

LESSON III

PRONUNCIATION AND SPELLING

English Spelling is not phonetic

Everyone knows that there is not a one-to-one correspondence between spelling and pronunciation in English. The 44 different sounds we use when speaking English are written down using only 26 letters. This means that although there obviously is some correspondence between sounds and letters, many letters can represent more than one sound. This is seen, for example, in the letter a, which can represent /æ/ as in apple, or /ɑ:/ as in ask, amongst numerous other possibilities. With consonants too, the letter c can be pronounced as /k/ as in can, or /s/ as in cinema. To add to the complication, many sounds can be represented by more than one letter or combination of letters; for example, /u/ appear in put, book, and could.

Although the relationship between spelling and pronunciation is very complex in English, it is not the case that the learners will always have to make a complete guess in such circumstances, nor that they will have to learn the spelling and pronunciation of thousands of words without recourse to any general rules. This is because English spelling is not as irregular as it seems. Surveys of the system have shown that over 80% of English words are spelled according to regular patterns, and that there are fewer than 500 words (out of an estimated total of over a million words) whose spelling can be considered completely irregular. The fact that some of these words also happen to be amongst the most common ones (e.g. are, said, come, how, what, could) gives a distorted impression of irregularity in the system.

Regular Features of English Pronunciation and Spelling

For practical reasons, the regular features of English pronunciation and spelling will be presented in the following tables, on the next pages:

Spelling and Pronunciation Tables

Tables 1 to 5 analyze the links between the spelling and the pronunciation of consonants. Tables 6 to 7 analyze vowel letters and sounds, and table 8 looks at the interplay of vowels and

consonants. Where there is significant variation in ‘General American’ English (the standard form in the USA), this is noted in the tables. ‘GA’. Is used here as an abbreviation.

Table 1: ‘Simple’ consonants

The following consonants have one main sound association.

Letter	Sound	Examples
b	/b/	<i>beach, cabbage, cab</i>
d	/d/	<i>do, oddity, cod</i>
f	/f/	<i>for, coffee, off</i>
h	/h/	<i>hello, behind</i>
j	/dʒ /	<i>judge, major</i>
k	/k/	<i>kick, making, take</i>
l	/l/	<i>leg, hello, poll</i>
m	/m/	<i>me, coming, plum</i>
n	/n/	<i>no, any, plain</i>
r	/r/	<i>run, carrot</i>
s	/s/	<i>sit, missing, kiss</i>
t	/t/	<i>tub, butter, but</i> (Letter <i>t</i> between vowel sounds in often voiced in G.A.)
v	/v/	<i>very, having, brave</i>
w	/w/	<i>we, towards</i>
z	/z/	<i>zebra, lizard, maze</i>

Some of the above letters do have alternative sounds, but they tend to be restricted to one or two words, like the /v/ sound of *f* in *of*. Notice also that when the above letters are doubled (as in *letter, cabbage, coffee* etc.) the sound does not change.

Table 2: ‘Silent’ consonants

The following letters appear in spellings where they are not actually pronounced.

Letter	Silent in
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b	<i>sub<u>b</u>tle, doub<u>t</u>, clim<u>b</u></i>
c	<i>sc<u>i</u>ssors, sc<u>e</u>ne, musc<u>l</u>e</i>
d	<i>Wed<u>n</u>esday, sand<u>w</u>ich, hand<u>k</u>erchief</i>
g	<i>gn<u>a</u>w, ou<u>gh</u>t, lon<u>g</u></i>
h	<i><u>h</u>our, wh<u>a</u>t, ou<u>gh</u>t</i>
k	<i><u>k</u>now, <u>k</u>nee</i>
l	<i>talk, half, cou<u>l</u>d</i>
n	<i>autumn<u>n</u>, column<u>n</u></i>
p	<i><u>p</u>sychology, <u>p</u>neumonia, cup<u>p</u>board, receipt</i>
r	<i>car<u>r</u>, more<u>r</u>, core<u>r</u>, bother<u>r</u> (in non-rhotic accents)</i>
s	<i>is<u>l</u>and, ais<u>l</u>e</i>
t	<i>list<u>en</u>, whist<u>l</u>e, of<u>t</u>en (though some speakers pronounce it in <i>often</i>)</i>
w	<i><u>w</u>rite, <u>w</u>rong, <u>tw</u>o, ans<u>w</u>er, yell<u>ow</u></i>

