



Silent letters in English

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Silent letters

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Why...

... is there a “k” in “know”?

... is there a “b” in “doubt”?

... do we write “island” with an “s”?

“Why are there so many silent letters in English?”

As an English pronunciation coach,
I hear this question all the time.



If you’ve asked yourself these **questions**,
you’re not alone!

Silent letters are one of several frustrating aspects of
English **pronunciation** for many non-native speakers.



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English...

contains many unpronounced letters for three main reasons

1

Historical Pronunciation

Many silent letters, like the “k” in “knife” or the “gh” in “night,” were once pronounced. Over time, pronunciation changed, but the spelling stayed the same, preserving a bit of language history.

2

Language Origins

English borrows from many languages, such as Latin, French, and Greek. Silent letters often reflect these origins, like the “p” in “psychology” (from Greek) or the “b” in “doubt” (from Latin).

3

Spelling Standardization

Spelling became fixed before pronunciation finished evolving, especially after the invention of the printing press and dictionaries. As a result, many silent letters remain in modern spelling.

Tip

Watch for common silent letter **patterns** to avoid mispronunciation and sound more natural. Keep learning to master these patterns!



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**B**

mb: bomb, dumb, thumb,
numb, crumb, comb, lamb

bt: debt, doubt, subtle

**C**

sc: muscle, scissors,
science, scent, scene

**ch**

ch: yacht



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G

ending gn: foreign, design,
campaign, sign, benign

beginning gn: gnome, gnat, gnaw



Gh

high, thigh, sigh, right, light,
night, might, sight, weigh/weight,
height, neighbor, bought, caught,
thought, ought, though, through



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beginning h: honest,
honor, hour, herb, heir

middle h: John, ghost, vehicle,
upholstery, prohibition,
rehabilitation, chihuahua

rh: rhetoric, rhythm

wh: what, when, where,
why, whale, wheel, white,
while, wheat, whether

exh: exhaust, exhibit

th: Thomas, Thai/Thailand,
Beethoven



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K

kn: knee, knife, knight, knit,
knock, know/knowledge, knuckle



L

lk: walk, talk, yolk

ld: would, could, should

lf: half, calf

other: salmon, Lincoln



N

mn: column, hymn, Autumn,
condemn, solemn, damn



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P

beginning ps: psychology,
psychiatrist, psychic, pseudo

beginning pn: pneumonia,
pneumatic

other: raspberry, cupboard,
receipt, coup, corps (**silent p & s**)

S

island, aisle, debris, Illinois,
Arkansas



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stle: castle, wrestle, whistle,
nestle, hustle



ten: listen, fasten, soften

et: ballet, buffet, gourmet,
duvet, sorbet

final t: debut, rapport, Merlot

other: mortgage, Christmas



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clothes, months, asthma,
strengths



wr: write, wrong, wrestle,
wrench, wrinkle, wrap

wh: whole, who

other: answer, two, sword



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Practice sentences

Instructions: Fill in each blank space with one of these missing words in the box above. Make sure to say each word aloud, pronouncing it correctly by not saying the silent letter. Then, say the completed sentences aloud also. Find the answers at the end of this booklet.

bomb, doubt, debt, muscle,
numb, scissors, thumb

Silent B

- His _____ has been _____, since the accident with the _____.
- I _____ we have that much _____.

Silent C

- The surgeon used very sharp _____ to cut through the _____ tissue.



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Fill in the Blank

sign, yacht, gnats, gnome's, foreign, benign

Silent Ch

- I'm going dancing at the _____ club.

Silent G

- The _____ had some _____ writing on it.
- _____ are annoying, but _____.



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Fill in the Blank

through, sight, neighbor, thought,
height, high, weight, night

Silent Gh

- The moon was quite a _____ last _____.
- My _____ fell _____ the roof.
- I _____ the price was _____.
- What's your _____ and _____?



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Fill in the Blank

rhythm, exhausting, white, John, exhibit, whale,
honest, upholstery, vehicle, heir, Thailand

Silent H

- There's an interesting _____ at the science center on the _____.
- _____ is the _____ to a family business in _____.
- To be _____, the _____ of work here is _____.
- Is it possible to change the _____ in this _____?



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Fill in the Blank

would, knuckles, could, salmon, yolks, solemn,
columns, know, talk, knit, half, knife

Silent K

- Do you _____ how to _____?
- I accidentally cut my _____ while working with a _____.

Silent L

- _____ I _____ to you for a minute?
- _____ you like the _____?
- We only need _____ of the egg _____.



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Fill in the Blank

autumn, hymns, raspberries, knuckles,
solemn, pseudo, columns, receipt, psychology,
pneumatic, cupboards

Silent N

- We sang several _____ on Memorial Day.
- We decorated the _____ especially for the _____ festival.

Silent P

- Can you give me a _____ for the _____?
- We'll need a _____ drill to install the _____.
- Do you think _____ is real or _____ science?



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Fill in the Blank

Christmas, duvet, Arkansas, castle,
softener, debris, island, Illinois, ballet,
hustle, mortgage, debuting

Silent S

- There was a lot of _____ on the _____ after the hurricane.
- Are you from _____ or _____?

Silent T

- They're _____ a world famous _____ in the _____ for _____.
- Don't use fabric _____ on the _____.
- You'll have to _____ if you want to catch the _____ broker before he leaves.



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Fill in the Blank

two, asthma, whole, clothes, answered,
wrinkle, months, strengths, wrongs

Silent Th

- My last _____ attack was 6 _____ ago.
- One of my _____ is picking exactly the right _____ for people.

Silent W

- Mom _____, “_____ don’t make a right.”
- Do they sell _____ cream at _____ Foods Market?



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What Do You Hear?

