

Silent Letters

What are 'silent letters'?

A silent letter is a letter that appears in a particular word, but does not correspond to any sound in the word's pronunciation. The bad news is that English has a lot of silent letters, and they create problems for both native and non-native speakers of English, because they make it more difficult to guess the spelling of many spoken words or the pronunciation of many written words.

Not all silent letters are completely redundant

- Silent letters can distinguish between homophones, e.g. in/inn; be/bee; lent/leant. This is an aid to readers already familiar with both words.
- Silent letters may give an insight into the meaning or origin of a word, e.g. vineyard suggests vines more than the phonetic 'vinyard' would.
- The final <fe> in giraffe gives a clue to the second-syllable stress, where 'giraf' might suggest initial-stress.
- Silent letters help to show long vowels e.g. rid/ride
- Silent letters help to show 'hard' consonants e.g. guest/gest
- They can help to connect different forms of the same word e.g. resign/resignation.

Since accent and pronunciation differ, letters may be silent for some speakers but not others. In non-rhotic accents, <r> is silent in such words as hard, feathered; in h-dropping accents, <h> is silent. A speaker may pronounce <t> in "often" or "tsunami" or neither or both.

Here are some examples of silent letters in use:-

A - artistically, logically, musically, romantically, stoically

B - climb, comb, crumb, debt, doubt, numb, plumb, subtle, thumb, tomb,

C - acquire, acquit, blackguard, czar, muscle, scissors, victual

D - handkerchief, Wednesday

E - When added to the end of a word, it changes the pronunciation of the word, but is in itself, silent.

F - halfpenny

G - align, alight, champagne, diaphragm, gnash, gnaw, high, light, reign, though,

H - choir, exhaust, ghost, heir, hour, khaki, thyme

I - business

J (none)

K - blackguard, knead, knell, knickers, knife, knight, knock, knot, know

L - calf, calm, chalk, folk, half, psalm, salmon, talk, yolk

M - mnemonic

N - autumn, chimney, column, condemn, damn, hymn, solemn

O - colonel - opossum

P - corps, coup, pneumonia, pseudo, psychology, ptomaine, receipt

Q (none)

R - butter, finger, garden, here, myrrh

S - aisle, apropos, bourgeois, debris, fracas, island, isle, viscount

T - asthma, ballet, castle, gourmet, listen, rapport, ricochet, soften, thistle

U - catalogue, colleague, dialogue, guess, guest, guide, guilt, guitar, tongue

V (none)

W - answer, sword, two, whole, whore, wrist, writ, write

X - faux pas

Y (none)

Z - laissez-faire, rendezvous