



READING WORKS

Silent Letters

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Silent letters – why does English have so many?

Social and linguistic events have influenced English for more than 1000 years.

These influences have come from Classical Greek, Spanish, Italian, Portuguese, Old English, French, Classical Latin and Norse languages.

Another factor is that pronunciation changed, but the spelling didn't.

An additional complication happened when printers came to England from the Continent, bringing with them their own spelling patterns.

Some word origins you might like to know about ...

A silent *b* is in *debt* because 16th-century scholars wanted to show its Latin origin - *debitum*. Similarly, *doubt* comes from *dubitare*, and *reign* from *regno*.

The word *yacht* comes from 16th century Dutch word *jaghtschip*, meaning a fast pirate ship.

The digraph *gh* was pronounced as *x* in Middle English, as in *light*.

The *ph* sound comes from the 21st letter of the Greek alphabet, phi, pronounced as *fie* or *fee*.

Island was said to have come from the Latin word *insula*. However, the scholars of the time had made an error, but the *s* stayed put.

The more deeply you research, the more interesting the English language becomes!

silent **g**

gnome

gnaw

gnash

rei**gn**

gnat

gnarled

si**gn**

desi**gn**

forei**gn**

gnu



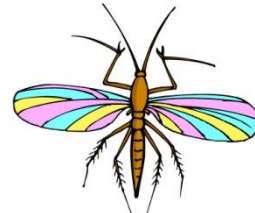
gnome



gnaw



reign



gnat



sign



gnarled



design



foreign



gnu (noo or n-you)

Your garden **g**nome looks grumpy!

Beavers **g**naw down trees to build dams to trap fish.

The Emperor will rei**gn** until his son comes of age.

Ouch! That **g**nat just bit me!

It's very important to stop at a **STOP sign**.

The tree was old and **g**narled.

Do you like the desi**gn** I'm using for the border of my story?

Oh no! A forei**gn** body has just entered my finger in the shape of a splinter!

The rarest **g**nu has a white tail.

silent **gh**

eight

lighthouse

straight

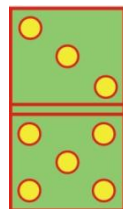
neighbour

daughter

sleigh

through

high



eight



night light lighthouse



as straight as an arrow



neighbour (US neighbor)



daughter



sleigh through



high heels



high tide

If five plus three equals **eight**, what's **eight** minus five?

Ships always look for the **bright light** of a **lighthouse** at **night**.

A **thoughtful** person is often said to be '**as straight** as an arrow'.

My **neighbour** and I sometimes chat over the fence for hours.

Mr Huan has just **taught** his young **daughter** to walk.

We **caught** a one-horse **sleigh** **through** the snow last **night**.

'Are these **high** heels the very **highest** you have?' asked **Leigh**.

If this isn't **high** tide, we **might** be in deep water very soon!

silent †

castle

listen

soften

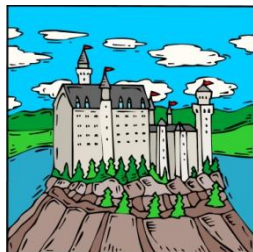
thistle

†sunami

chalet†

gourmet†

mort†gage



castle



listen soften



thistle



tsunami



chalet (*shall-ay*)



gourmet (*gor-may*)



mortgage

Castles built on hills made it easier to keep a watch for enemy invaders bristling with weapons.

My job is to listen to - and often soften - the sound inputs.

This thistle is a good logo to have as our depot letterhead.

A tsunami is a disaster of huge magnitude when it hits land.

Many students are staying at a Swiss chalet over the holidays. If the wind whistles, they'll put on their warm berets.

I hope this is gourmet cheese!

Are the mortgage costs on this fine cottage very high?