

A Note on Silent Letters

From *Spelling for Learning*

In this discussion we use the notion of silent letters as little as possible. To be sure, we do speak of silent final <e> and treat it as a diacritic. But we seldom speak of silent consonant letters. Instead, we normally treat such letters as part of a minor spelling of a single consonant sound. For example, rather than treating the at the end of *tomb* as silent, we treat <mb> as a simplified spelling of [m]. We do this in order to avoid – or at least minimize – positing a ghost-like unit of silence floating around in words.

The one major exception to this general approach is <gh>, which poses tough analytical problems in words like, say, *weigh* and *weight*. This <gh> is a vestige of an old fricative sound spelled <h> in Old English and <gh> in Middle English but now missing from our spoken language. In words like *rough* and *laugh* this old fricative, which sounded much like the final consonant in the German pronunciation of *Bach* or the Scottish pronunciation of *loch*, became [f]. We say that in *weight* the <gh> is part of the spelling of the consonant [t], <ght>. But in words like *weigh* where the <gh> comes at the end of an element (and does not spell [f]), we treat it as a silent digraph, a diacritic that marks long vowels and diphthongs, as in the following relatively few native words:

Table 5.1

After . . .	Instances
Long <a> spelled <ei>	<i>neigh, neighbor</i> (neigh+bor, “near dweller”), <i>weigh</i>
Long <i> spelled <i>	<i>high, nigh, sigh, thigh</i>
Long <o> spelled <ou>	<i>borough, dough, thorough, though</i>
[ou] spelled <ou>	<i>bough, plough, slough</i> ¹
Long <u> spelled <ou>	<i>slough</i> ² , <i>through</i>

For more on these issues see [A Compendium of English Spelling](#).