Table 3: Consonants with different ‘flavours’

Some consonants can be pronounced in different ways. (There are exceptions to the rules here, but the following examples illustrate the most common alternative pronunciations.)

Letter	Alternative Pronunciation
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c	/k/	<i>Cat</i>
	/s/	when followed by <i>e, i,</i> or <i>y</i> : <i>cent, cinema, cycle</i>
	/ʃ/	before certain suffixes: <i>delicious, prejudicial</i>
g	/g/	<i>go</i>
	/dʒ/	when followed by <i>e, i,</i> or <i>y</i> : <i>gentle, gin, gym, refrigerate</i> (Some exceptions are very common words: <i>get, give,</i> and <i>girl</i>)
	/dʒ/	before a suffix: <i>contagious, prestigious</i>
s	/ʒ/	in certain originally borrowed words: <i>prestige, mirage</i>
	/z/	<i>sun, sleep, loss, eats, sleeps</i>
	/s/	when between two vowels: <i>present, losing</i>
	/z/	at the end of a word, after a voiced consonant (<i>hands, minds</i>), or after a vowel (<i>loses, houses</i>)
	/ʃ/	between a consonant and a following <i>i</i> : <i>mansion, pension</i>
	/z/	between two vowels: <i>vision, measure, lesion</i>
t	/t/	<i>cat, too</i>
	/ʃ/	when followed by a letter <i>i</i> in many suffixed words: <i>information, substantial, ambitious</i>
	/tʃ/	in words ending in <i>-ure</i> (<i>picture, furniture, denture</i>) and when followed by the sound /u:/ (<i>Tuesday, tumour, tumultuous</i>)
x		<i>fix, mix, fixture, mixture</i>
	/ks/	between vowels: <i>exam, exact</i>
	/gz/	at the beginning of words like <i>xylophone</i> and <i>xenophobe</i>
y	/z/	at the beginning of words: <i>yes, yellow</i>
	/j/	between consonants: <i>gym, bicycle</i>
	/ɪ/	at the end of words: <i>city, busy</i> (In connected speech this can be pronounced as /ɪ/.)
	/i:/	in short words (<i>why, my, by</i>) and in stressed final syllables (<i>apply, deny</i>)
	/aɪ/	in words ending in <i>-fy</i> (<i>satisfy, beautify</i>) and in <i>gynaecology, psychology</i> and related words.
	/aɪ/	Helps form diphthongs in <i>boy, gay, buy, obey,</i> etc.

Table 4: Double consonants

Most doubled consonants do not change from their single sound value (e.g. *rub, rubber, fat, fatter, thin, thinner*). The following doubles, however, can undergo the changes described below:

cc	/ks/	when followed by <i>e</i> or <i>i</i> : <i>success, accident, succinct</i>
	/tʃ/	in borrowed Italian word: <i>cappuccino</i>
gg	/dʒ/	when followed by <i>e</i> or <i>i</i> : <i>suggest, exaggerate</i>
ss	/ʃ/	when followed by <i>-ion</i> (<i>passion, permission</i>) and <i>-ure</i> (<i>pressure</i>)
zz	/ts/	in some borrowed Italian words: <i>pizza, mozzarella</i>

Table 5: Consonant digraphs/other combinations

Digraphs are two letters which represent one sound in a word. Some digraphs have more than one sound value.

