

## 1. 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.’”

## 2. 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.

## 3. 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 <b> 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 rho (?) and roughly aspirated rho (?) 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.

## 4. 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

|          |   |
|----------|---|
| <b>D</b> | grandson, handkerchief, sandwich, handsome, landscape, Windsor, Wednesday   |
| <b>E</b> | rite, fame, serve, enclose, bridge, more, careful, clue, lonely, vogue, hope, corpse, fate                          |
| <b>F</b> | halfpenny   |
| <b>G</b> | though, light, align, gnash, reign, champagne, diaphragm, high, gnaw, ghost, intaglio                               |
| <b>H</b> | hour, hurrah, Pooh, khaki, Gandhi, heir, Birmingham, exhaust, Thames, exhibition                                    |
| <b>I</b> | business  |
| <b>J</b> | (none)  |
| <b>K</b> | know, knead, knot, knife, knickers, knell, knight, Knox, Knowles, blackguard, knock                                 |
| <b>L</b> | salmon, psalm, almond, calf, half, folk, yolk, Colne, Norfolk, chalk, calm, talk                                    |
| <b>M</b> | mnemonic  |
| <b>N</b> | autumn, solemn, condemn, damn, hymn, monsieur, column   |
| <b>O</b> | people ?colonel?  |
| <b>P</b> | corps, pneumonia, pseudo, ptomaine, psychology, ptomaine, coup, receipt, Thompson                                   |
| <b>Q</b> | (none)  |
| <b>R</b> | myrrh, diarrhoea (in British English all r's are 'silent' before consonants as in card or before silence as in car) |
| <b>S</b> | island, isle, viscount, apropos, aisle, debris, bourgeois, Illinois, Basle, bourgeois, fracas                       |
| <b>T</b> | ballet, ricochet, Christmas, gourmet, tsunami, thistle, rapport, asthma, listen, castle, soften                     |
| <b>U</b> | guest, questionnaire, guitar, catalogue, guilt, tongue, colleague, guide, dialogue                                  |
| <b>V</b> | (none)  |
| <b>W</b> | sword, greensward, answer, Greenwich, Norwich, write, two, wrist, writ, whore, whole                                |
| <b>X</b> | faux pas, Sioux   |
| <b>Y</b> | (none)  |
| <b>Z</b> | rendezvous, laissez-faire, chez   |

#### 4. The rules of silent letters:

**Silent 'b':** The 'b' is **silent** in the combination '**mb**' at **the end of a word**. For example:

|        |         |           |         |
|--------|---------|-----------|---------|
| bom(b) | clim(b) | com(b)    | crum(b) |
| lam(b) | lim(b)  | plum(b)er | num(b)  |

- The '**b**' is **silent** in the **combination 'bt'**. For example:

|        |         |          |
|--------|---------|----------|
| de(b)t | dou(b)t | su(b)tle |
|--------|---------|----------|

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

**Silent C:** 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':** the 'd' is **silent** in the combination 'dg'. For example:

ba(d)ge          e(d)ge          han(d)kerchief          he(d)ge  
han(d)some      ple(d)ge      we(d)ge              We(d)nesday

**Silent 'k':** the 'k' is **silent** in the combination 'kn'. For example:

(k)nack          (k)nee          (k)new              (k)nickers  
(k)nife          (k)night        (k)nitting        (k)nob  
(k)nock          (k)not          (k)now              (k)nuckle

**Silent 'n':** The 'n' is **silent** in the combination 'mn' at **the end of a word**. For example:

Autum(n)                      dam(n)                      hym(n)                      colum(n)  
condem(n)                      solem(n)

**Silent 'p':** the 'p' is **silent** in the combination 'ps' at **the beginning of a word**. For example:

(p)salm          (p)sychiatry              (p)syche              (p)sychology

**Silent GH:** the "gh" is silent when followed by a "t": **night, bought**.

**Silent 'h':** the 'h' is **silent** at **the end of word** when it **follows a vowel**. For example:

cheeta(h)                      Sara(h)                      messia(h)                      savana(h)

The 'h' is **silent between two vowels**. For example:

anni(h)ilate                      ve(h)ement                      ve(h)icle

- The 'h' is **silent** after the letter 'r'. For example:

r(h)yme                      r(h)ubarb                      r(h)ythm

- The 'h' is **silent** after the letters 'ex' For example:

ex(h)austing                      ex(h)ibition                      ex(h)ort

- but not in some words, e.g. exhale, exhume

The "h" is silent when preceded by a "p": **shepherd**.

The "h" is silent when preceded by a "g": **ghost**.

**Silent U:** the "u" is silent when preceded by the letter "g" and followed by a vowel: **guess, guitar**

**Silent W:** the "W" is silent followed by the letter "r" at the beginning of a word: **write, wrong**.