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The English language is full of words whose written form can be deceptive. Unlike a language like Spanish, in English we rarely sound out all the letters that we see.The result is a series of words which are written in a way which seems very different from their sound. Lots of these strange ‘silent’ letters are due to the history of the English language. Not only has it absorbed plenty of vocabulary from invaders, like French, Latin and Norse, but the eventual standardization of sounds in the English language has meant that certain words, whilst keeping their older forms of spelling, have had their sounds refined and softened.Thanks to this development of the language, we are now left with hundreds and hundreds of English words which have some surprising silent letters. Here we take a look at some common words with silent letters, and how to pronounce them.The silent K: You need to knowThe ‘k’ in English is traditionally a hard-sounding vowel ‘calh’ or ‘kah’, especially when it’s at the end of a word: back, for instance. However, when the letter ‘k’ precedes the letter ‘n’ at the start of a word, it falls silent; such as ‘know’. ‘Know’ is interesting, because even though the ‘k’ is silent (we don’t say ‘cah-noh’), it is not pronounced the same way as ‘now’. ‘Know’ = noh. ‘Now’ = naow.Here’s a few words which have a silent k at the start and a hard k later on: knock, knack, knapsack, knickers, knuckle.The silent P: Psychology with no receiptThe ‘p’, usually a popping sound made at the front of the mouth, is silenced when it precedes an ‘s’. Most of these words with silent ‘p’s are to do with the mind or the medicine of the mind: Psychology, psychiatry, psyche, psychological, psychotic or pseudo.Indeed, when p or ‘ps’ starts a word it is almost always medical. This is thanks to its Greek origins. ‘Pneumonia’ – caused when you catch excessive cold – also has a silent p, so it is pronounced ‘new-moan-ee-a’.Finally, you’ll every now and then find a silent p in the middle of a word, such as ‘receipt’. In English we say ‘re-seet’, with no ‘p’ sounding in the second syllable, though some would argue that the p is there to slightly soften the sound.The silent c: Miscellaneous muscleA bit like the ‘k’, the ‘c’ is usually a hard sound (unless followed by an ‘h’; ‘ch’ is soft, think ‘cheese’, ‘cheers’). However, when following an ‘s’ it is often silent.‘Muscle’ – we say the same as ‘mussel’, the seafood.‘Miscellaneous’ – pronounced ‘mis-sell-lay-nee – ous’.Whilst you do not hear the c, it does slightly change the sound. ‘Scene’ for instance, has the first sound slightly further forward in the mouth than ‘seen’, it’s rhyme. Likewise, the ‘c’ works in slightly softening what would otherwise be a very hard, hissy ‘ss’ sound. Other key words with silent ‘c’s include: ascend, ascent/descent, fascinate, fluorescent, incandescent, obscene, scene, scenario or scented.The silent g: Benign gnomesThis is one of our favourites. There are many words which sound normal, and should be spelt in a normal simple way – and all of a sudden there’s a ‘g’ in there. ‘Foreign’ is a classic example – the only thing ‘foreign’ in that word is the ‘g’!We don’t sound the hard ‘guh’ sound of the ‘g’ in these words, but its inclusion does give a slight lengthening of the vowel sound – ‘for-reyn’. Here’s a few more examples: gnome, benign, malign, design, deign, gnash, sign... A great example of how the ‘silent’ g isn’t quite silent, if we didn’t pronounce the ‘g’ at all, this would be ‘sin’. However, the ‘g’ lightens and elongates the vowel sound – to be pronounced ‘sigh-n’. This is true for all ‘ign’ words – imagine that the ‘ign’ sounds like ‘sigh’ (de-sigh-n; mal-ighn).Learn English today with the world’s largest online school: EF English Live. We provide support, structure and help achieve your goals. Start learning English today!The silent b: A bomb with aplombThere are plenty of words in the English language that smuggle in a ‘b’ where it’s not needed, supposedly.The silent b, usually coming after an m, is not pronounced ‘b’ as it would normally be at the front of a word (‘boy’). However, as with most of these examples, it does soften and slightly elongate the word – so whereas ‘tomb’ would sound like ‘toh-m’ or the name ‘Tom’ is we just took out the b, ‘tomb’ is pronounced ‘tooh-m’.Here are some key examples: climb, comb, crumb, debt, thumb, tomb or womb.The silent n: Damn solemn autumnNot dissimilar to the silent b, the silent n usually appears after an ‘m’ and is not pronounced ‘nuh’ as an ‘n’ normally is, but simply functions to soften the words final vowel sound a little. The ‘n’ is silenced, within the mouth, but it makes these words subtly longer than if they just ended in ‘m’: hymn, damn, solemn, condemn or column.The silent t: A whistle! Listen!Ah the confusing silent ‘t’. The ‘t’ – ‘tuh’ sound – is one of the most recognisable and strong sounds in the English language – yet in the middle of ‘listen’, it disappears!Instead the ‘t’ becomes a little like another, slightly shorter ‘s’: listen becomes ‘lissen’; whistle is ‘whissle’ etc. Here’s a few more: hustle, jostle, apostle, bristle, thistle or wrestle.Finally, an interesting fact. A long while ago this ‘t’ wasn’t silent. This letter would have been sounded in many regional Englishes, but during the English Vowel Shift which took place from the late 1400s on, these regional anomalies were softened up. In fact, ‘list’ could be used as a shortened form of the word, very common in Shakespeare’s England and before. Here’s a bit of Antony and Cleopatra from 1607, act 4 scene 3:Peace, what noise? / List, list! / Hark! / Music / the air.Want to learn more? Visit our website to start learning English online today!Article related: 10 secrets to success for English speakers Posted at 16:57h in Uncategorized by Have you ever noticed that letters in some English words are not pronounced? Here are the top five words that surprise non-native English speakers in my accent training courses. 