ck	/k/	<i>pick, kick, pickle</i>
ch	/tʃ/	<i>chip, change</i>
	/k/	<i>character, technique</i>
	/ʃ/	<i>machine</i>
gh	/g/	<i>ghost, ghastly</i>
	/f/	<i>tough, cough, silent, ought, though</i>
ng	/ŋ/	<i>sing, thing, singing</i>
ph	/f/	<i>phone, photograph, graphology</i>
qu	/kw/	<i>queen, quiz, antiquated</i>
	/k/	in a word ending in <i>-que</i> (<i>antique, oblique</i>) or at the beginning of some borrowed words (<i>quiche</i>)
sh	/ʃ/	<i>ship, sheep, cash, fashion</i>
tch	/tʃ/	<i>watch, catch, matching</i> (This is a trigraph.)
th	/θ/	<i>theatre, bath</i>
	/ð/	<i>this, brother, bathe</i>
wh	/w/	<i>what, where, nowhere</i>
	/h/	<i>who, whole</i>

Table 6: The ‘basic menu’ of vowel letters

The five vowel letters may be seen to have their most basic sounds when they occur in very short words, between two single consonant letters. Some dialects of English may have other variations to the ones listed here.

Letter	Pronounced as	
a	/æ/	<i>cat, hat, fat</i>
	/ɑ:/	in RP and Southern British English before some two-consonant letter combination: <i>bath, grass</i> but not before others: <i>bank, mass</i>
e	/e/	<i>let, met, set</i>
i	/ɪ/	<i>sit, lit, kit</i>
o	/ɒ/	<i>hot, got, lot</i> (o is pronounced as /ɑ:/ in G.A.)
u	/ʊ/	<i>cup, bus, hut</i>

Table 7: Vowel digraphs/other combination

English has a number of vowel digraphs where two vowel letters ‘take the name’ of the first letter, e.g. *ai* is pronounced /eɪ/ like the letter A. Most vowel digraphs have more than one sound associated with them –some have many more than one.

Letter	Pronounced as			
ai	/eɪ/	<i>raid, train</i>		
ea	/i:/	<i>dream, neat</i>	/eə/	<i>bear, tear</i> (verb)
	/eɪ/	<i>break, great</i>	/ɪə/	<i>near, tear</i> (noun)
	/e/	<i>dead, ready</i>	/ɑ:/	<i>heart, hearth</i>
	/ɜ:/	<i>learn, heard</i>		
ee	/i:/	<i>tree, need</i>	/ɪ/	weak form as in <i>been</i> /bɪn/
ei	/i:/	<i>seize, either, receive</i>	/eɪ/	<i>eight, reign</i>
	/aɪ/	<i>height, either</i>		
ie	/aɪ/	<i>die, pie, cried</i>	/i:/	<i>piece, believe</i>
	/e/	<i>friend</i>	/ɪə/	<i>pierce, fierce</i>
oa	/əʊ/	<i>coat, goal, approach</i>	/ /	<i>abroad, board</i>

ou	/əʊ/	<i>soul, shoulder</i>	/u:/	<i>soup, routine</i>
	/aʊ/	<i>house, sprout</i>	/ /	<i>cough</i>
	/ʌ/	<i>double, trouble, tough</i>	/ /	<i>bought, nought</i>
ue	/u:/	<i>blue, due, sue</i>	/ju:/	<i>sue, value, queue</i>
ui	/u:/	<i>fruit, suit, juice</i>	/ɪ/	<i>building, biscuit</i>
	/ju:/	for some speakers: <i>suit</i>	/aɪ/	<i>guide</i>

