

Syllables in English

I. Definition

The syllable is a unit of spoken language larger than a phoneme. It is a unit of pronunciation uttered without interruption, forming whole or part of a word, and usually having one vowel or diphthong sound optionally surrounded by one or more consonants. A word contains at least one syllable. So, there are

- monosyllabic words (having one syllables) such as "was", "book",
- disyllabic words (having two syllables), "water", "sister", "apple"
- trisyllabic ones (having three syllables) like : "inferno", "linguistics"
- ...Etc.

I. The structure of the English syllable

A syllable can be divided into parts. The parts are **onset** and **rhyme**; within the rhyme we find the **nucleus (or peak) and coda**. Not all syllables have all parts; the smallest possible syllable contains a nucleus only. A syllable may or may not have an onset and / or a coda.

1. Onset

The onset is the beginning sounds of the syllable; the ones preceding the nucleus. These are always consonants (we can have one, two or three consonants as an onset) in English. All consonants in English, except], [ŋ], can appear as onsets; [ʒ], however, is rare. In the following words, the onset is in bold characters; the rest underlined.

rose

play

straight

If a word contains more than one syllable, each syllable will have the usual syllable parts:

pain.**t**ing

to.**m**a.**t**o

pre.pos.te.rous

fun.da.men.tal

If the first syllable of a word begins with vowel (any vowel may occur, though u is rare) we say that this initial syllable has a **zero onset**.

a.pply. the first syllable in this word is "a" (zero onset)

ex.pert the first syllable in this word is "ex" (zero onset)

2. Rhyme (or rime)

The rhyme is the rest of the syllable, after the onset. The rhyme can also be divided up:

Rhyme = nucleus + coda

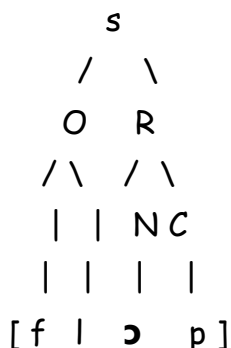
- **The nucleus**, as the term suggests, is the core or essential part of a syllable. A nucleus must be present in order for a syllable to be present. In English and most other languages, the nucleus is a vowel (or diphthong) in most cases, although the consonants [r], [l], [m], [n], [ŋ] can also be nuclei of syllables.
- **The coda** is usually one or more consonants. The coda may be absent in some syllables.

In English, the syllable structure analysis of the words 'read', 'flop', 'strap' and 'window', for instance, are as follows (IPA symbols are used to show the sounds in the word/syllable):

- read = one syllable
Onset = [r]
Rhyme = [i:d] (within the rhyme:)
Nucleus = [i:]
Coda = [d]
- flop = one syllable
Onset = [f l]
Rhyme = [ɔp]
Nucleus = [ɔ]
Coda = [p]
- window = 2 syllables
 - First syllable: [win]
Onset = [w]
Rhyme = [I n]
Nucleus = [I]
Coda = [n]
 - Second syllable: [dəu]
Onset = [d]
Rhyme = [əu]

Nucleus = [əu]
 (This syllable has no coda)

Linguists often use tree diagrams to illustrate syllable structure. 'Flop', for example, would look like this (the word appears in IPA symbols, not English spelling). 's' = 'syllable'; 'O' = 'onset'; 'R' = 'rhyme'; 'N' = 'nucleus'; 'C' = 'coda'.



Syllabic consonants:

The great majority of syllables in all languages has a vowel at their centre, and may have one or more consonants preceding and following the vowel (though languages differ greatly in the possible occurrences of consonants in syllables). In English, some syllabic consonants appear to have become practically obligatory in present day speech: words such as "bottle" and "button" would not sound acceptable in BBC pronunciation if pronounced /botəl/ and /bʌtəl/ (though these are normal in some other English accents), and are instead pronounced /botl/ and /bʌtn/.

The English consonants / m, n, ŋ, r, l/ can be the nuclei of syllables if they are preceded by a consonant in RP (there is no vowel in the pronunciation of these syllables even though there is one in the spelling).

Syllabic consonant	Cases
/l/	It is common with words ending in one or more consonant letter followed by "le", "el" and "al" e.g. struggle/strʌgl/, panel/pænl/, petal/petl/...
/n/	/n/ is most common after alveolar plosives and fricatives but we do not find /n/ after 'l' or "tʃ", "dʒ" so that for example sullen must be pronounced /sʌlən/, Christian /kristʃən/, pigeon /pidʒən/. After /f/ and /v/ syllabic /n/ is most common e.g. heaven /hevnl/, often /ofnl/.
/m/ & /ŋ/	Both can occur as syllabic, but only as a result of processes such as assimilation and elision.

/r/	It is less common in RP and in most cases where it occurs there are perfectly acceptable pronunciations without /r/, but it is very common in accents called Rhotic (American).
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Exercise: Analyse the structure of each syllable in the following words:

Eighths Department

National Presentation

Government Dropped

Postcard Furniture

Explain Handkerchief

Exercise: Break the following words into syllables:

Telecommunication Vocabulary

Gorgeous Consumed

Tongue Location

Unpopular Tomorrow

Returned Added

Breaking words into syllables

What is syllable? A syllable is a beat in a word.

Dog one syllable
Hun/gry two syllables
E/le/phant three syllables

Helpful rule: Every syllable must have a vowel sound.

Remember: Some syllables have more than one vowel e.g. boat, hound, shine, bike, sail, and house.

How can I count syllables of a word I've never seen before?

When you say a vowel, your mouth has to open. So put your hand under your chin and count how many times your jaw drops open when you say a word. That should tell you how many syllables to look for.

What should I do if I'm reading a new word?

- ✓ Put a dot under each of the vowels in the word.
- ✓ Check silent "e", and if there are "diphthongs" these vowels count only for one vowel.
- ✓ Count the vowels, this will tell you how many syllables are there in the word.
- ✓ Start dividing the word following the dividing syllables rules.

Dividing syllables rules:

- ✓ Look for words and parts of the words you recognize (ing, ment, pre, dis)these are called suffixes and prefixes. Separate these parts by drawing a slash between them and the rest of the word e.g pre/par/ing
- ✓ Try to learn as many suffixes and prefixes as you can.
- ✓ Divide between double letters e.g. waffle, kissing
- ✓ Try to keep consonant blends together e.g. (tr, st, pl...) remember the consonants distribution and the possible combinations of clusters.
- ✓ Divide the word between consonants that are not consonant blends e.g. hun/dred.
- ✓ Divide vowels that are not of pairs you know. Vowels that usually stay together include e.g. mai/den, pow/er. Remember that if the vowels are not in this order, you probably need to separate them e.g. pi/an/o, mu/se/um.
- ✓ When we divide a word into syllables and sometimes we find "le" at the end when we are breaking a word into syllables, the "le" acts like a magnet and drags the consonant in front of it into a syllable e.g. sim/ple .

Closed syllable: a syllable that ends with a consonant is called closed syllable. In a closed syllable the vowel is short.

Open syllable: a syllable that ends with vowel sound is called open syllable. In an open syllable the vowel sound at the end of the syllable is long. E.g. ta/ble.pa/per, tie.