Silent Letter Workbook
*know, two, Wednesday, eight, knee, write, listen, could, walk... All these common words have silent letters in them.*

More than 60% of English words have silent letters in them, which can cause all sorts of problems spelling the word, pronouncing the word or looking for the word in a dictionary.

One of the most useful strategies to improve spelling is knowing why spelling is the way it is, so knowing why we have so many words with silent letters in them will not only help your spelling, reading, and pronunciation, but stop you getting frustrated with spelling, especially if your language doesn't have silent letters.

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**English and spelling developed from the languages of the invaders that settled in England. Each time the country was invaded so too was English and spelling.**

43AD - the **Romans** from Italy (spoke Latin)

410 AD - the **Angles, Saxons, Jutes** from Germany and Holland (spoke Dutch/Germanic),

793 AD - the **Vikings** from Denmark and Norway (spoke Old Norse),

1066 - the **French** (spoke Norman French).

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In **43AD the Romans** invaded and colonized Britain. They spoke Latin.

We still use some Roman Latin words - look at these with silent letters in them: *scissors, salmon, debt, receipt, plumber.* (Which letters are silent?)
scissors, salmon, debt, receipt, plumber - they all contain silent letters which used to be pronounced, but are left in the word to show the history of the word and their Latin roots.

![Map of Britain 400-500 AD showing the Anglo-Saxon Homelands and settlements.](image)

410 AD the Anglo-Saxons.

Romans withdrew from Britain because they needed to defend Rome and Italy from invaders. The **Anglo-Saxons** invaded from Germany & Holland. These Saxons, Angles and Jutes spoke a number of Germanic languages (west Germanic and Dutch) that eventually became Anglo-Saxon.

The **Anglo-Saxons** became the English!

The 100 most common words in present day English are from Anglo-Saxon, including everyday words: earth, house, food, sing, night, daughter, women, light, cough, sleep... Notice a lot of these old words have silent letters in them, especially the difficult -gh- pattern.

daughter (dohtor), night (niht), light (liht), bright (beorht), dough (dag), rough (ruh)

- The 'h' in the original spelling was a hard throaty sound like the Scottish sound in loch.
- Then around the 13th century 'g' was added to 'h' becoming 'gh' because of French influence to try to spell this throaty sound.
- Then in about the 17th century the 'gh' sound was either dropped or became the 'f' sound: enough, cough, though, through, plough, rough, borough, slaughter, laugh...

enough, cough, rough, roughly, tough, toughen, laugh, laughter - have the "f" sound because they were originally pronounced "f" in some regions of England.
793AD, the Vikings

The Vikings from Denmark and Norway with their Old Norse language invaded. After fighting the Anglo-Saxons they settled down together and gave English loads of words including the silent letter words: knife, knock, knee, know, gnat, gnaw, gnash, gnarl... The silent ‘k’ and ‘g’ used to be pronounced, but we leave the letters in there to show the origin and history of the word.

The Anglo-Saxon and Viking languages became Old English.

Old English Letter Patterns

Many modern English letter patterns with silent letters in them come from Old English: igh, gh, wh, 1k, wr

According to spelling expert Johanna Stirling: If you learn these you’ll be less likely to write –hg instead of –gh and you’ll know why there are silent k and g in knee/knock/gnaw/gnome.

Remember with letter patterns the visual pattern is important not the sound.
1066, the French

The Normans from Normandy, Northern France invaded.

The Normans (the French) settled in Britain over the next three centuries.

French and Latin became the language of the nobility (the kings, queens, lords, barons), as well as the language of law and government.

But only 2% of the population spoke French. There was no bilingualism.

French and Latin became the language of the nobility (the kings, queens, lords, barons) and anyone wanting upward mobility. French was the language of law, government, fashion, education and literature.

English was the 'everyday, street' language of the lower classes and peasants, and stopped being a written language.

The surfs/peasants were the English-speaking Saxons and their movements were restricted. They were oppressed by the Norman landowners. A feudal system came into being.

