

Pronunciation Spelling and Sounds

Silent Letters

- Silent letters** are letters in words which are not pronounced, e.g. **b** in *lamb* and **n** in *autumn*. English is not a **phonetic language** – we do not speak as we write English. There are **48 different sounds** in English but only **26 letters** in the **alphabet**, which means that there isn't one letter to represent each sound. This means that we often need to use **digraphs** – two letters together which represent either individual **vowel** or **consonant** sounds, e.g.

<u>Con.Digraph:</u>	<u>Sound(s): Examples:</u>	<u>Vowel Digraph:</u>	<u>Sound(s): Examples:</u>
ch	k / ch chord / cheese	ai	ei gain, pain, rain, vain
kn	n knee, knight, know	eigh	ai / ei height / eight
ps	s psalm, psychiatrist	oa	eu boat, coat, float, goat
qu	kw quick, quite, quiz	ough	eu / o / or dough / cough / bought
rh	r rhubarb, rhyme, rhythm	ui	i build, guild, guilt, circuit
sc	s muscle, scissors	ue	e guess, guest, parquet
wh	w / h whale, what / whole	ar / er / or	uh popular / teacher / doctor

We *could* call **a** in *coat* or **h** in *what* silent letters, because they are not pronounced. However, they are part of recognised spelling patterns (digraphs), which we can learn, so they are not **true silent letters**. Similarly, words with **double letters** – such as *butter*, *illness*, *gorilla*, and *apple* – could be said to contain silent letters. One letter in each is certainly **redundant** – e.g. the second **t** in *butter* – but double consonant letters help us to know how to pronounce words. Double letters usually make the first vowel letter short. For example, compare the pronunciation of *biter* (long ai sound) and *bitter* (short i sound).

- There are also words which have vowel letters that are not pronounced, because they are changed to **schwa sounds** (weak vowel sounds). For example, the first **a** in *amazing* is not pronounced as short a but rather as a schwa sound: uh: uh Mei zing. This is due to **English word stress**. In *cinema* we pronounce the first vowel letter **i** as strong short i, while the other two vowel letters become schwa sounds: *cinema* = Si n m. Does this make the **e** and **a** in *cinema* silent letters? They are still pronounced – just not as you might expect. So, maybe not.
- True silent letters are letters which appear in words but do not have any connection with them. Below are some good examples. It is worth learning the spellings of these words and practising saying them out loud as you write them (**sounding them out**):

<u>Silent Letter:</u>	<u>Example(s):</u>
b	bomb, climb, comb, dumb, lamb, numb, plumb, thumb; plumber; debt, doubt, subtle
d	grandson, handkerchief (nd changes to ng sound = assimilation), handsome; Wednesday
h	honest, honour, hour
l	chalk, talk, walk; calf, half; folk, yolk; almond, calm; salmon; could, should, would
n	autumn, column, solemn; hymn; government
p	cupboard, raspberry, receipt
s	aisle, Isla, island, isle; chamois, debris
t	listen, often, soften; ballet, duvet, haricot; Christmas, mortgage; tsunami

There is a special case with silent **e** at the end of a word, e.g. *time*, *pale*, *role*, etc. This is called **the magic e rule**, where the existence of **vowel + consonant + e** (or another vowel letter) causes the first vowel to be long. So while this **e** is a silent letter, it has a useful function. This applies to lots of words.

- Silent letters are caused by two main factors. English is an old language dating back to C5th AD and it is rich in vocabulary with over 1m words. As new words have been added over time, the spellings have become fixed by writing and printing them, while pronunciation evolved in a different direction, causing **separation** of written and spoken English. In the case of many words with silent letters the spelling shows how the word used to be pronounced in the past, when the English language was far more phonetic. For example, in the Middle Ages **knight** had two syllables and was pronounced with every letter sounded: **k Neehht**. As new words have been added to English from other languages, the spelling was often retained but the pronunciation was altered to fit our **vowel sounds** and **stress rules**. In American English there have been attempts to rationalise the spelling by deleting redundant letters, e.g. letters are dropped from the end of various words: *omelette* > *omelet*, *programme* > *program*, etc.
- Other silent letters are also useful because they provide a way of telling the difference between **homophones** – words that have the same pronunciation, but different meanings and spellings, e.g.

a) ad/add	e) hart/heart	i) new/knew	m) our/hour
b) be/bee	f) hi/high	j) no/know	n) red/read (past)
c) by/bye	g) hole/whole	k) nose/knows	o) to/too/two
d) find/finned	h) in/inn	l) not/knot	p) way/weigh