

Years 3 & 4 · Free resource

Endings: -gue and -que; *sc* spelling for /s/

Year group: 3/4

Source: DfE, *English Appendix 1: Spelling*, National Curriculum for England (2013) — Years 3–4, Other spellings

Curriculum requirement: Statutory

Rule A: -gue and -que

Words ending in *-gue* (pronounced /g/) and *-que* (pronounced /k/) come from French. In French, the *ue* after *g* and *q* is silent — it exists to show that the *g* or *q* is "hard" (makes its own consonant sound, not softened by the following vowel).

league — the *ue* is silent; we hear /li:g/

antique — the *ue* is silent; we hear /æn 'ti:k/

-gue words (/g/ sound at end):

Word	Meaning
league	a group or alliance
tongue	the muscle in the mouth
vague	not clear
plague	a serious disease
rogue	a dishonest person
fatigue	extreme tiredness
dialogue	a conversation
colleague	someone you work with

-que words (/k/ sound at end):

Word	Meaning
antique	old and valuable
unique	the only one of its kind
technique	a method or skill
opaque	not see-through
plaque	a flat decorated plate; a build-up on teeth
mosque	a Muslim place of worship
grotesque	ugly or distorted

Etymology note: Both endings came into English from French after 1066. In French, *qu* is always pronounced /k/ (French *que* = English "that"). The silent *ue* is not redundant — it tells the reader: the preceding consonant is hard, not softened by what follows.

Rule B: *sc* spelling for the /s/ sound

In some words, *sc* makes the /s/ sound (not the usual /sk/ of *scat* or *scoop*). This happens when *sc* is followed by *e* or *i* — the *e* or *i* softens both the *s* and the *c* into a single /s/ sound.

Word	Sound at <i>sc</i>
science	/s/ – <i>sc</i> before <i>i</i>
scene	/s/ – <i>sc</i> before <i>e</i>
scent	/s/ – <i>sc</i> before <i>e</i>
discipline	/s/ – <i>sc</i> before <i>i</i>
fascinate	/s/ – <i>sc</i> before <i>i</i>
crescent	/s/ – <i>sc</i> before <i>e</i>
descend	/s/ – <i>sc</i> before <i>e</i>
scissors	/s/ – <i>sc</i> before <i>i</i>
muscle	/s/ – <i>sc</i> before <i>l</i> (special case)

The rule in plain English: When *sc* is followed by *e* or *i*, it makes the /s/ sound. When *sc* is followed by any other letter, it makes the /sk/ sound (*scar*, *scout*, *scoop*, *school* — exception: Greek *ch* = /k/).

Etymology note: This pattern comes from the same logic as the soft *c* rule (taught in Y2): *c* is softened to /s/ when followed by *e*, *i*, or *y*. In *sc*, both letters experience this softening together, giving a single /s/ rather than /sk/.

Common mistakes

Wrong	Right	Reason
<i>leege / leag</i>	league	French <i>-gue</i> ending, silent <i>ue</i>
<i>tung</i>	tongue	French <i>-gue</i> ending
<i>antiek</i>	antique	French <i>-que</i> ending
<i>unike</i>	unique	French <i>-que</i> ending
<i>sience</i>	science	<i>sc + i = /s/</i> ; the <i>c</i> is not silent, it combines with <i>s</i>
<i>sene</i>	scene	<i>sc + e = /s/</i>
<i>disipline</i>	discipline	<i>sc</i> before <i>i = /s/</i> ; both the <i>c</i> and the <i>s</i> are doing their job

Word sort activity – Part A: -gue and -que

Sort these words by their ending.

Words: league · antique · tongue · unique · vague · technique · dialogue · plague · opaque ·
colleague · fatigue · grotesque

-gue words (end in /g/ sound)	-que words (end in /k/ sound)

Word sort activity – Part B: sc = /s/ or /sk/?

Say each word. Sort by the sound sc makes.

Words: science · scarf · scene · scoop · discipline · Scotland · fascinate · scent · scout · crescent · scissors · scramble

<i>sc = /s/</i>	<i>sc = /sk/</i>

Dictation sentences (teacher-ready)

The **scene** was **unique** — nobody had ever seen anything quite like it.

His **technique** was hard to describe, somewhere between **vague** and inventive.

The **science** lesson used a careful **discipline** of observation and recording.

She was fascinated by the **antique** found during the **crescent**-shaped excavation.

The team's **league** standing meant they needed a new **strategy** to avoid **fatigue**.

Classroom questions

Say *league* aloud. Can you hear the *ue* at the end? Why is it there?

What does the *ue* in *antique* tell us about how to pronounce the *q*?

Say *science* and *scarf*. The *sc* makes a different sound in each — why?

What language did *antique*, *unique*, and *technique* come from? How can you tell?

Tongue seems like it should be spelled *tung* — can you work out why it isn't?

Links to other rules

Y2: soft c rule (*c* before *e, i, y* makes /s/) — *sc* before *e/i* follows the same logic

Y3/4 rule 06: ch spellings from Greek and French — same story of French-origin unusual letter patterns

Source: DfE English Appendix 1: Spelling (2013). Etymology references verified against Oxford English Dictionary and standard etymological sources. All statutory word examples verified against the published statutory word lists for Years 3–4.