

# Syllables

## 1. Definition

A **syllable** is a unit of organization for a sequence of speech sounds. It is typically made up of a syllable nucleus (most often a vowel) with optional initial and final margins (typically, consonants). Syllables are often considered the phonological "building blocks" of words.<sup>[1]</sup> They can influence the rhythm of a language, its prosody, its poetic metre and its stress patterns. Speech can usually be divided up into a whole number of syllables: for example, the word *ignite* is composed of two syllables: *ig* and *nite*.

A word that consists of a single syllable (like English *dog*) is called a **monosyllable** (and is said to be *monosyllabic*). Similar terms include **disyllable** (and *disyllabic*; also *bisyllable* and *bisyllabic*) for a word of two syllables; **trisyllable** (and *trisyllabic*) for a word of three syllables; and **polysyllable** (and *polysyllabic*), which may refer either to a word of more than three syllables or to any word of more than one syllable.

## 2. Structure of a syllable

In the typical theory of syllable structure, the general structure of a syllable ( $\sigma$ ) consists of three segments. These segments are grouped into two components:

**Onset (O):** a **consonant** or **consonant cluster**, obligatory in some languages, optional or even restricted in others

**Nucleus (N)** (or peak): a **vowel** or **syllabic consonant**, obligatory in most languages

**Coda (c):** consonant, optional in some languages, highly restricted or prohibited in others

The *nucleus* is usually the vowel in the middle of a syllable.

The *onset* is the sound or sounds occurring before the nucleus, and the *coda* (literally 'tail') is the sound or sounds that follow the nucleus.

In the one-syllable English word *cat*, the nucleus is *a* (the sound that can be shouted or sung on its own), the onset *c*, the coda *t*, and the peak *a*. This syllable can be abstracted as a *consonant-vowel-consonant* syllable, abbreviated *CVC*.

English words may consist of a single closed syllable, with peak denoted by *p*, and coda denote by *c*:

- *in*: p = /ɪ/, c = /n/
- *cup*: p = /ʌ/, g = /p/
- *tall*: p = /ɔ:/, c = /l/
- *milk*: p = /ɪ/, c = /lk/
- *tints*: p = /ɪ/, c = /nts/
- *fifths*: p = /ɪ/, c = /fθs/
- *sixths*: p = /ɪ/, c = /ksθs/
- *twelfths*: p = /ɛ/, c = /lfθs/
- *strengths*: p = /ɛ/, c = /ŋθs/

English words may also consist of a single open syllable, ending in a nucleus, without a coda:

- glue, c = /u:/
- pie, c = /aɪ/
- though, c = /oʊ/
- boy, c = /ɔɪ/

### 3. Counting Syllables in a word

**To find the number of syllables:**

**---count the vowels in the word,**

**---subtract any silent vowels,** (like the silent "e" at the end of a word or the second vowel when two vowels are together in a syllable)

**---subtract one vowel from every diphthong,** (diphthongs only count as one vowel sound.)

**---the number of vowel sounds left is the same as the number of syllables.**

The number of syllables that you hear when you pronounce a word is the same as the number of vowel sounds heard. For example:

The word "**came**" has 2 vowels, but the "e" is silent, leaving one vowel sound and **one syllable**.

The word "**outside**" has 4 vowels, but the "e" is silent and the "ou" is a diphthong which counts as only one sound, so this word has only two vowel sounds and therefore, **two syllables**.

### 4. Dividing words into syllables

There are many exceptions in English because of the vastness of the language and the many languages from which it has borrowed. The rules do work however, in the majority of the words.

**1. Every syllable in every word must have a vowel (or a syllabic consonant).** English is a "vocal" language; Every word must have a vowel.

**2. Divide between two middle consonants.**

Split up words that have two middle consonants. For example: **hap/pen, bas/ket, let/ter, sup/per, din/ner, and Den/nis**. The only exceptions are the consonant digraphs. Never split up consonant digraphs as they really represent only one sound. The exceptions are "th", "sh", "ph", "ch", and "wh".

**3. Usually divide before a single middle consonant.**

When there is only one syllable, you usually divide in front of it, as in: "**o/pen, i/tem, e/vil, and re/port**". The only exceptions are those times when the first syllable has an obvious short sound, as in "**cab/in**".

**4. Divide before the consonant before an "-le" syllable.**

When you have a word that has the old-style spelling in which the "-le" sounds like "-el", divide before the consonant before the "-le". For example: "**a/ble, fum/ble, rub/ble, mum/ble**" and "**this/tle**". The only exception to this are "ckle" words like "**tick/le**".

### 5. Divide off any compound words, prefixes, suffixes and roots which have vowel sounds.

Split off the parts of compound words like "sports/car" and "house/boat". Divide off prefixes such as "un/happy", "pre/paid", or "re/write". Also divide off suffixes as in the words "farm/er", "teach/er", "hope/less" and "care/ful". In the word "stop/ping", the suffix is actually "-ping" because this word follows the rule that when you add "-ing" to a word with one syllable, you double the last consonant and add the "-ing".

**Exercise 1:** Divide the following words into syllables (You may check the answers in a dictionary after finishing the exercise).

Attached connected answered borrow corrected create die discussed division  
agriculture component reports conquer

**Exercise 2:** Divide the following words into syllables; then, describe the components of each syllable.

attention women cigarette challenge crowded decisions develop horrible  
disappear enough exam fluently honey introduce lovely personal prison  
pyramid regular ugly weather

e.g. a.tten.tion (3syll.)

(1 st syll.) : a → peak (a)

(1 nd syll.) : ten → onset (t) + peak (e) + coda (n)

(1 rd syll.) : tion → onset (t) + peak (io) + coda (n)

Adapted from:

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Syllable>

<http://english.glendale.cc.ca.us/phonics.rules.html>