



FREE RESOURCE · PRONUNCIATION

Silent letters

Silent letters are letters that appear in the spelling of a word but are not pronounced, such as the k in knife, the b in comb and the w in write. Most come from older pronunciations, so they follow patterns you can learn, but a dictionary is always the final check.

What to know

What are silent letters?

In English, the spelling and the sound of a word do not always match. A silent letter is one that is written but not said. You see k in knee, but you say /ni:/. You see b in thumb, but you say /θʌm/.

The most useful patterns

Learn these patterns first. They cover words that you will meet in IELTS reading and speaking.

- kn- at the start: the k is silent. Know, knife, knee, knock, knowledge.
- wr- at the start: the w is silent. Write, wrong, wrap, wrist, wrinkle.
- -mb at the end: the b is silent. Comb, climb, thumb, bomb, lamb, plumber.
- -gn at the end or before an ending: the g is silent. Sign, design, foreign, reign, campaign.
- -stle, -sten and -ften in the middle: the t is silent. Castle, whistle, listen, fasten, soften.

Other common ones to know

Some silent letters have no clear pattern, so learn them as individual words. The p is silent in psychology, receipt and cupboard. The n is silent after m at the end of autumn, column and damn. The s is silent in island and aisle. The d is silent in Wednesday /'wenzdeɪ/ and handsome. The u is silent after g in guess, guitar and guard.

Not silent in some words

A letter can be silent in one word and sounded in another. The t is silent in listen, but it is said in lesson. The b is silent in bomb, but it is said in bombard. In the word often, some people say the t and others do not, so both are acceptable.

A method for learning them

Do not try to memorise a long list. Use a small routine. When you meet a new word, check its sound in a dictionary. If a letter is silent, mark it with a line in your notebook, and write the sound next to the word. Group the words by pattern, such as the kn- words on one page and the -mb words on another.

Exercises

1. Which letter is silent in *knife*?
 - a. f
 - b. k
 - c. i
2. Which word has a silent b at the end?

- a. climb
- b. club
- c. crab

3. The letter w is silent at the start of _____.

- a. window
- b. write
- c. water

4. How is *Wednesday* usually said in British English?

- a. /'wednesdeɪ/ with every letter
- b. /'wi:nzdeɪ/
- c. /'wenzdeɪ/

5. Find the mistake and write the right form: (1) In the word castle, (2) the letter t (3) is said clearly.

6. Which syllable is stressed in **knowledge**? know · ledge

7. Write the word that means 'sixty minutes' and begins with a silent h.

8. Which word has a silent l?

- a. hall
- b. half
- c. help

9. The letter p is silent in _____.

- a. present
- b. report
- c. receipt

10. Which word has a silent g?

- a. foreign
- b. finger
- c. forget

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

IELTS tip. In the Speaking test, check the sound of a few important words from your topics, such as foreign, knowledge, answer and island, and say them aloud without the silent letters. In the Writing test, silent letters are a common source of spelling errors, so write a short list of the ones you often forget and check it before you finish an essay.

FOR TEACHERS · PRONUNCIATION

Silent letters

AIM	Learners will recognise the main silent-letter patterns and say common words without the silent letters.
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

Write knife, climb, write, island and Wednesday on the board. Ask learners to say them and to underline the letter that they think is not said.

Lesson steps

1. Present each pattern with three or four example words. Learners say each word and cross out the silent letter.
2. Sorting game: give word cards. Learners sort them into groups by pattern, such as kn-, wr-, -mb, -stle.
3. Dictionary check: learners look up five unfamiliar words and note the sounds and the silent letters.
4. Write sentences using at least three words from different groups, then read them aloud to a partner.

Extension

Compare silent letters with spelling errors in a short learner essay and make a personal list of words to check.

Answer key

1. b) k. In words that start with kn-, the k is silent. Knife is said /naɪf/.
2. a) climb. In climb, the b after m is silent: /klaɪm/. In club and crab the b is said.
3. b) write. Write is /raɪt/. In water and window the w is said.
4. c) /'wenzdeɪ/. The first d and the vowel before the s are not said, so the word has two syllables: WENZ-day.
5. Part 3: *is said clearly*. → **is silent**. In castle the t is silent: /'kɑːsl/ in British English.
6. **KNOW**ledge. KNOW-ledge: the stress is on the first syllable. The k at the start is silent, so say /'nɒlɪdʒ/.
7. hour. Hour is /aʊə/. The h is silent.
8. b) half. In half, the l is silent: /hɑːf/. In help and hall it is said.
9. c) receipt. In receipt, the p is silent: /rɪ'siːt/. In report and present it is said.
10. a) foreign. In foreign, the g is silent: /'fɒrən/. Finger and forget both have a sounded g.

Questions learners often ask

Why does English have silent letters? Many were pronounced in the past, but speech changed while spelling stayed the same. Others came from the spelling of words borrowed from other languages.

What is the most common silent letter? The final e is one of the most common silent letters, as in make and hope. Other very common ones are the k in kn- words, the w in wr- words, the b in -mb words and the h in hour and honest.

How can I know if a letter is silent? Check the pronunciation in a dictionary. It shows the sounds between slashes, and a silent letter will not appear there. Learn the common patterns too.

Is the t in often silent? Both pronunciations are used in British English: /'ɒfn/ and /'ɒftən/. Either is fine, so choose one and use it consistently.

Sources

- Roach, P., Setter, J., & Esling, J. (Eds.). (2011). Cambridge English Pronouncing Dictionary (18th ed.). Cambridge University Press.
- Wells, J. C. (2008). Longman Pronunciation Dictionary (3rd ed.). Pearson Longman.

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