Some combinations of vowel letters do not follow the ‘naming’ rule, as follows:

au	/ /	<i>daughter, cause</i> (These tend towards /a:/ in G.A.)
	/a:/	<i>aunt, laugh, laughter</i> (These are pronounced /æ/ in G.A.)
	/ /	<i>because, claustrophobia</i> (These tend towards /a:/ in G.A.)
eu	/u:/ or /ju:/	<i>neutral, neuter</i>
	/ / or /juə/	for some speakers: <i>neuralgic, neurosis, Europe</i>
oi	/ /	<i>Coin, join, disappoint</i>
oo	/u:/	<i>food, boot</i>
	/ʌ/	<i>blood, flood</i>
	/ʊ/	<i>book, foot</i>

In addition, letter combinations composed of a vowel and a consonant (always *w* or *y*) are linked to particular sounds.

aw	/ /	<i>jaw, flaw.</i> (These tend towards /a:/ in G.A.)
ay	/eɪ/	<i>today, way, say</i>
ew	/u:/ or /ju:/	<i>new, knew, threw</i>
	/əʊ/	<i>sew</i>
cy	/i:/	<i>key</i>
	/eɪ/	<i>obey</i>
ow	/əʊ/	<i>own, thrown</i>
	/aʊ/	<i>town, crown</i>
oy	/ /	<i>toy, boy, enjoy</i>

Table 8: Modifiers and preservatives

Certain letters modify or preserve other sounds within a word. The most important of these are outlined below.

The 'e effect'	<p>At the end of a one-syllable word, a final <i>e</i> can make the preceding vowel 'say its name': <i>fat/fate, scent/scene, bit/bite, not/note, cut/cute</i>. (Exceptions to this rule, however, include some very common words, many ending in <i>-ve, -me</i> and <i>-ne</i>: <i>have, live, move, above, some, come, none, gone</i>.) A final <i>-le</i> can do the same: <i>tab/table, lad/ladle</i>.</p> <p>The effect is sometimes preserved even if the <i>e</i> from the root form is no longer present and the end of the word has been changed: <i>complete/completion, smile/smiling</i>.</p>
The 'y effect'	This can be similar to the <i>y</i> effect: <i>lad/lady, tin/tiny</i>
'Double-consonant blockers'	When a consonant is doubled, the 'e effect' is usually lost: <i>fat/fatter, bit/bitten</i> . The 'y effect' is lost too: <i>mummy, daddy</i> , as is the 'le effect': <i>knob, noble, nobble</i>
'Extra-consonant blockers'	A similar effect is noticed if an extra different consonant is added: <i>produce/production, describe/description</i>
The 'r effect'	<i>r</i> can modify a preceding vowel sound: <i>cat/cart, par/part</i>
The 'w effect'	<i>w</i> can change a preceding vowel (<i>hot/how, lot/low</i>) and a subsequent vowel (<i>work, war, world</i>)
The 'l effect'	<i>l</i> within a word can also change vowel quality (<i>bad/bald, cod/cold</i>), as can a double <i>-l</i> (compare the vowel sound in <i>pile</i> and <i>pill</i>). It can also 'sneak in', changing the vowel sound but keeping quite: <i>half, calm</i> .

Exercise 1: Pronounce the following words!

Back	mad	wrap	damn	cash
Abbey	absence	abstract	anxious	adequate
Bar	charge	shark	alarm	apart
Ask	task	glass	pass	cast

All	call	small	chalk	walk
Audience	August	author	autumn	authority
About	aboard	adopt	accept	advance
Any	anybody	anyone	anything	anywhere
Ale	bale	frame	game	shade
Aim	jail	trail	braise	obtain
Bay	clay	spray	way	say
Bare	rare	scare	hair	stair
Bed	shed	mend	cent	rest
Bee	speed	bleed	cheek	steep
Pea	beach	steak	feast	cheat
Dead	head	threat	sweat	jealous
Bear	pear	wear	tear (v)	treasure
Dear	shear	spear	tear (n)	year
Brick	which	bitch	pitch	spill
Dice	mice	Mike	smile	devise
Die	lie	tie		
Bind	blind	kind	wind (v)	wind (n)
High	bright	night	right	tight
Brief	thief	belief	priest	yield
Fire	shire	admire	umpire	diet
Stir	firm	skirt	third	dirty
Block	knock	chop	cloth	box
Zoo	fool	bloom	choose	troop
Move	prove	improve		
Good	cook	shook	wool	would
Choice	voice	alloy	annoy	enjoy
Go	no	so	ago	