Thousands of French words became English: crown, castle, parliament, army, mansion, romance, chess, colour/color, servant, peasant, traitor, governor... and spelled the French way but spoken the English way!

Spelling became more complicated as the Norman scribes applied French spelling rules to English.
The Letter Q

The French replaced several Old English spellings including, *cw* to *qu*.

In Anglo-Saxon/Old English the sound ‘qu’ as in ‘queen’ was spelt ‘cw’ – cwene/cwen

Say these words: cwic, cwifer, becweth, cwell. What are they? *qu had the same sound as cw*. (Some say it was a pointless change!)

cwen or cwene "queen, cwic " quick, cwifer " quiver, becweth " bequeath, cwell" quell

But many *qu* words are originally French – quality, question, tranquil, queasy.

French included many words where the sound ‘k’ was represented by ‘qu’ – as in quay and picturesque.

The Letter G

The French put a silent *U* in words like *guess* because in French *g* followed by *e* would sound like *j*. So ‘gu’ made it a /k/ sound: guide, guess, guilty, guard, dialogue...

gest (Old English) - *guest*
tunge (Old English) - *tongue*
vage (Old English) - vague
voge (Old English) - vogue

The Letter H can be silent or pronounced depending on your accent.

For centuries this letter wasn’t pronounced. By the 18th century ‘h’ began to be pronounced in some words but not others.

Words that still have a silent *H* are of French origin: *heir, honest, honour* (honor AmE), *hour, herb* (in American and some British accents) This is useful to know because when you write the article ‘a’ or ‘an’ we add "an" for silent ‘h’ for voiced ‘h’ we have:

*a historical event*,
*an honest mistake*,
*in an hour’s time*. *It’s an honour* (honor AmE) *to be here.*
For more about the history and reasons why English spelling is the way it is check out my ebook: *The Reasons Why English Spelling is so Weird and Wonderful* in the link below

More information about silent letters

Even though silent letters are not pronounced, they make a huge difference to the meaning and sometimes the pronunciation of words. Silent letters aren't there to make you crazy or make spelling and reading hard. Silent letters are there for various reasons:

1. Silent letters help the reader to recognize the difference between homophones. (Remember what those are from the lesson on words that sound alike?) Homophones have the same sound but different meaning and different spelling) *in/inn, be/bée, to/too/two, know/no, whole/hole, knot/not, lent/leant, write/right*.

2. A silent letter can help us work out the meaning of the word and it also can change the pronunciation even though it's silent - *sin/sign*, and the important silent 'e' to make long vowel sound in *rat/rate, mad/made, tap/tape*.

3. Most silent letters used to be pronounced then over the centuries pronunciation changed but the letters were left in the spellings. Unfortunately, books and dictionaries were printed during a period between 1450 and 1750 called the *Great Vowel Shift*. During this period many vowel and consonant sounds changed or disappeared or became silent. No one seems to know why this happened, but pronunciation has always been changing, even now we shorten words, slide letters together chop letters off - all to make speaking and pronunciation easier, and a nightmare for spelling.
Patterns and rules

kn- silent k before n: knee, know, knife, knives, knob, knot, knuckle, knock, knack, knave, knead, kneel, knew, knickerbocker, knight, knit... K used to be pronounced but in the 17th century began to drop out of fashion.

gn- silent g before n: gnat, gnaw, gnash, gnarl, gnome...
-gn- align, assign, benign, design, malign, reign, sign, campaign, poignant, champagne, cologne, foreign...

wr- silent w before r: write, wrist, wrinkle, wring, wriggle, wrong, wrote, wrap, wreck, wrench, wretched, wry, awry, playwright, wrestle (silent w, t, e!)

ps- silent p before s: psychic, psalm, psychology, psychiatry... These words have Greek origins.

-lk silent l before k: folk, walk, talk, yolk, chalk...

