

## Silent Letters

### Definition:

A [letter](#) that is usually left unpronounced, such as the *b* in *subtle*, the *c* in *scissors*, the *g* in *design*, and the *t* in *listen*.

According to Ursula Dubosarsky, roughly "60 percent of words in [English](#) have a silent letter in them" (*The Word Snoop*, 2009).

### Examples and Observations:

- The letter combination *gh* is silent in the following words: *bought*, *caught*, *dough*, *eight*, *flight right*, *sleigh*, *sigh*, *taught*, *thought*.
- **Different Kinds of Silent Letters**  
"Edward Carney, author of *A Survey of English Spelling* distinguishes two kinds of **silent letters**: *auxiliary* and *dummy*.

"*Auxiliary letters* are part of a group of letters that spell a sound that does not have a usual single letter to represent it. For example,

/th/ thing      /th/ there      /sh/ share      /zh/ treasure      /ng/ song

*Dummy letters* have two subgroups: *inert letters* and *empty letters*. *Inert letters* are letters that in a given word segment are sometimes heard and sometimes not heard. For example,

**resign** (g is not heard)  
**resignation** (g is heard)  
**malign** (g is not heard)  
**malignant** (g is heard)

*Empty letters* are letters that do not have a function like auxiliary letters or inert letters. The letter *u* in the word *gauge* is empty. Here are some examples of silent [consonants](#):

Silent b: thumb      Silent c: indict      Silent ch: yacht      Silent d: bridge  
Silent g: foreign      Silent h: rhinoceros      Silent k: knee      Silent l: calf

Silent m: mnemonic      Silent n: autumn      Silent p: receipt      Silent t: castle

Silent w: answer

There are no rules that we can apply to words with empty letters[;] you just have to use them and remember their spelling."

- **Silent Consonants**

"**Silent consonant letters** constitute one of the problem areas in respect to pronunciation of English words. To solve some of the problems of the learners, a few spelling sequences containing silent letters are discussed below:

(\*) *b* is always silent in the spelling sequences *mb* and *bt* occurring in the word-final position: *comb, numb, bomb, limb, debt . . .*

(\*) *d* is always silent in the spelling sequence *dj*: *adjective, adjunct, adjacent . . .*

(\*) *g* is silent in the spelling sequence *gm* or *gn*: *sign, phlegm*

(\*) *h* is silent in the spelling sequence *gh* and in the word-final position: *ghost, oh*.

(\*) *k* is always silent in the word-initial spelling sequence *kn*: *knee knowledge*,

**Exercise:** Read each word and choose which letter is silent.

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Gnome: silent letter is G

Wrap: silent letter is W

Spaghetti: silent letter is H

Talk: silent letter is L

Raspberry: silent letter is P

Ballet: silent letter is T