

Why are letters sometimes silent in English?

There are a number of reasons why letters are sometimes silent in English.

Frequently, the reason is historical: the letter was once pronounced. However, it is not anymore but the spelling hasn't changed. There are many such words. One example of this is *though* /ðəʊ/. In this word, the final consonant cluster used to be pronounced like 'ch' in *loch*. (Note that in other words, the cluster has come to be pronounced as /f/. One example of this is the word *enough*: /iːnʌf/). The final -e in words like *bite* used to indicate that the word was pronounced with two syllables: bi.te. Further, it indicated that the preceding vowel was long [bi:te]. Currently, -e is silent and of course, the pronunciation of the vowel 'i' has changed by the Great Vowel Shift: /baɪ/. Thus, silent letters may be a blast from the past.

Conversely, it has happened that letters have been added to words in the history of English. In this way, the spelling looked more like prestigious languages such as Latin and French at the time. These letters were never pronounced in English. Think, for example, of /b/ in *debt*. The original form was in fact *dette*, without 'b'. The corresponding Latin word was *debitum*.

Letters may also be left unpronounced because they occur in difficult sound combinations. For example, /ndk/ in *handkerchief* is somewhat difficult and therefore people can be heard saying [hæŋkɜ:tʃi:f].

Finally, a word may be borrowed from a language where the letter isn't pronounced. A well-known example of this is silent 'h' (h-dropping) in French. H-dropping has been carried over into *an (h)our* from *un (h)eur*. Sometimes, the consonant IS pronounced in the donor language but it does not fit English phonological rules. This is the case for the initial /p/ words like *psychology* [saɪkɒlədʒi].