

# **COMMON SILENT CONSONANTS IN ENGLISH**

## 1. The Letter “k”

This seems to be silent only and always at the start of words (even words within longer words) where there is a following “n” (knack, knead, knee, breadknife, knight, knock, know, knuckle etc.).

## 2. The Letter “h”

At the start of a word, this letter is silent in honour and its derivatives (honourable, honorific, honorarium etc.) and also honest. In addition, there are hour and heir. In most varieties of English, “h” after a starting “w” is silent, as in wheat, when, where, whether, whet, whey, while, whistle and why.

Inside words, a common silent occurrence is in -ham at the end of British (not American) place names like Birmingham, Cheltenham, Tottenham and Nottingham (it is pronounced /-əm/ in all of these). The word vehicle has no /h/ sound, being pronounced /'vi: jə kl/, and there is none in shepherd and silhouette. The “h” in Thames can also be called silent because it does not alter the /t/ to /θ/. Similar is “h” after “r” in words of Greek origin like rhyme, rhino and diarrhoea.

Finally, “h” is silent after “c” in words of Greek origin, such as choir; it does not change the sound of “c” in any way (see 90. The Greek Impact on English Vocabulary). Other examples are anarchy, anchor, cholesterol, chorus, Christmas, chrome, epoch, orchestra, psychology and scheme.

## 3. The Letter “p”

Words of Greek origin beginning “ps-”, “pt-” or “pn-“ tend to be pronounced without the /p/ (see 90. The Greek Impact on English Vocabulary). Examples are combinations with psych- (psychology, psychic) and pseudo- (pseudonym, pseudopod), as well as psalm, pterodactyl and pneumatic.

Elsewhere, three notable words are receipt (/rɪ 'si:t/), coup (/ku:/) and corps (/kɔ:/), the latter two being borrowings from French.

## 4. The Letter “b”

A major context for the silence of this letter is after “m” at the end of a word, as in bomb, climb, comb, crumb, dumb, lamb, limb, tomb and womb. The “b” remains silent even after the addition of -ing, -ed or -er (bombing, combing, dumbing, lambled, dumber), but not in the verbs crumble (which is like humble and tumble) or limber (like timber). In addition, there are some words where a silent “b” is followed by “t”, e.g. debt, doubt and subtle.

## 5. The Letter “t”

The main locations of this are inside the three modal verbs could, would, should; between “a”/“o” and “k” in words like stalk, talk, walk, folk and yolk; and between “a” and “m”, e.g. alms, calm, palm, psalm and salmon.

## 6. The Letter “s”

A few words of French origin have a silent “s” at the end (corps, debris, fracas, rendezvous). Words with it in the middle include isle, aisle, island and viscount. The “i” is pronounced /aɪ/ in all of these.

## 7. The Letter “t”

This letter is usually silent when sandwiched between “s” and “le”, as in bustle, castle, epistle, pestle, rustle and thistle, and often silent between “f” (or “s”) and “en” in words like often, soften, listen, glisten, fasten and hasten.

Words that end in “-et” tend to be borrowings from French. Some must be pronounced in the French way, ending in the vowel /eɪ/ without “t”, some not. The former include ballet, beret, bidet, bouquet, buffet (= self-service food), cachet, chalet, croquet, duvet, ricochet, sobriquet, tourniquet and valet. Two other French-derived words with a silent final “t” are depot and rapport.

## 8. The Letter “w”

There are two striking contexts for this silent letter. One is words beginning “wr-”, such as wrangle, wreck, wrestle, wring, wrong, wrought and wry. The other is a few words (usually place names) ending in “-wich” or “-wick”, for example Greenwich and Harwich (but not Midwich) and Chiswick and Warwick (but not Gatwick or Northwick). Another notable place name is Southwark (pronounced /ˈsʌ ʃðɜk/), and “w” is also silent in two, who, whole, sword and awry.

## 9. The Letter “c”

One silent use of this letter is after “s” in words like ascent, crescent, irascible, miscellaneous, nascent, reminisce, scene, sceptre (but not sceptic), science and visceral. This group does not include rescind because the “c” there is changing the pronunciation of the neighbouring “s” into /ʃ/. Another use is before unstressed “es” in such British place names as Leicester, Worcester, Bicester and Gloucester. One other notable silent “c” is in indict.

## 10. The Letter “g”

This letter is commonly silent between “i” and “n” in words like align, benign, deign, feign, foreign, malign, reign, sign and sovereign. However, it is not silent in poignant (since it changes the following /n/ to /nj/) nor in benignant and malignant. Other notable words are champagne, gnaw, gnome, gnu and phlegm. Recognise seems to allow a choice about pronouncing the “g”.

## 11. The Letters “gh”

These are well-known silent letters before “t” in words like bright, fight, might, tight, ought, brought, sought, thought, caught, taught, eight, height and weight. They also occur without the “t” in though, through, bough, plough, high, weigh, neighbour etc. (however, they are less “silent” in cough and tough because the consonant sound /f/, though unexpected, exists where they occur).

## 12. Other Letters

There is a silent “n” at the end of autumn, column, condemn, hymn and solemn, while at the start of mnemonic it is the “m” that is silent. In iron, the “r” is silent, in yacht the “ch” and in Wednesday the first “d” (along with the following “e”). Some borrowed French words, such as laissez-faire and rendezvous, contain a silent “z”.