



FREE RESOURCE · PRONUNCIATION

Commonly mispronounced words

Learners most often mispronounce words because the spelling misleads them. Some letters are silent, some syllables disappear in natural speech, some words have unexpected stress, and some vowels are not what the letters suggest. Forty common examples are grouped below, each with its British English sounds.

What to know

Why these words go wrong

English spelling records the history of a word, not how it sounds today. Letters stay on the page after they have stopped being said, and syllables shrink in everyday speech. A learner who says every letter will often be using a pronunciation that no native speaker uses.

Group 1: syllables that disappear

In these words, a vowel that you can see in the spelling is not said in normal speech. The word is shorter than it looks. Count the syllables you hear, not the vowels you see.

- Wednesday /'wenzdeɪ/: two syllables, WENZ-day. There is no d before the n.
- comfortable /'kʌmfətəbl/: three syllables, KUMF-tuh-bl, not 'com-for-ta-ble'.
- vegetable /'vedʒtəbl/: three syllables, VEDJ-tuh-bl.
- business /'bɪznəs/: two syllables, BIZ-nuhs, not 'busy-ness'.
- chocolate /'tʃɒklət/: two syllables, CHOK-luht.

Group 2: silent letters

Silent letters are the best-known problem. There is no rule that predicts them completely, but some patterns help: kn- at the start (knowledge), ps- at the start (psychology), -mb at the end (climb), and -stle or -sten in the middle (castle, listen).

- debt /det/ and doubt /daʊt/: the b is silent.
- receipt /rɪ'si:t/: the p is silent.
- island /'aɪlənd/: the s is silent.
- castle /'kɑ:sl/ and listen /'lɪsn/: the t is silent.
- knowledge /'nɒlɪdʒ/: the k is silent.

Group 3: stress in the wrong place

Stress means the strong syllable of a word: longer, louder and clearer. If it moves, the word can sound like a different word, and listeners work harder to understand you. Dictionaries mark it with the sign ' before the strong syllable.

- photograph /'fəʊtəgrɑ:f/, but photographer /fə'tɒgrəfə/: the stress moves.
- economy /ɪ'kɒnəmi/: the strong syllable is CON.
- hotel /həʊ'tel/ and police /pə'li:s/: the strong syllable is the second.
- develop /dɪ'veləp/: the strong syllable is VEL, and there is no stress on the last syllable.

- career /kə'reɪə/: the strong syllable is the second, RI.

Group 4: vowels that surprise you

In these words the letters suggest one vowel and the word uses another. Trust the IPA, not the spelling.

- pronunciation /prəˌnʌnsi'eɪʃn/: the second syllable is NUN, not 'noun'. It is not the same vowel as in the verb pronounce.
- clothes /kləʊðz/: say the th, or in fast speech the shorter /kləʊz/.
- iron /'aɪən/: the r is silent in British English; two syllables, EYE-uhn.
- schedule /'ʃedju:l/: in British English it starts with sh.
- sugar /'ʃʊgə/: it starts with sh.

Exercises

1. Which syllable is stressed in **photographer**? pho · tog · ra · pher
2. Which syllable is stressed in **hotel**? ho · tel
3. Which syllable is stressed in **pronunciation**? pro · nun · ci · a · tion
4. Which letter is silent in *receipt*?
 - a. c
 - b. t
 - c. p
5. How do you say the first two syllables of *library* in British English?
 - a. /'laɪberi/
 - b. /'laɪbrə/
6. How many syllables does *vegetable* usually have in natural British speech? Write a number.
7. In *pronunciation*, the second syllable sounds like the word _____.
 - a. nun
 - b. noun
8. Which word has a silent *s*?
 - a. listen
 - b. island
 - c. castle
9. Which is the usual British pronunciation of *schedule*?
 - a. /'skedju:l/, starting with sk
 - b. /'ʃedju:l/, starting with sh
10. Which word is said /'wenzdeɪ/?
 - a. Wednesday
 - b. Wendsday
 - c. Westday

Practise online, free: hear every example and check your answers at www.ielts-laboratory.co/free-resources/commonly-mispronounced-words/practice/

IELTS tip. Most of these words are ordinary IELTS vocabulary: environment, economy, different, interesting, knowledge, literature, temperature. Check the stress and the syllable count of the 10 words you use most before you speak. Saying them naturally helps listeners follow your ideas without effort.

FOR TEACHERS · PRONUNCIATION

Commonly mispronounced words

AIM	Learners notice and correct common word-level errors caused by spelling: lost syllables, silent letters, misplaced stress and unexpected vowels.
TIME	25 minutes
LEVEL	B1 to B2 (IELTS 5 to 6.5)
MATERIALS	This worksheet, one copy per learner; the free online practice for the audio

Warm-up

Read five words from the list aloud with a deliberate error. Learners say which letters or syllables should not be there.

Lesson steps

1. Present one group at a time with IPA on the board. Learners predict the sound before they hear it.
2. Drill each word chorally, then in a short phrase ('a comfortable chair', 'a library card').
3. Learners mark stress and silent letters on a worksheet, then check against a dictionary with audio.
4. In pairs, one learner reads a short paragraph using eight of the words while the partner ticks each one said as listed.

Extension

Each learner builds a personal list of five words they mispronounce, with IPA and a model sentence, and records it.

Answer key

1. pho**TOG**rapher. pho-**TOG**-ra-fer. Compare *PHO*-to-graph: the stress moves when the word grows.
2. ho**TEL**. ho-**TEL**. Many learners say HO-tel, but this noun has its strong syllable second.
3. pronunci**A**tion. pro-nun-ci-**A**-tion. The strong syllable is the fourth, and the second syllable is *nun*, not *noun*.
4. c) p. *Receipt* is /rɪ'si:t/. The p is silent, the c sounds /s/, and the t is said.
5. b) /'laɪbrəri/. The sound is /'laɪbrəri/ with an r straight after the b. 'Lie-berry' drops that r.
6. 3. It is /'vedʒtəbl/: VEDJ-tuh-bl, three syllables. The middle e is not said.
7. a) nun. The vowel is /ʌ/ as in *cup*, so the syllable is /nʌn/. The verb *pronounce* has /naʊns/, which is why the mistake is common.
8. b) island. The s in *island* is silent: /'aɪlənd/. In *castle* and *listen* the silent letter is the t.
9. b) /'fedju:l/, starting with sh. British English says /'fedju:l/. The /sk/ form is the usual American one.

10. a) Wednesday. *Wednesday* is /ˈwenzdeɪ/: the first d in the spelling is not said and the second syllable is *day*.

Questions learners often ask

Why is English pronunciation so different from spelling? Spelling was fixed centuries ago, while pronunciation kept changing. Many letters are still written but no longer said.

Which words should I learn first? Start with the words you use most in your own topics, such as work, study, environment and technology. Check them in a dictionary with audio.

Is it wrong to say a silent letter? Listeners will usually still understand you, but the word sounds unnatural and the extra sound can slow a conversation.

Do these words sound the same in American English? Most do, but a few differ, such as schedule, advertisement and often. The IPA here is British English.

Sources

- Roach, P. (2009). *English Phonetics and Phonology: A Practical Course* (4th ed.). Cambridge University Press.
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- Field, J. (2005). Intelligibility and the listener: the role of lexical stress. *TESOL Quarterly*, 39(3), 399-423.

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