



## ASK A TEACHER

# Silent Letters

October 23, 2020

Today we answer a question from Ahmad in Iraq. He writes:

### Question:

Why do we have some silent letters in English? Like these words: write, know, half, hide. So, tell me, why should we write them, although we don't **pronounce** them?

Thank you – *Ahmad, Iraq.*

### Answer:

Dear Ahmad,

That is a great question. Like many of the unusual things about English, the answer is tied to history. Three of the reasons for the silent letters are changes in the language, borrowing words or terms from other languages and simplification of words.

If you pay close attention, you will find my answer to your second question: “Why should we write them?”

### Language changes

The first reason is that language changes over time, and as people move from place to place. The English language has been written for over 10 centuries. We all know the way speakers of English pronounce words has changed over the years. However, the **spelling** of many of those words has not changed.

About 400 years ago, people said the “w” sound or /w/ at the beginning of your first example, “write.” In the Northeast of Scotland, you may still hear the sound “v” at the beginning of the word.

You asked about the word “hide.” That has a silent “e” because at one time, there were two **syllables** or separate parts to the word. In Middle English, one might say /heed-uh/. This word was part of a big change in the way people speak English. It came along between the years 1400 and 1700 and is called the Great Vowel Shift. The vowels -- sounds you make with an open mouth -- began to change. /Heed-uh/ became “hide.” After that change, English speakers kept writing words with the silent “e” to show that the words have a long vowel sound within the word.

### **Borrowed words**

Another reason for silent letters is that English has borrowed words from many other languages. Words that came from Greek may start with the letters “ph”, but we say them with a “f” sound, /f/ as in “physical.” **Scholars** decided to write them in the Greek way to show their roots.

### **Make it simpler**

You can imagine that people want to make the language they speak simpler. That is true with pronunciation, but until today, there have been few major changes to the spelling of English words. Two centuries ago, Noah Webster tried to change American spelling in his **dictionary**. He is the reason Americans spell “color” without the letter “u” and spell “jail” as j-a-i-l, not “g-a-o-l.”

Ahmad, the second word you asked about -- “know” -- came from an old German word. In Old English and in old German, the “k” sound was heard at the beginning. But to make it simpler, people started to say the “n” at the beginning. Today, we write the word “know” as “k-n-o-w” to show that it is different from the word spelled n-o, or “no.” The same is true for all other words that begin with the letters “kn.”

I hope this helps you understand our strange way of writing words, Ahmad!

And that’s *Ask a Teacher* for this week.

What question do *you* have about American English? Send us an email at [learningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:learningenglish@voanews.com)

I'm Jill Robbins.

*Jill Robbins wrote this story for VOA Learning English. George Grow was the editor.*

*See also: #7 in this story, [Nine Surprising Facts About the English Language](#)*

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## Words in This Story

**pronounce** - *v.* to make the sound of (a word or letter) with your voice

**spelling** - *n.* the process of writing the letters of a word

**syllable** - *n.* any one of the parts into which a word is naturally divided when it is pronounced

**scholar** - *n.* a specialist in a field of study, such as language or the humanities

**dictionary** - *n.* a book or electronic guide that lists the words of a language and gives their meaning

*Do you have a question for the teacher? We want to hear from you. Write to us in the [Comments Section](#) or send us an email at [learningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:learningenglish@voanews.com).*

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