1. Bomb The “b” in the word “bomb” is silent. Finish this word with an “m.” Other words that fit this pattern: limb, climb, lamb. 2. Debt Again, no “b”! Skip the “b” and just pronounce the “t.” Other words like this: doubt. 3. Talk Don’t pronounce the “l” in words ending in “-alk.” Pronounce an “ah” sound for the vowel (see tutorial here) and then produce a “k” to end the word. Other words that fit this pattern: walk, stalk, chalk. 4. Half Skip the “l” and end the word with “f.” Other words that fit this pattern: calf, behalf. 5. Receipt Skip the “p” and end the word with a “t.” This list is just the beginning of all the confusion the English language as to offer. Subscribe to the blog to get the latest American English pronunciation tips. Words with Silent Letters The chart below highlights many common words that have a letter that is not pronounced. silent b bomb, debt, limb, thumb, crumb, doubt, numb, tomb, climb, dumb, plumber, comb, lamb, subtle silent c indict, muscle silent ch yacht silent d adjective, adjust, handsome, Wednesday silent g align, campaign, diaphragm, resign, assign, champagne, foreign, sign, benign, design, reign silent gh bright, fight, light, bought, fought, night, caught, height, weigh, drought, high, weight silent h ghost, heir, honest, hour, honor, herb, vehicle, exhibit silent k knee, knife, know, knot silent l calm, folk, psalm, talk, chalk, half, salmon, palm, walk, could, Lincoln, should, would silent n hymn, autumn, column silent p cupboard, pneumonia, psalm, psychology, psychic, receipt silent s aisle, debris, island, Arkansas, Illinois silent t ballet, Chevrolet, mortgage, gourmet, bouquet, Christmas, often, debut, buffet, fasten, whistle, soften, castle, listen, fillet, rapport silent th asthma, months, clothes silent w answer, sword, toward June 01, 2012 June 01, 2012/ Amanda Lillet Which high-frequency words have a silent consonant? Hi again, and welcome back to Seattle Learning Academy’s American English pronunciation podcast. My name is Mandy, and this is our 156th episode.I’ve just created a new lesson on Pronunciation that lists all of the words in the top 5000 most frequent words that have a silent consonant. I didn’t include silent vowels because their spelling rules are so complicated that they are very difficult to classify as being “silent” or not.The top 5,000 most frequent words is not just an arbitrary number. That is the number of words listed in Mark Davies and Dee Gardner’s Frequency Dictionary of Contemporary English. I’ve talked about the frequency dictionary before, but in case you don’t know what it is, it’s basically just a list of words that includes information about the part of speech that the word is being used as and also how frequently the word is used in English. This frequency dictionary also lists other words that are usually used alongside each word.To get an idea of how important the 5,000 most frequent words are in English, it states in the preface of the Frequency Dictionary of Contemporary English that “the 4,000-5,000 most frequent words account for up to 95 percent of a written text and the top 1,000 most frequent words account for 85 percent of speech.” So, if you can handle the top 5,000 words in English, you’ll do quite well in most any situation.I never would have guessed that the letters l, b, and g are the most common silent consonants in the top 2,000 words in English. Those are the words I’m going to talk about today. In fact, there are 13 words in the 2,000 most frequent words in English that have a silent consonant. Seven of those words have a silent l, four have a silent b, and two have a silent g.Let’s take a quick look at these 13 words.Here are the top words with a silent l listed from the more frequent words to the less frequent words:wouldcouldshouldtalkwalkhalfalkYes, the word talk is included twice. First it’s included for the verb form, as in “I talked to him,” then again for the noun form, as in “She gave a very long talk.” The pronunciation of both forms is identical.Now here are the four words with a silent b:climbdoubtdebtbomband here are the two words with a silent g:campaigndesignThere are 10 more words in the top 5,000 words with silent letters. I’ve included those words in our new Silent Letters lesson on Pronunciation. In the lesson I also include the word’s frequency as well as its part of speech. I’ll link to that free lesson from this episode’s transcript page. As always you can find the transcript by going to www.pronuncian.com/podcast. From there, click Episode 156.I’m going to say all of those top 13 words again, and I want you to note the silent letter. Repeat each word after me:wouldcouldshouldtalkwalkhalfalkclimbdoubtdebtbombcampaigndesignAgain, you can find the link to the free lesson that lists all of the words with silent consonants by going to this show’s transcript page.That’s all for today everyone. This has been a Seattle Learning Academy digital publication. SLA is where the world comes to learn.Thanks for listening.Bye-bye.Davies, Mark, and Dee Gardner. A Frequency Dictionary of Contemporary American English. London: Routledge, 2010. Print. June 01, 2012/ Amanda Lillet/

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