



FREE RESOURCE · PRONUNCIATION

Consonant clusters

A consonant cluster is a group of two or more consonant sounds said together with no vowel between them, like /str/ in street or /sts/ at the end of tests. English allows up to three consonants at the start of a syllable and four at the end. Say them as one smooth blend and do not add a vowel.

What to know

What is a consonant cluster?

A cluster is two or more consonant sounds in a row. It is about sounds, not letters. The word street has six letters but only four sounds: /s/ /t/ /r/ and the vowel /i:/. The first three are a cluster. The word knife has the letters k and n together, but you do not say the k, so it is not a cluster.

Where clusters appear

At the start of a word you can have two consonants (play, tree, snow) or three (street, spring, splash, scream). The three-consonant clusters always begin with /s/, then /p/, /t/ or /k/, then /l/, /r/, /w/ or /j/ (not every combination exists, but these are the ones to know).

- school (add a vowel: 'eschool') · school /sku:l/
- plan (split: 'pelan') · plan /plæn/
- asked (drop the end: 'ask') · asked /ɑ:skt/

The two common mistakes

The first mistake is to add a vowel. Many languages do not allow two consonants together at the start or end of a syllable, so speakers insert a short vowel to make the word easier: 'estreet', 'pelan', 'texts-uh'. This adds a syllable that English does not have. Street has one syllable; 'estreet' has two.

How to say a cluster

Treat the cluster as one movement. Your tongue goes from one position to the next without a pause and without voice between them. The best way to learn this is to build the word slowly from one end.

- Hold the first consonant and keep the air flowing. Do not stop for a vowel.
- Touch each sound lightly; every sound should be there, but very short.
- Practise end clusters before a pause: say 'I asked' and stop on the /t/.
- When three or four sounds are hard together, say them slowly first, then at normal speed.

A practice ladder

Work from easy to hard. Start with two-consonant clusters in single words, then add a third consonant, then move to whole sentences. Do not move on until the earlier step is smooth and you can say it without thinking.

- Two at the start: play, tree, snow, clean, grow, small.
- Three at the start: street, spring, split, screen, strong.
- Two at the end: best, help, hand, left, milk, desk.

- Three or four at the end: asked, worlds, tests, texts, months, sixth.
- Sentences: 'The students asked about the plans.' 'She helped three friends.'

How to make the sound

1. Start with a long /s/: tongue tip close to the ridge behind your top teeth, air hissing, no voice.
2. Move to /t/ without adding a vowel: touch the ridge, then release.
3. Move to /r/ or /l/ with your voice on, still before the vowel.
4. Only now open into the vowel: street, spring, school.

Exercises

1. A consonant cluster is two or more _____ sounds said together.
 - a. consonant
 - b. vowel
2. How many consonant sounds are at the start of *street*?
 - a. Three
 - b. Two
 - c. One
3. Which word ends in a consonant cluster?
 - a. bat
 - b. bee
 - c. best
4. How many syllables does *texts* have? Write a number.
5. Which is the right way to say *school*?
 - a. /ɪsku:l/, with a vowel before the s
 - b. /sku:l/, with no vowel before the s
6. Which word begins with a three-consonant cluster?
 - a. stay
 - b. tree
 - c. spring
7. How many consonant sounds come after the vowel in *sixth* /sɪksθ/?
 - a. Two
 - b. Three
 - c. Four
8. Which spoken form keeps the past tense in *She asked a question*?
 - a. /ɑ:s/, with no /t/
 - b. /ɑ:skt/, with /t/ at the end

Listening items (2) are online only and are not included in this list.

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

IELTS tip. In the Speaking test your answers are full of clusters in everyday words: friends, projects, months, asked, strongly. If you drop or split them, listeners can lose plurals and past tenses. Practise the endings of the words you use most, such as 'projects' and 'I worked', before a pause.

FOR TEACHERS · PRONUNCIATION

Consonant clusters

AIM	Learners say initial and final clusters as a blend with no added or dropped sounds.
TIME	20 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

Say 'street' with an added vowel ('estreet') and with the correct blend. Learners say which is English and count the syllables.

Lesson steps

1. Show the three-consonant start rule (s + p, t or k + l, r, w or j) with six example words. Learners clap the syllables to confirm one beat.
2. Backchain end clusters: /s/, /ts/, /sts/, /ests/, 'tests'. Repeat with asked and worlds.
3. Pairs take turns reading a word list. The listener writes down how many syllables they heard.
4. Learners record one sentence containing three clusters and listen for added vowels.

Extension

Learners read a short Part 2 answer aloud and underline every cluster they find, then say each cluster slowly and then at speed.

Answer key

1. a) consonant. A cluster is made only of consonant sounds, with no vowel between them.
2. a) Three. *Street* starts /s/ /t/ /r/. Three consonants, then the vowel /i:/.
3. c) best. *Best* ends /st/. *Bat* ends in one consonant and *bee* ends in a vowel.
4. 1. *Texts* is /teksts/: one vowel, so one syllable. Adding a vowel at the end ('texts-uh') makes a second syllable that English does not have.
5. b) /sku:l/, with no vowel before the s. English starts *school* with the cluster /sk/. Adding a vowel before it changes the number of syllables.
6. c) spring. *Spring* starts /s/ /p/ /r/. *Stay* and *tree* start with two consonants.
7. b) Three. After the vowel /ɪ/ you say /k/ /s/ /θ/: three consonant sounds in a row.
8. b) /ɑ:skt/, with /t/ at the end. The ending /t/ shows the past tense. If you drop it, the word sounds like present-tense *ask*.

Questions learners often ask

How many consonants can English have together? Up to three at the start of a syllable, like street, and up to four at the end, like texts. The start clusters of three always begin with /s/.

Is a cluster about letters or sounds? Sounds. Knife begins with the letters kn but the k is silent, so it starts with a single sound /n/.

Why do I add a vowel? Your first language probably does not allow some clusters, so your mouth adds a vowel to make the word easier. You can train yourself to blend the consonants instead.

Do native speakers drop sounds in clusters? Sometimes, in fast speech, a middle /t/ or /d/ disappears, as in next door. They do not add vowels.

Sources

- Roach, P. (2009). English Phonetics and Phonology: A Practical Course (4th ed.). Cambridge University Press.
- Cruttenden, A. (2014). Gimson's Pronunciation of English (8th ed.). Routledge.

Written by Will Salisbury · IELTS Laboratory · ielts-laboratory.co/free-resources/consonant-clusters · Free to copy for classroom use.