

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 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

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

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

anni(h)ilate	ve(h)ement	ve(h)icle
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- The 'h' is **silent** after the letter 'r'. For example:

r(h)yyme	r(h)ubarb	r(h)ythm
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- 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**.