

Origin of Silent Letters

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Old English originally had its own alphabet for its 33 sounds. Around the seventh century, scholars started using the Latin alphabet to write Anglo-Saxon English. But they ran into a problem. Latin only has six vowel sounds (A, E, I, O, U, Y). English has 16. Latin only has 21 consonant letters; English has 25 consonant sounds, including the Y consonant sound.

To represent these extra sounds, the scholars created letter combinations, which I will refer to as multi-letter phonograms, the term used by the *Spell to Write to Read* program (see [review](#)). Some people may consider one of the letters in these combinations to be silent, but they must be viewed as a team to make one particular sound.

Multi-Letter Vowel Sounds

Short sounds are represented by the six Latin vowels: A, E, I, O, U, Y. Short sounds depicted with multi-letter phonograms include EA for /e/ as in **head**, EI/EY for /i/ as in **forfeit** and **money**, and OU for /u/ as in **country**.

Long vowel sounds are represented by the six Latin letters and several multi-letter phonograms:

- **Long A:** AI/AY, EI/EY (**rain, ray, their, they**)
- **Long E:** EA/EE, IE/EY (**meat, meet, chief, key**)
- **Long I:** IE/EY, IGH (**tie, eye, night**)
- **Long O:** OU/OW, OA, OE (**soul, show, boat, toe**)
- **Long U:** EU/EW, UI (**feudal, few, fruit**)

To represent other English vowel sounds that don't exist in Latin, these combinations were created.

- AU/AW (**cause, saw**)
- OI/OY (**boil, boy**)
- OU/OW (**shout, cow**)
- OO, EW, OU (**boot, flew, group**)
- U (**put**) and OO (**foot**)

Multi-Letter Consonant Sounds

Because the Latin alphabet lacked enough letters to stand for all the English consonant sounds, multi-letter phonograms were developed for those sounds.

- CH for /ch/ as in **children**, for /k/ as in **monarch** (Greek), and for /sh/ as in **chef** (French)
- SH for /sh/ as in **ship**
- TH for /th/ as in **this** and as in **thing**
- WH for /wh/ as in **when**
- SI for /zh/ as in **vision**
- NG for /ng/ as in **long**

When an A, E, O, or U comes at the end of a syllable of an English word, it makes the long sound. To make a vowel short in an English root word, two consonants must follow the vowel. For this reason, these multi-phonograms endings were created. The letter combinations work as a team.

- **-CK** for /k/ is only used after a short single vowel (**back**). Use K after anything else (**risk, book**)
- **-DGE** for /j/ is only used after a short single vowel (**judge**). Use -GE after anything but a short vowel (**hinge, page, gouge**). This rule also explains one use of the silent E.
- **-FF** is only used after a short single vowel (**stuff**). Use -F after anything else (**gulf, loaf, roof**).
- **-LL** is only used after a short single vowel (**wall**). Use -L after anything else (**curl, feel, tool**).
- **-SS** is only used after a short single vowel (**bass**). Use -SE for a /s/ or /z/ after anything else (**tense, please, house, rouse**). This rule also explains one use of the silent E.
- **-TCH** for /ch/ is only used after a short single vowel (**patch**). Use -CH after anything else (**bench, reach, couch**).
- **-ZZ** is only used after a short single vowel (**jazz**). Use -ZE for /z/ after anything else (**bronze, breeze, gauze**). This rule also explains one use of the silent E.

True Silent Letters

The Final Silent E

The final silent E is the best-known silent letter in the English language, but it wasn't always silent. People pronounced the E in Old and Middle English. For instance, in Middle English, the word *make* was pronounced *maw-kə*.

By the Renaissance, English speakers had stopped pronouncing the final E. Yet, those words' spelling remained the same. Fortunately, the modern use of the final silent E can be explained in several spelling rules.

Spell to Write to Read teaches five final silent E rules. I found these rules eye-opening when I learned them to teach my kids. I wish I had been taught them while a student.