Coach	load	soak	coast	goat
Blow	crow	grown	bow (n)	bow (v)
Code	stone	dose	rope	rose
Boor	moor	poor		
Loud	bound	mouth	shout	south
Cow	down	gown	how	now
Cord	born	horse	port	short
Boar	board	oar	soar	floor
Bought	brought	fought	thought	sought
Touch	tough	done	month	wonder
Blood	flood			
Flour	hour	bowel	flower	shower
Collect	collide	combine	produce	propose

Bull	bush	butcher	pudding	push
Dug	drum	lunch	brush	bust
Burn	curse	burst	burden	urgent
Buy	guy			
Cure	pure	sure	lure	

Consonant letters

climb	plumb	plumber	plumbing	subtle
cease	ceiling	deceive	grace	palace
city	civil	civilize	citizen	circumstance
cycle	cyclist	cylinder	bicycle	
cage	card	carry	carriage	castle
architect	character	chemistry	Christmas	chronology
chain	change	chicken	lunch	reach
adjective	adjunct	edge	judge	lodge
gang	gale	gallant	give	gift

go	goose	gorgeous	lagoon	gospel
gum	guard	league	guardian	guidance
gem	germ	gesture	general	generous
age	message	charge	agent	plunge
gin	giant	ginger	gigantic	giraffe
camouflage	garage	massage	mirage	sabotage
ham	heart	high	higher	hide
hue	huge	human	humid	humorous
hour	honest	honour	honoured	honourable
knee	knife	knight	knob	know
alms	calm	palm	psalm	salmon
anger	angle	hunger	hungry	longer
bank	rank	sank	drink	trunk
knew	neutral	neutron	renew	renewal
damn	hymn	solemn	autumn	
pick	pig	pill	pace	pain
phase	phrase	philosophy	photograph	photography
pneumonia	psychology	receipt	debt	indebted
jealous	furious	curious	continuous	courageous
choose	use	please	accuse	arise
shake	shield	wish	furnish	foolish
closure	measure	usual	collision	division
Take	tape	determine	turning	material
Active	beauty	notice	pattern	mystery
Actual	factual	tulip	congratulate	opportunity
Capture	mixture	nature	literature	temperature
Action	connection	distinction	consideration	determination
Thank	thumb	threw	wealthy	youth
Than	those	father	rather	within
Bouquet	buffet	castle	debut	listen
Wrap	wrinkle	whole	written	wreck

Exact	exam	examine	examination	exist
Bay	ray	merry	employ	worry
By	ply	shy	sky	why
Yacht	yawn	yearn	yield	yours

Exercise 2: Read the following dialogue in pairs.

Woman : Do you have any plans this weekend?

Man : There's so much to choose from on campus that I'm not sure what I'm going to do.

Woman : The football game's on Saturday night, and I'm going with a group of friends. Do you want to go with us?

Man : Of course I'd like to go to the football game: it's the biggest game of the season. And it sounds like fun to go with a large group of people.

Woman : Good. We'll be meeting at the cafeteria for dinner at six o'clock on Saturday night, and then we'll go on to the game together.

Man : That takes care of my plans for Saturday nights. But now I need to make a decision about Sunday afternoon. The music department is sponsoring a concert then, and I'd really like to hear that concert. But there's also a play being presented by the drama department that I really wanted to see. It's too bad those two events are at the same time.

Woman : You know, if you go to the game on Saturday night and a concert or play on Sunday, that doesn't leave much time for studying.

Man : Oh, well. Maybe I can do that the weekend after this one.

Exercise 3: Read the following passage

