

## 2. STRUCTURE OF ENGLISH SYLLABLES

The syllable is a unit containing one and only one vowel either alone as in /aɪ/ or surrounded by consonants in certain arrangements such as tick /tɪk/.

### 2.1. Counting syllables

To find the number of syllables in a word, follow the next steps:

1. Count the vowels in the word. The number of vowel sounds must be the same as the number of syllables, such as: receive /rɪ'si:v/, perhaps /pə'(r)hæps/, intend /ɪn'tend/, record (v) /rɪ'kɔ:d/, many /'meni/
2. Diphthongs count as one vowel sound like: Time /taɪm/, don't /dɒnt/, toy /tɔɪ/.
3. Subtract any silent vowels, (like the silent e at the end of the word) such as: rate /reɪt/.
4. When there is a word that has an "-le" in final position, we divide before the consonant before the "-le". For example: a/ble, hum/ble, dou/ble, ca/ble, no/ble and "whi/stle".

English words can be in one syllable (monosyllabic) or divided into syllables (polysyllabic/ multisyllabic).

- 1- **One syllable:** A, an, the, cold, trade, hide, start, clean, green, chair, sign, low.
- 2- **Two syllables:** par/ty, to/day, part/ner, doc/tor, Fri/day, chi/cken.
- 3- **Three syllables:** Fan/tas/tic, won/der/ful, tech/ni/cal.
- 4- **Four syllables:** Un/der/stand/ing, con/ver/sa/tion.
- 5- **Five syllables:** Mis/un/der/stand/ing, con/ver/sa/tion/al.

### 2.2. Structure of syllables

If we have a look at the structural properties of the syllables, we can observe that each syllable consists of a **nucleus** (central peak of sonority), usually a vowel, and the consonants that cluster before and after the nucleus which are called the **onset** and the **coda** respectively.

The syllable parts	Description	Optionality
Onset	Initial segment of a syllable	Optional
<i>Nucleus</i>	Central segment of a syllable (core)	Obligatory
Coda	Closing segment of a syllable	Optional

- English syllable requires a "nucleus" which is a vowel in most cases, although the syllabic consonants (/r/, /l/, /ŋ/, /ŋ/) can be also the nucleus of a syllable.

**Zero onset:** if the syllable does not contain any consonant before the vowel. E.g.: Ill, On, Ask

**Zero coda:** when the syllable has no consonant after the vowel. E.g.: May, Fee, Strew, Troy.

### Let's practice:

Transcribe and count the number of syllables in the following words:

Word	Phonetic transcription	Syllable division	Number of syllables
American			
Demand			
Quite			
psychology			
Over			
Expensive			
temptation			
uncontrollable			

### 2.3. Syllabic consonants

Simply defined, a *syllabic consonant* is a syllable where the vowel and the consonant have merged into one.

In unstressed syllables where usually the realization of the underlying sequence of schwa plus consonant can be represented in one consonant called “syllabic consonant”; those consonants are (/r/, /l/, /m/, and /n/) which *can serve as the separate syllable instead of a vowel plus consonant*. In phonetic transcription, a syllabic consonant is usually indicated by means of a small vertical diacritic (◌̩) as in (/r̩/, /l̩/, /m̩/, /n̩/).

*Example:* table [ˈteɪb̩], turtle /tɜːt̩l/, cotton /ˈkɒt̩n/, sudden /ˈsʌd̩n/, rhythm /ˈrɪð̩m/, bottom /ˈbɒt̩m/, reference /ˈrefr̩əns/, difference /ˈdɪfr̩əns/.

**Syllabic /ŋ/** is the most common syllabic consonants which is found after alveolar plosives and fricatives; in the case of /t,d/ sounds followed by /n/. Such as: Eaten /ˈiːt̩n/, seven /ˈsev̩n/, heaven /ˈhev̩n/, heathen /ˈhiːð̩n/; relation /rɪˈleɪʃ̩n/, lessen /ˈles̩n/, risen /ˈrɪz̩n/, frozen /frəʊz̩n/.

**The lateral /l/** consonant is mostly syllabic at the end of the word, if it fell immediately after plosives and fricatives –such as: couple [ˈkʌp̩l], little [ˈlɪt̩l], tackle [ˈtæk̩l], paddle [ˈpæd̩l], awful [ˈɔːf̩l], whistle [ˈwɪs̩l], muscle [ˈmʌs̩l], drizzle [ˈdrɪz̩l]. Also, after nasal consonants such as: channel [ˈtʃæ̩n̩l], tunnel /ˈtʌ̩n̩l/, camel /ˈkæ̩m̩l/.

### 2.4. Consonant clusters (consonant blend)

**Definition:** a consonant cluster is a group, combination or sequence of consonants that appear together in a syllable without a vowel between them.

*Example:* snow /snəʊ/, small /smɔːl/, sleep /sliːp/, sport /spɔːt/.

#### a) Initial consonant clusters (examples)

1- **S (PRE-INITIAL) + /p, t, k, f, m, n, l, r, w, j/ + Vowel**

*Examples:* Spy /spaɪ/, stay /steɪ/, skill /skɪl/, sphinx /sfɪŋks/, sphere /sfɪə(r)/, smile /smaɪl/, swear /sweə(r)/.

If an onset cluster has three consonants, then it should always begin with /s/ as pre-initial.

2- **S (PRE-INITIAL) + /p,t,k,f,m,n,l,r,w,j/ + /l, r, w, j/ + Vowel**

*Examples:* Splendid /ˈsplendɪd/, street /stri:t/, square /skweə(r)/, squad /skwɒd/, spread /spred/.

#### b) Final consonant cluster (examples)

1-**PRE-FINAL** (m, n, ŋ, p, b, k, g, f, v, d, s, z, θ, ð, l, ʒ, tʃ, dʒ) + **FINAL** (m, n, ŋ, p, b, k, g, f, v, d, s, z, θ, ð, l, ʒ, tʃ, dʒ)  
+ **POST-FINAL** (s, z, t, d, θ)

*Examples:* helped /helpt/, banks /bæŋks/, bonds /bɒndz/, twelfth /twelfθ/

2-**FINAL** (m, n, ŋ, p, b, k, g, f, v, d, s, z, θ, ð, l, ʒ, tʃ, dʒ) + **POST-FINAL 1** (s, z, t, d, θ) + **POST-FINAL 2** (always /s/ or /t/)

*Examples:* next /nekst/, lapsed /læpst/, glimpsed /glɪmpst/, prompts /prɒmpts/,

3-**FINAL** (k) + **POST-FINAL 1** (s) + **POST-FINAL 2** (t, θ) + **POST-FINAL 3** (s)

*Examples:* texts /teksts/.