

English Pronunciation – Silent Letters

1. Silent 'K' and 'G'

The letters 'k' and 'g' are usually silent in combination with 'n'. Listen to and repeat these words:

know	knight	knowledge	knee
knock	knife	knit	
sign	gnome	foreign	design
reign	gnaw	gnu	

Sometimes the pronunciation changes when we add a suffix:

sign (silent 'g') / signal (hard 'g') / signature (hard 'g')
malign (silent 'g') / malignant (hard 'g')
resign (silent 'g') / resignation (hard 'g')

Now practise saying these mini-dialogues:

A: What are you reading?

B: A lovely fairy tale, with knights and gnomes.

A: Can you pass me the butter knife, please?

B: Sure! Here it is.

A: Why are you limping?

B: I injured my knee playing football.

A: How many foreign languages do you speak?

B: Well, I speak French and German, and I know a little Italian.

A: My dog loves to gnaw bones.

B: Yes, it's good for his teeth.

A: That building has a wonderful design.

B: Yes. It was designed by a foreign architect.

2. Silent 'B' and 'C'

The letter 'b' is often silent after 'm' or before 't'.

The letter 'c' is silent in the combination 'sc-' at the beginning of a word before the letters 'i' or 'e'.

Listen to and repeat these words:

comb	dumb	bomb	climb
doubt	debt	subtle	
scene	scissors	science	muscle

Now practise saying these sentences:

How strange – the scissors aren't where I left them.

I like the scene in which the car flies.

I doubt that aliens have visited our planet.

That's the building where they're doing strange scientific experiments.

He is going to climb Everest this year.

Boris Johnson never combs his hair.

Sometimes the pronunciation changes when we add a suffix:

muscle (silent 'c') / muscular (hard 'c')
bomb (silent 'b') / bombardier (hard 'b')

3. Silent 'H'

The letter 'h' is silent at the beginning of only five English words:

1. **honest** (also: *honesty, dishonest, honestly, dishonestly*)
2. **hour** (also: *hours, hourly*)
3. **honour** (also: *honours, honourable, dishonourable, honourably, dishonourably*)
4. **heir** (also: *heiress, heirloom*)
5. **herb** (also: *herbivorous*)

The 'h' is silent *only* in American and Canadian English.

If the indefinite article is used in front of these words, we need to use 'an' because they begin with a vowel sound:

- He is **an honest** man.
- I waited for **an hour** and a half.
- I am **an honourable** person.
- He is **an heir** to his father's fortune.
- Let's put **an herb** in tonight's lasagna. (American English)

Exercise. Say these sentences:

- I only have half **an hour** for lunch.
- I **honestly** don't know what to order.
- He behaved extremely **honourably**.
- She is **an heiress** to her father's fortune.
- I got **an herb** from the garden for lunch. (American English)

4. Silent 'GH'

The letters 'gh' are usually silent, but there are some exceptions. Listen to and repeat these words:

sight	eight	fight	weight	weigh	through	bought
brought	sigh	thigh	thought	though	caught	neighbor
throughout	thoughtful					

Exercise. Say the following sentences:

- a) I thought that you said that you wanted to study French.
- b) I brought two pens and a pencil with me.
- c) He is an extremely thoughtful person.
- d) I will promote her, though she will have to work harder!
- e) You need to go through the store to get to the parking area.
- f) A: How much do you weigh? B: I weigh 200 pounds.

5. Silent 'P'.

Words which begin with 'pn', 'ps' or 'pt' are pronounced with a silent 'p'.

Here are some examples. Listen and repeat these words:

pneumatic	pneumonia	pterodactyl	psychic	psalm
pseudonym	psychiatrist	psychologist		

Note: The 'p' in receipt is also silent.

6. Silent 'L'.

The 'l' in many words between a vowel and a consonant is silent.

Exercise. Say these words:

half	calf		
would	could	should	
talk	walk	chalk	
salmon	calm	palm	psalm

The first 'L' is also silent in the word 'colonel', which is pronounced the same as 'kernel'.

7. Silent 'T'.

The 't' after 's' or 'f' is sometimes silent. For example:

listen	fasten	often	soften
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8. Silent 'N'.

Words which end with 'mn' are pronounced with a silent 'n'. Listen and repeat these words:

damn	condemn	column	autumn	solemn	hymn
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Sometimes the pronunciation changes when we add a suffix:

condemn (silent 'n') / condemnation (hard 'n')

9. Silent 'E'

The 'e' at the end of many English words is not pronounced, but it often changes the pronunciation of the previous vowel in the word. For example:

Compare:	bit	fat	cut	kit	not
	bite	fate	cute	kite	note

10. Silent 'W'.

The 'w' is always silent before an 'r' and sometimes before 'ho'. For example:

write	wrestling	wrist	
whole	who	whom	whore

Suggested videos: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nUccn2K0fjw> (Part 1, 12 mins)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wprp1N2srlw> (Part 2, 7 mins)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NXVqZpHY5R8> (23 mins)

Funny video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BrJv_wUEKko (5 mins)