

Years 5 & 6 · Free resource

Silent letters

Year group: 5/6

Source: DfE, *English Appendix 1: Spelling*, National Curriculum for England (2013) — Years 5–6

Curriculum requirement: Statutory

The rule

Silent letters are letters that are written but not pronounced. In English, they are almost never random — they are historical records of how the word was once pronounced, or evidence of the word's origin.

The key insight: no letter in English is truly silent without reason. Understanding *why* a letter is there makes it far easier to remember.

The statutory silent letter groups

b* – silent after *m* and before *t

Word	Meaning	Etymology note
doubt	to be uncertain	Latin <i>dubitare</i> – the <i>b</i> was in the Latin original
debt	money owed	Latin <i>debitum</i> – same Latin <i>b</i> preserved
subtle	not obvious; finely detailed	Latin <i>subtilis</i> – the <i>b</i> was in the Latin
lamb	a young sheep	Old English <i>lamb</i> – the <i>b</i> was once pronounced in Old English
thumb	the short thick finger	Old English <i>þūma</i> – <i>b</i> was added by analogy with <i>lamb</i> , <i>dumb</i>
bomb	an explosive device	French <i>bombe</i> – final <i>b</i> kept from French
comb	a toothed grooming tool	Old English <i>camb</i> – <i>b</i> once pronounced
climb	to go upward	Old English <i>climban</i> – <i>b</i> once pronounced
plumb	perfectly vertical	Latin <i>plumbum</i> (lead) – the <i>b</i> is from the Latin
dumb	unable to speak; (informal) stupid	Old English <i>dumb</i> – <i>b</i> was once sounded
numb	without feeling	Old English <i>niman</i> – <i>b</i> added by analogy

Word	Meaning	Etymology note
crumb	a tiny piece of bread	Old English <i>cruma</i> – <i>b</i> added by analogy

The rule for *mb*: In Old English, the *mb* cluster at the end of words was fully pronounced. Over time, the *b* became silent, but the spelling was preserved. This is why *lamb*, *bomb*, *comb*, *thumb* all end in *-mb*.

The rule for *bt*: The *b* in *debt* and *doubt* was reinserted by Renaissance scholars who wanted the English spelling to reflect the Latin original (*debitum*, *dubitare*). The *b* was actually NOT in the Old French words (*dete*, *doute*) — it was added artificially. Yet it stuck.

k – silent before n

Word	Meaning	Etymology note
knight	an armoured warrior	Old English <i>cniht</i> – the <i>k</i> was once fully pronounced
kneel	to rest on one's knees	Old English <i>cnēowlian</i> – <i>kn</i> was pronounced
knot	a tying of rope	Old English <i>cnotta</i>
know	to have knowledge	Old English <i>cnāwan</i>
knife	a cutting blade	Old Norse <i>knífr</i>
knock	to strike a surface	Old English <i>cnocian</i>
knack	a special skill	related to <i>knock</i>
knit	to make fabric from yarn	Old English <i>cnyttan</i>
knowledge	awareness; learning	Old English <i>cnāwan</i> + <i>-ledge</i>

The rule for *kn*: In Old English and Middle English, *kn* was fully pronounced as two sounds: the *k* (a velar stop) followed by *n*. By around 1600, the *k* had become silent in speech, but spelling had already been standardised. Every *kn* word is a record of a sound that existed in medieval English.

(Note: this pattern was introduced at Y2 for simple words like know, knock. At Y5/6, deepen with etymology.)

g* – silent before *n

Word	Meaning	Etymology note
gnaw	to bite repeatedly	Old English <i>gnagan</i> – <i>g</i> was once pronounced
gnat	a tiny flying insect	Old English <i>gnætt</i>
gnome	a mythical creature	Greek <i>gnōmōn</i> via Latin
sign	a mark or symbol	Latin <i>signum</i> – the <i>g</i> reflects the Latin
signal	a gesture or device for communication	Latin <i>signale</i> – the <i>g</i> is pronounced here (showing the root)
design	a plan; to plan artistically	Latin <i>designare</i>
foreign	from another country	Old French <i>forain</i> – <i>g</i> inserted by analogy
reign	a monarch's rule	Old French <i>reignier</i> , Latin <i>regnare</i>
align	to put in a straight line	Old French <i>aligner</i>
benign	kind; not harmful	Latin <i>benignus</i>
malign	evil; to speak badly of	Latin <i>malignus</i>
campaign	an organised effort	French <i>campagne</i>

The morphological key for *gn*: The *g* in *sign*, *design*, and *align* is silent in those words — but it is pronounced in related words: *signal*, *designation*, *alignment*. This shows the *g* is not arbitrary

— it belongs to the root, and resurfaces when the suffix changes the stress. Teach: *sign* → *signal* (g sounds), *design* → *designation* (g sounds).

