

STRUCTURE OF ENGLISH SYLLABLES

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

1. 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**, 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 (/r̩/, /l̩/, /m̩/, /ŋ̩/) 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, Toy.

2. Counting syllables

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

1. Transcribe the word phonetically.
2. 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/.
3. Diphthongs count as one vowel sound like: Time /taɪm/, toy /tɔɪ/.
4. Subtract any silent vowels, (like the silent e at the end of the word) such as: rate /ret/.
5. When there is a word that has an "-le" in final position, we divide the syllable 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/stan/ding, con/ver/sa/tion.
- 5- **Five syllables:** Mis/un/der/stan/ding, con/ver/sa/tion/al.

LET'S PRACTICE:

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

Word	Transcription	Syllable division (#)	Word	Transcription	Syllable division (#)
American			Question		
English			Imaginary		
Quite			Traffic		
Demand			Video		
Over			Construction		
Brought			Expensive		
Temptation			Psychology		
Uncontrollable			Power		

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 ['teɪb̩l̩], turtle /tɜ:tl̩/, cotton /'kɒt̩n̩/, sudden /'sʌd̩n̩/, rhythm /'rɪð̩m̩/, bottom /'bɒt̩m̩/, reference /'refr̩əns̩/, difference /'dɪfr̩əns̩/.

Syllabic /ŋ/ is the most common syllabic consonant which is found after alveolar plosives and fricatives; in the case of /t, d/ sounds followed by /n/. Such as: Eaten /'i:t̩n̩/, seven /'sev̩n̩/, heaven /'hev̩n̩/, heathen /'hi:ð̩n̩/; relation /rɪ'leɪʃ̩n̩/, lessen /'les̩n̩/, risen /'rɪz̩n̩/, frozen /frəʊz̩n̩/.

The lateral /l/ consonant is mostly syllabic at the end of the word, if it fell immediately after plosives and fricatives –such as: couple ['kʌp̩l̩], little ['lɪtl̩], tackle ['tæk̩l̩], paddle ['pæd̩l̩], awful ['ɔ:f̩l̩], whistle ['wɪsl̩], muscle ['mʌsl̩], drizzle ['drɪz̩l̩]. Also, after nasal consonants such as: channel ['tʃænl̩], tunnel /'tʌnl̩/, camel /'kæml̩/.

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 /smɔ:l/, sleep /sli:p/, sport /spɔ:t/.

a) Initial consonant clusters (examples)

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

Examples: Spy /spɑɪ/, 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 /'splendɪd/, 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/.