Instructions: Supply the missing words with silent letters while listening to the story. Find the answers at the end of this booklet.

The Case of the Decapitated Roses

Detective _____ stood quietly at the _____ of the crime. The flowers were gone, cut clean _____ and a strange _____ was carved into the soil.

“Looks like someone _____ with the rose bushes,” he muttered.

Cassie, a _____, let out a long _____. “I _____ did this,” she _____. “A _____.”

Detective Thomas raised an eyebrow. “A gnome?” Cassie nodded. “He’s invisible, but I found some _____, tiny footprints and the _____ of gnome tarts near that _____.”



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What Do You Hear? (continued)

Detective Thomas had his _____.

Still, he _____ as Cassie continued.

“He’s angry,” Cassie said. “He thinks the garden belongs to him. There was a _____ against picking his mushrooms. Some of the _____ broke it.”

They _____ around the garden. Detective Thomas _____ on a tree stump.

“You _____ think I’m crazy for asking this,” he said, “but... _____ I _____ to the gnome?” The stump shook. A _____ movement, but enough.



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What Do You Hear? (continued)

Then, a tiny voice said, “I _____ these gardens!
This is war!”

A flash of silver _____ appeared from the bushes.
“Violence is _____, little guy,” Detective Thomas
said. “Let’s _____ it over and find a
solution.”

The gnome paused. “Only if you start a _____ to
protect my mushrooms and my _____.”

Detective Thomas smiled. “Deal. It _____ be my
_____ to help protect them.”

Cassie looked proud. “You see? I told you I was an ex-
pert in these types of cases. A lot of magic is
alive in _____.”



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Be creative: Tell your own story

1. Create sentences with the words in the boxes below.
2. If you're creative, see how many words you can fit into one sentence, or better yet, create a whole story using the words below that have silent letters.
3. Make sure to say both the words and your sentences aloud.

Story #1:

doubt, crumbs, scent, bought, taught,
exhausting, should, folks, salmon, island,
debris, buffet, gourmet, months, fasten

Story #2:

subtle, muscles, design, ghost, knight,
light, night, hours, while, knock, could,
whistle, clothes, wrap, heir



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Answer Key

Practice Sentences

Silent B:

- His **thumb** has been **numb**, since the accident with the **bomb**.
- I **doubt** we have that much **debt**.

Silent C:

- The surgeon used very sharp **scissors** to cut through the **muscle** tissue.

Silent Ch:

- I'm going dancing at the **yacht** club.

Silent G:

- The **gnome's sign** had some **foreign** writing on it.
- **Gnats** are annoying, but **benign**.

Silent GH:

- The moon was quite a **sight** last **night**.
- My **neighbor** fell **through** the roof.
- I **thought** the price was **high**.
- What's your **height** and **weight**?

Silent H:

- There's an interesting **exhibit** at the science center on the **white whale**.
- **John** is the **heir** to a family business in **Thailand**.
- To be **honest**, the **rhythm** of work here is **exhausting**.
- Is it possible to change the **upholstery** in this **vehicle**?

Silent K:

- Do you **know** how to **knit**?
- I accidentally cut my **knuckles** while working with a **knife**.



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Answer Key

Practice Sentences (continued)

Silent L:

- Could I talk to you for a minute?
- Would you like the salmon?
- We only need half of the egg yolks.

Silent N:

- We sang several solemn hymns on Memorial Day.
- We decorated the columns especially for the Autumn festival.

Silent P:

- Can you give me a receipt for the raspberries?
- We'll need a pneumatic drill to install the cupboards.
- Do you think psychology is real or pseudoscience?

Silent S:

- There was a lot of debris on the island after the hurricane.
- Are you from Illinois or Arkansas?

Silent T:

- They're debuting a world famous ballet in the castle for Christmas.
- Don't use fabric softener on the duvet.
- You'll have to hustle if you want to catch the mortgage broker before he leaves.

Silent Th:

- My last asthma attack was 6 months ago.
- One of my strengths is picking exactly the right clothes for people.

Silent W:

- Mom answered, "Two wrongs don't make a right."
- Do they sell wrinkle cream at Whole Foods Market?



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Answer Key

The Case of the Decapitated Roses

Detective **Thomas** stood quietly at the **scene** of the crime. The flowers were gone—cut clean **through**—and a strange **design** was carved into the soil.

“Looks like someone **wrestled** with the rose bushes,” he muttered.

Cassie, a **psychic**, let out a long **sigh**. “I **know who** did this,” she **whispered**.

“A gnome.”

Detective Thomas raised an eyebrow. “A gnome?”

Cassie nodded. “He’s invisible, but I found some **signs**—tiny footprints and the **crumbs** of gnome tarts near that **column**.”

Detective Thomas had his **doubts**. Still, he **listened** as Cassie continued.

“He’s angry,” Cassie said. “He thinks the garden belongs to him. There was a **prohibition** against picking his mushrooms. Some of the **neighbors** broke it.” They **walked** around the garden. Detective Thomas **knocked** on a tree stump.



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Answer Key

The Case of the Decapitated Roses (continued)

“You **might** think I’m crazy for asking this,” he said, “but... **should** I **talk** to the gnome?”

The stump shook. A **subtle** movement, but enough.

Then, a tiny voice said, “I **condemn** these gardens! This is war!”

A flash of silver **scissors** appeared from the bushes.

“Violence is **wrong**, little guy,” Detective Thomas said. “Let’s **talk** it over and find a solution.”

The gnome paused. “Only if you start a **campaign** to protect my mushrooms and my castle.”

Detective Thomas smiled. “Deal. It **would** be my **honor** to help protect them.” Cassie looked proud. “You see? I told you I was an expert in these types of cases. A lot of magic is alive in **Arkansas**.”