-mb- silent b after m: plumber, numb, dumb, thumb, crumb, climb, limb, lamb, succumb, bomb, comb, tomb, womb...

-mn silent n after m: autumn, column, solemn, condemn, hymn, damn...

-lm- silent l before m: palm, calm, psalm (silent p & l), qualm, alms, almond, balm, salmon...

-st- silent t after s: listen, fasten, glisten, moisten, hasten, christen...
-stle bristle, bustle, castle, gristle, hustle, jostle, mistletoe, rustle, thistle, whistle, wrestle (silent w/t)

We have the classic silent l in three important words would, could, should
Exercise

Write in the correct words for these body parts.

1. 

2. 

3. 

4. 

Body Parts Exercise Answers

1. thumb / thumbs (silent b)

2. knee / knees (silent k)

3. wrist / wrists (silent w)

4. palm/ palms (silent l before m)
5. thigh /thighs (silent 'gh')

6. muscles (silent c)
Silent letters in some common words, surnames, names and places:

A - artistically, dramatically, logically, musically...

B - climb, comb, crumb, thumb, numb, subtle, debt, doubt

C - acquire, acquitted, czar, muscle, scissors, Connecticut, Tucson

D - grandson, Wednesday handsome, handkerchief, landscape, sandwich (some people pronounce the 'd')

E - We saw the silent 'e' in the Magic 'e' Silent 'e' lesson.
We also have silent 'e' in: Wednesday, vegetable...

G - align, champagne, diaphragm, high, reign, foreign...
-igh- alight, right, light, eight, weight
-ugh-though, through, thought, drought

H - hour, honour/honor, honest, heir choir, exhaust, herb (American), exhibition, ghost, rhyme, rhythm, thyme, Thames, Gandhi, Birmingham

I - business

J (none)

K - blackguard, knead, knell, knickers, knife, knight, knock, knot, know, Knox, Knowles...

L - calf, calm, chalk, folk, half, psalm, salmon, talk, yolk, Norfolk, should, could, would...

M - mnemonic

N - autumn, column, condemn, damn, hymn, solemn
O - colonel, people, leopard

P - corps, coup, pneumonia, pseudo, psychology, receipt, Thompson

Q (none)

R - butter, finger, garden, here (in British English all r’s are 'silent' before consonants)

S - aisle, bourgeois, debris, fracas, island, isle, viscount, Illinois...

T - asthma, ballet, castle, gourmet, listen, rapport, ricochet, soften, thistle, Christmas, tsunami...

U - catalogue, colleague, dialogue, guess, guest, guide, guilt, guitar, tongue

V (none)

W - answer, sword, two, whole, wrist, writ, write, Norwich, Greenwich

X - faux faux pas, Sioux

Y (none)

Z - laissez-faire, rendezvous, chez
Exercise

1. Britain is ___ nown for its music.
2. Reading and ___riting.
3. We read ___alms and sing hymns in church.
4. Stop ___ashing your teeth!
5. ___rap up warm in winter.
6. In summer there are lots of ___nats in the countryside.
7. General ___nowledge.
8. ___nives and forks.
9. I'd like to ___rite better.
10. I don't ___now how to do it.
11. The yo___k of an egg.
12. Autum___ leaves.
13. Brush and com___.
14. Ta___king in your sleep.
15. Fas___en your seatbelt.
16. Lis___en to me!
17. My hands are num___ with cold.
18. Add up this colum___ of figures.
Exercise Answers

1. Britain is known for its music.
2. Reading and writing.
3. We read psalms and sing hymns in church.
4. Stop gnashing your teeth!
5. Wrap up warm in winter.
6. In summer there are lots of gnats in the countryside.
7. General knowledge.
8. Knives and forks.
9. I'd like to write better.
10. I don't know how to do it.
11. The yolk of an egg.
12. Autumn leaves.
14. Talking in your sleep.
15. Fasten your seatbelt.
16. Listen to me!
17. My hands are numb with cold.
18. Add up this column of figures.