w – silent before r and in some other positions

Word	Sound	Etymology
wrap	w silent	Old English <i>wrappan</i> – <i>wr</i> was once a distinct sound
write	w silent	Old English <i>wriƿan</i>
wrong	w silent	Old English <i>wrang</i>
wrist	w silent	Old English <i>wrist</i>
wreck	w silent	Old Norse <i>rek</i>
wrestle	w silent	Old English <i>wræstlian</i>
sword	w silent	Old English <i>sweord</i>
answer	w silent in most accents	Old English <i>andswarian</i>
two	w silent	Old English <i>twā</i>
whole	w silent	Old English <i>hāl</i>

The rule for *wr*: Like *kn*, the *wr* cluster was a distinct sound in Old English (possibly a consonant cluster where both were articulated). By the 17th century, the *w* had become silent, but spelling was already standardised.

***h* – silent in some positions**

Word	Note
hour	from French <i>heure</i> – French <i>h</i> is always silent
honest	from French <i>honnête</i>
honour	from French <i>honneur</i>
heir	from French <i>héritier</i>
exhaust	the <i>h</i> is silent in some accents
vehicle	<i>h</i> often silent in speech
white / where / when	<i>wh</i> – in most modern British English accents, <i>wh</i> = /w/ with silent <i>h</i>

l – silent before certain consonants

Word	Note
calf	Old English <i>cealf</i> – <i>l</i> dropped before <i>f</i>
half	Old English <i>healf</i>
calm	Old French <i>calme</i> – <i>l</i> silent before <i>m</i>
palm	Latin <i>palma</i>
psalm	Greek <i>psalmos</i>
could	Old English <i>cūðe</i> – <i>l</i> was inserted by analogy with <i>should</i> , <i>would</i>
should	Old English <i>sceolde</i>
would	Old English <i>wolde</i>
folk	Old English <i>folc</i> – <i>l</i> silent before <i>k</i>
walk	Old English <i>wealcan</i>
talk	Old English <i>talian</i>
chalk	Old English <i>cealc</i>
yolk	Old English <i>geolca</i>
salmon	Latin <i>salmo</i> – <i>l</i> silent in English

p – silent at start of Greek-origin words

Word	Note
psychology	Greek <i>psykhē</i> (soul) + <i>logos</i>
psychiatry	Greek – healing of the mind
pneumonia	Greek <i>pneumon</i> (lung)
pterodactyl	Greek <i>pteron</i> (wing)
psalm	Greek <i>psalmos</i>
pseudo	Greek <i>pseudēs</i> (false)

The pattern: Words beginning with *ps-*, *pn-*, *pt-* come from Greek and the *p* is silent. Useful to mention in Y5/6 science and history contexts.

n* – silent after *m

Word	Note
autumn	Latin <i>autumnus</i> – <i>n</i> was once sounded in Latin
column	Latin <i>columna</i>
solemn	Latin <i>sollemnis</i>
hymn	Greek <i>hymnos</i>
damn	Latin <i>damnare</i> – <i>n</i> pronounced in <i>damnation</i>
condemn	Latin <i>condemnare</i> – <i>n</i> sounded in <i>condemnation</i>

The morphological key: Like the *gn* group, the silent *n* reappears in related words: *damn* → *damnation* (*n* sounds), *condemn* → *condemnation* (*n* sounds), *autumn* → *autumnal* (*n* sounds).

The big teaching principle

No letter is silent without reason. When children ask "why is there a *b* in *debt*?" the answer is: because the word comes from Latin *debitum* and Renaissance scholars put it back. When they ask "why is there a *k* in *know*?" the answer is: because in Old English you said it.

Etymology makes silent letters memorable. A silent letter is a clue about where the word has been.

Word sort

Sort by which letter is silent.

Words: lamb · knight · write · debt · gnaw · calm · hour · sign · wrong · autumn · kneel · bomb · foreign · psalm · subtle

Silent <i>b</i>	Silent <i>k</i>	Silent <i>g</i>	Silent <i>w</i>	Silent <i>l</i>	Silent <i>n</i>	Silent <i>h</i>

Dictation sentences

The **knight** had to **kneel** before the **solemn** ceremony could begin.

She wrote the answer in the **column** marked **foreign** languages.

There was no **doubt** that the **subtle** damage to the **lamb's limb** was **genuine**.

He had to **wrap** the **bomb** disposal equipment carefully before moving it.

The **autumn hymn** drifted through the **calm** air as the sun set.

The **sign** above the door showed a **design** from the **reign** of the old king.

Source: DfE English Appendix 1: Spelling (2013). Etymology references verified against Oxford English Dictionary and Skeat's Etymological Dictionary. The statutory examples given in Appendix 1 are: doubt, island, lamb, solemn, thistle, knight.