The Silent E

1. Makes the vowel say its name (**dime**).
2. Prevents words from ending with a V or a U (**have, true**). The Romans always placed an E after a V.
3. Causes the C to say /s/ and the G to say /j/ (**dance, large**).
4. Every syllable must have a vowel (**maple**).
5. Odd Job E's
 - Adds length to a very short word. (ore, ewe, awe, owe)
 - Shows that a word isn't plural (*false*, not *falls*; *please* not *pleas*; *dense* not *dens*; *goose* not *goos*).
 - Creates a distinction between similar words (*ore* not *or*; *cleanse* not *cleans*; *hearse* not *hears*)
 - Changes the pronunciation of the proceeding phonogram (*bath/bathe, teeth/teethe, loathe*).
 - Probably retained from the Middle English spellings (*are, were, there, where, gone*)

Letter Interactions Require a Silent Letter

- We often **double a letter** when adding a vowel suffix to an English root word. For instance, to add an *-ing* to *hop*, you must double the P. Otherwise, the word becomes *hoping*, with a long O sound and it becomes a form of the word *hope*. The second consonant is added to make the single vowel sound short.
- **A silence -L:** “when a single A or O is followed by -LL, the short sound of the A is changed to an AW sound, as in **ball**; the short sound of the O is changed to a long O sound, as in **roll**” (*ABC's and All Their Tricks*, 61). This is also true when the L is followed by a K or an M. The L becomes silent as in **walk** or **folk**. The L controls the vowel sound.
- **Silent T:** In words such as **castle**, **fasten**, and **soften**, the T is there to make the vowel short.

Obsolete Consonant Sounds

English has lost some of the sounds it once had, but the letters representing those sounds have remained.

- **KN-** as in **knife**: In German, the /k/ sound is still used, but English speakers dropped the pronunciation before early Modern English.
- **WR-** as in **write**: The W was once pronounced but was [dropped](#) before the 17th century.
- **GN-** as in **gnat**, **reign**, and **sign**: In Middle English, the G in *gnat* was pronounced. The other two words have Latin roots. When adding an English suffix, the G remains silent, as in **reigning**. When adding a Latin suffix, the G makes its hard sound, but the preceding vowel sound is short, as in **signal** and **interregnum**. Only 34 words use this phonogram.
- **-MB** and **-MN** as in **crumb** and **column**: In a root word, the B or N is silent. In a longer word, these consonants make their sounds (**crumb/crumble**, **columnist**). Only 28 words end with **-MB**, and only seven words end with **-MN**.
- **-GH** as in **straight**: This phonogram once represented a lost Old English sound.
- **OUGH** represents six sounds that reflect Old English dialect pronunciations that have survived in modern English. Only 38 words use this phonogram.
- **GH-** used at the beginning of a syllable makes the hard G sound. Only nine English words use this phonogram, such as *ghost* or *aghost*. This spelling of *ghost* appeared in the early 15th century and may have been influenced by Flemish and Middle Dutch.

Individual Silent Consonants

- **Silent H** as in **what**: At one time, the H sound was made in WH words. In Old Saxon, it was pronounced *hwat*. The other W question words also started with *hw*.
- **Silent H** as in **hour**, **exhibit**, **ghetto**, **rhyme**, and **oh**. This silent H appears for these reasons:
 - French origin: **hour**, **honor**, **heir**, and **herb**.
 - After the prefix **ex-** as in **exhibit**; but pronounced in *inhibit* and *prohibit*. In some cases, the H is too tricky to pronounce, so it is left silent.
 - H is silent after G at the beginning of a syllable. H causes the G to make its hard sound, as in **ghetto** and **spaghetti**. Otherwise, G usually says /j/ before an E, I, or Y.
 - H after R is silent as in **rhyme**. The RH phonogram is borrowed from Greek.
 - H is always silent after a vowel: **ah**, **eh**, **oh**, **uh**.
- **Silent P** as in **pneumonia**, **Psalms**, and **pterodactyl**: If P begins a word with a consonant it doesn't blend with, it is silent. These words came from Greek through Latin. The P represents a Greek sound that the Romans couldn't make, but they preserved the Greek spelling.

- **Scholarly Insertions:** In the 18th century, scholars studied the history of the English language (etymology) and sometimes added silent letters where they didn't belong. Unfortunately, these spellings have become standard English. Approximately a dozen words fall in this category and are exceptions to the rules.
 - B in *debt* to connect it to *debit*.
 - C in *muscle* to connect it to *muscular*.
 - S in *island* to connect it to the Latin word *insula*, the root word for *peninsula*.

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