not pronounced after M at the end of a word.

Examples: *limb, lamb, crumb, dumb, comb, bomb, plumber, thumb, climb, tomb, numb*

Rule 2: B is usually not pronounced before T at the end of a root word.**

Examples: *debt, doubt, debtor, doubtful, subtle, subtleness*

A root word is the original word in its root form without any prefixes or suffixes attached e.g. **doubt is the root word in **doubtful**, and the 'ful' is a suffix. **Subtle** is the root word, and 'ness' is a suffix.

but not in some words, e.g. obtain, unobtrusive

* Silent C

Rule 1: C is not pronounced in the combination SC.

Examples: *Muscle, scissors, ascent, miscellaneous, fascinate, scenario*

Exceptions: *Sclera, asclepiad, sclerosis, muscovado, sceptic*

Rule 2: C is usually redundant before the letters K or Q.

Examples: *Acquaintance, acknowledge, acquiesce, acquit*

Rule 3: the "c" is silent when preceded by an "s" followed by an 'e' or an 'i' at the beginning of a word: scenic, scenario, science.

* Silent D

Rule 1: D is not pronounced in the following common words:

Examples: *Handkerchief, Wednesday, sandwich, handsome*

Rule 2: D is also not pronounced in the combination DG.

Examples: *Pledge, dodge, grudge, hedge, badge, edge, hedge, wedge*

* Silent E

Rule: E is not pronounced at the end of words, but instead elongates the sound of the vowel before it.

Examples: *Hope, drive, gave, write, site, grave, bite, hide*

Exceptions: *Giraffe, brunette, cassette, gazelle* (You may be able to spot a pattern in these words; they have similar combinations in the last syllable. This shows that the exceptions are generally words with unusual stress on the final syllable – but not always! One example would be the word ‘minute’ as in the time-measuring unit.)

* Silent G

Rule: G is not often not pronounced when it comes before N.

Examples: *Champagne, foreign, sign, feign, foreign, design, align, cognac*

Exceptions: *Magnet, igneous, cognitive, signature*

* Silent GH

Rule 1: GH is not pronounced when it comes after a vowel.

Examples: *Thought, drought, through, thorough, borough, daughter, light, might, sigh, right, fight, weigh, weight*

Exceptions: *Doghouse, foghorn, bighead* (As you can see, the exceptions are generally compound words i.e. words that have been formed by combining two complete words)

Rule 2: GH is sometimes pronounced like F.

Examples: *rough, tough, laugh, enough, cough, clough, draught*

Exceptions: *Examples from rule 1!*

Rule 3: the "gh" is silent when followed by a "t": night, bought.

* Silent H

Rule 1: H is not pronounced when it comes after W (n.b. some speakers whisper the H before the W).

Examples: *what, when, where, whether, why*

Rule 2: H is not pronounced at the beginning of many words (remember to use the article "an" with unvoiced H).

Examples: *hour, honest, honour, heir*

Exceptions: *hill, history, height, happy, hereditary* (Plus most other words beginning with H that are NOT of French origin – and remember to use the article "a" with voiced H)

Rule 3: H is often not pronounced when it comes after C, G or R.

Examples: *choir, chorus, ghastly, ghoul, aghast, echo, rhinoceros, rhythm*

Rule 4: the 'h' is silent at the end of word when it follows a vowel. For example: *cheetah, Sarah, messiah, savannah*

Rule 5: The 'h' is silent between two vowels. For example: *annihilate, vehement, vehicle*

Rule 6: The 'h' is silent after the letter 'r'. For example: *rhyme, rhubarb, rhythm*

Rule 7: The 'h' is silent after the letters 'ex' For example: **exhausting, exhibition, exhort** but not in some words, e.g. exhale, exhume

Rule 8: The "h" is silent when preceded by a "p": shepherd

Rule 9: The "h" is silent when preceded by a "g": ghost

* **Silent K**

Rule: K is not pronounced when it comes before N at the beginning of a word.

Examples: **knife, knee, know, knock, knowledge, knead, knack, knight, knot, knew, knitting, knickers, knob, knuckle**

* **Silent L**

Rule: L is not pronounced after the vowels A, O and U.

Examples: **calm, half, talk, walk, would, should, could, calf, salmon, yolk, chalk, folk, balm**

Exceptions: **Halo, bulk, sulk, hold, sold, fold, mould**

* **Silent N**

Rule: N is not pronounced when it comes after M at the end of a word.

Examples: **Autumn, hymn, column, solemn, condemn, damn, column**

* **Silent P**

Rule: P is not pronounced at the beginning of many words using the combinations PS, PT and PN.

Examples: **Psychiatrist, pneumonia, pneumatic, psychotherapy, psychotic, psychologist, pseudonym, Pterodactyl, psalm, psychiatry, psyche, psychology**

* **Silent PH**

Rule: PH is sometimes pronounced like F.

Examples: *telephone, paragraph, alphabet, epiphany, sophomore*

* **Silent S**

Rule: S is not pronounced before L in the following words:

Examples: *Island, isle, aisle, islet*

* **Silent T**

Rule: T is not pronounced in these common words:

Examples: *Castle, Christmas, fasten, listen, often, whistle, thistle, bustle, hasten, soften, rapport, gourmet, ballet*

* **Silent U**

Rule: U is not pronounced when it comes after G and before a vowel.

Examples: *guess, guidance, guitar, guest, guild, guard*

* **Silent W**

Rule 1: W is not pronounced at the beginning of a word when it is before the letter R.

Examples: *wrap, write, wrong, wring, wreck, wrestle, wrap, wrist*

Rule 2: W is not pronounced in the following words:

Examples: *Who, whose, whom, whole, whoever, answer, sword, two*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z-vff0nJJGU>

https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLLMk_1x96FKAGltN9Q9DgQoKuOm5wzYMf