



Why Some Words Have Silent Letters

KS2 ENGLISH

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Ages 10-14 ⌚ 3 min read

What Are Silent Letters?

Silent letters are letters that appear in a word but don't make a sound when you say it. For example, the **'k'** in **'knight'** is silent—we say 'nite' not 'k-nite'. Other common silent letters include the **'b'** in **'doubt'**, the **'gh'** in **'laugh'**, and the **'w'** in **'wrap'**.

English has loads of these tricky words, which is why spelling can feel confusing. You might wonder: if we don't say the letter, why is it even there?

How Did Silent Letters Get There?

The answer takes us back in time. **English changed over hundreds of years** as people from different places spoke it and changed how it sounded. However, the spelling didn't always change to match.

When **French people** invaded **England in 1066**, they brought their language with them. Many **French words** entered English, along with their spellings. For instance, the **'k'** before **'n'** in words like **'knight'** came from **Old English and French** influences. People used to actually pronounce that **'k'** sound, but after hundreds of years, English speakers stopped saying it—even though they kept writing it.

Think of it like a family tradition: your great-grandparents baked their cake a certain way, so now you follow the recipe even though you've invented a quicker method. The old way is still written down in the recipe book, even if nobody does it that way anymore.

Why Didn't We Remove Them?

You might think it would be simpler to just delete silent letters and spell words the way they sound. But **English spelling got 'locked in'** after the invention of the **printing press in the 1440s**. When books started being printed, spelling became standardised. By then, silent letters were already part of many words, and it was easier to keep them than to change every book and every person's writing habits.

Another reason is that **silent letters help us understand word families**. The 'g' in 'sign' is silent, but it's pronounced in 'signal' and 'signature'. This helps us see that all these words are connected.

Silent Letters Around the World

English isn't alone in having this problem. Many languages have silent letters because of historical changes. Learning to spot patterns—like knowing that 'kn' usually starts words silently—makes spelling easier over time.