

Years 3 & 4 · Free resource

/ɪ/ spelt y and /ʌ/ spelt ou

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: /ɪ/ spelt y in the middle of a word

Children know *y* as the /aɪ/ sound at the end of words (*fly, by, my*) and as the /i:/ sound in some positions (*happy, baby*). In Years 3/4, the curriculum introduces *y* spelling the short /ɪ/ sound in the **middle** of a word.

Examples:

Word	Pattern
gym	y = /I/
myth	y = /I/
hymn	y = /I/
Egypt	y = /I/
pyramid	y = /I/
mystery †	y = /I/
symbol	y = /I/
system	y = /I/
rhythm	y = /I/ (Y5/6 statutory)
crystal	y = /I/
typical	y = /I/
physics	y = /I/
bicycle	y = /I/ (Y3/4 statutory)
cylinder	y = /I/
syllable	y = /I/

(† = Y3/4 statutory word)

Etymology note: These words almost all come from **Greek**, where the letter *upsilon* (υ) made the /ɪ/ sound — somewhere between English /ɪ/ and /ʊ/. When Greek words were absorbed into Latin and then English, *upsilon* was written as *y* and pronounced /ɪ/ in English. So: whenever you see *y* making the /ɪ/ sound in the middle of a word, think **Greek origin**. This explains *gym* (Greek *gymnos*), *myth* (Greek *mythos*), *physics* (Greek *physis*), *symbol* (Greek *symbolon*).

Rule B: /ʌ/ spelt *ou*

The short /ʌ/ sound (as in *cup, run, love*) is usually spelt *u* or *o*. In some words of French origin, it is spelt *ou*.

Examples:

Word	Meaning
young	not old
touch	to feel with the hand
double	twice as much
trouble	a problem or difficulty
country	a nation; rural land
cousin	a relative
encourage	to give support or confidence
flourish	to grow healthily; to thrive
nourish	to provide food; to sustain
rough	not smooth (note: <i>ough</i> spelling)
tough	strong; difficult
enough	as much as needed
couple	two people together; a small number
soup	(note: <i>ou</i> = /u:/ here – exception)

Etymology note: These *ou* words came from French, where *ou* makes the /u/ sound (as in *nous*, *vous*). When absorbed into English, the pronunciation shifted to /ʌ/ while the *ou* spelling was

kept. *Country* came from Old French *contrée*; *double* from Old French *doble*; *trouble* from Old French *truble*. The *ou* spelling is a historical record of the word's French origin.

Common mistakes

Wrong	Right	Reason
<i>gim</i>	gym	Greek origin: $\gamma = /ɪ/$
<i>mith</i>	myth	Greek origin: $\gamma = /ɪ/$
<i>bicikle</i>	bicycle	Greek: $\gamma = /ɪ/$ in <i>cy-</i>
<i>simbol</i>	symbol	Greek: $\gamma = /ɪ/$
<i>cuntry</i>	country	French origin: $ou = /ʌ/$
<i>dubble</i>	double	French origin: $ou = /ʌ/$
<i>trubbel</i>	trouble	French origin: $ou = /ʌ/$

Word sort

Sort by spelling pattern:

Words: gym · country · myth · trouble · symbol · young · pyramid · double · mystery · cousin · bicycle · encourage · crystal · touch · hymn

y = /ɪ/ (Greek origin)	ou = /ʊ/ (French origin)

Dictation sentences

The **mystery** of the ancient **pyramid** puzzled every visitor to **Egypt**.

He could **double** his score by learning the **rhythm** of the game.

Her **country** had **enough** resources to **encourage** new ideas.

The **symbol** on the map showed the location of the old **gym**.

Even in **trouble**, she kept a **typical** sense of calm.

Classroom questions

Gym, myth, symbol, and bicycle all have *y* making the /ɪ/ sound. What language did they come from?

Why do you think Greek words kept the letter *y* when they came into English?

Country, double, and trouble all spell /ʌ/ as *ou*. What language are they from?

Say *soup* aloud. The *ou* makes /uː/, not /ʌ/. How does this fit with the French origin pattern?

Can you find a word in this classroom that has *y* making the /ɪ/ sound?

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