

SOME HELPFUL SPELLING AND PRONUNCIATION RULES

Rule #1: Short words have short vowels

Vowel sounds are commonly divided into short and long vowel sounds. While they may seem complicated, there are some rules for knowing when a vowel sound is short or long.

Short vowels always occur in short words. These are often one syllable and typically have three or four letters as in “cat”, “tin” and “bend”.

Rule #2: Two vowels side-by-side make a long vowel

Two vowels beside each other are not uncommon in English, but they can be easily mastered with this simple trick.

Namely, when there are two different vowels beside each other, they generally make the long sound of the first vowel. For example, the word “meat” has the long e sound, the word “plain” has the long a sound and the word “goat” has the long o sound.

Rule #3: Keep vowels short before double consonants

Double consonants don’t only have rules for how they are pronounced, but also play a role in how to pronounce the vowel that comes before them.

The rule is simple: the vowel that comes before double consonants is always in its short pronunciation. To see this, let’s look at the difference in pronunciation between the words “diner” and “dinner.”

The word “diner” has only one *n*, and the *i* is pronounced as a long vowel. Conversely, the word “dinner” has double *n*, so the *i* is pronounced as a short vowel.

Rule #4: Pronounce double consonants as a single letter

Unlike some languages, double letters in English are not pronounced any different than single letters.

This is true for words that have double *ll*, *ss*, *ff*, *rr*, *pp*, *zz*, *dd* and *cc*. They are all pronounced as if they are singular such as the words “fuzz,” “occur,” or “fluff.”

Rule #5: If E is at the end of a word, it’s silent

Sometimes English words can be confusing if they end an e. Many learners will want to include the e in their pronunciation, but it is actually silent.

Rather, the e causes the vowel before it to become long such as “ate,” “bite,” or “rope.”

Rule #6: Pronounce C like S when it’s followed by I, E, or Y

C makes more of an S sound when it is followed by *i*, *e*, or *y* such as words like “cite,” “century” and “cycle.”

Rule #7: Pronounce the word ending -TION with a SH sound

The word ending *-tion* is tricky to pronounce for two reasons.

The first reason is that the *t* is not pronounced like a *t* at all. Instead, it is pronounced like a *sh* as in the word “shoe.” As a whole, *-tion* ends up being pronounced more like “shun.”

This gives us words like “tradition”, “situation” and “position” that include the *sh* sound followed by a reduced vowel.

Rule #8: G and K are always silent before N at the beginning of a word

Many languages have rules that every consonant must be pronounced, but English has many rules that make consonants silent in certain cases.

One of these rules is that when a word begins with a *k* or a *g* and then is immediately followed by an *n*, the *k* or *g* is not pronounced. Instead, it’s almost as if the word started with a *n*. This can be seen in words such as “knee,” “knock” and “gnarl.”

Rule #9: Pronounce S like Z at the end of a word

There are many situations where the letter *s* is pronounced like a *z* sound.

This happens when a word that ends in a *b, d, g, l, m, n, ng, r, th* or *v* becomes plural or an *s* is added.

Examples of this include the plural words “moms” or “kings” and the *s* in words like “there’s” and “Michael’s.”

The *-es* ending of plural words is also pronounced like a *z* as in the word “buses.”

Rule #10: Pronounce S like Z between two vowels

When *s* is between two vowel sounds, it is pronounced like a *z*. This gives us words like “phase,” “music” and “please.”

There are some exceptions to this rule, such as in the words “goose” and “chase.”

Rule #11: Pronounce X like GZ before a stressed syllable

By now, we know that *x* makes a *ks* sound as in “taxi” or “toxic.” But this sound is only in unstressed syllables.

When *x* comes before a stressed syllable, it can make a *gz* sound as in “examine” or “exist.”

Rule #12: Pronounce X like Z at the beginning of a word

There is yet another way that *x* can be pronounced.

Rarely, it can make a *z* sound as in the words “xylophone” or “xenophobia.” This pronunciation happens almost exclusively at the beginning of words (unless you’re saying the word “x-ray”).

Rule #13: Y is both a consonant and a vowel

Y is a unique letter in English: it acts like both a consonant and a vowel.

- When *y* is at the beginning of a word or syllable, it is considered a consonant. In these cases it is pronounced with the long *ee* sound like in the words “young,” “you” or “beyond.”
- When *y* is at the end of a word or syllable, it is a vowel and can be pronounced a few different ways.
- *Y* sounds like a long *e* sound at the end of a word such as in adverbs like “quickly” or “slowly.” This pronunciation happens mostly in adverbs (words ending in *-ly* that describe verbs) or words that end in *-ity* like “community” or “ability”.
- *Y* sounds like *ai* in one syllable words such as “fly” or “cry.”
- It sounds like a short *i* sound in words where it is in the middle of a syllable like “gym” or “cyst.”
- When combined with *a*, the *ay* combination is pronounced like a long *a* sound as in “play” and “day.”

Rule #14: NG sometimes sounds like two letters stuck together

When learning English, we learn that the *ng* combination makes a special sound as in the words “king” or “thing.”

There is, however, a second pronunciation of *ng*. In fact, there are certain words where the *ng* is not pronounced as a singular sound, but rather pronounced in such a way that you hear both letters: *n* and *g*. Some of these words are “anger,” “finger” and “hunger.”

Rule #15: Unstressed vowels make a “schwa” sound

While a “schwa” may seem like a fancy English sound, it’s actually not. In fact, it is the sound that is easiest for our mouths to create: holding the jaw slightly open, relaxing the tongue and making a short sound. It is very similar to the short *u* sound in English.

The cool thing about the “schwa” is that it can happen to virtually any vowel. When a vowel is unstressed in a word, it reduces to this sound. This can be seen in the words “panda,” “mitten,” “bikini,” “citrus” and “freedom.”

Rule #16: Past tense endings aren’t always pronounced as D

The regular past tense in English is formed by adding *-ed* to the end of verbs. This ending, however, can be pronounced multiple ways.

- The first way is as a general *d* sound. This happens for verbs that end in voiced consonants (consonants that use the vocal cords) like *n, m, g, l, z, b, r* and *v*, and this results in the words “rolled,” “rubbed” and “revved.”
- The second pronunciation of the *-ed* ending is as a *t*. This happens for verbs that end in voiceless consonants (consonants that don’t use the vocal cords) like *k, f, s* and *p*. This results in the words “kicked,” “flopped” and “huffed.”
- The third pronunciation of this ending is pronounced like *id* with a short *i* sound. This pronunciation is for verbs that already end in a *t* or a *d* as in “fitted” or “skidded.”

Rule #17: Sometimes H is silent

Most of the time when a *h* is at the beginning of a word, we pronounce it by almost letting out a little sigh such as in “hot” or “humble.”

There are a few words in which you don’t let this little bit of air out and rather pronounce the word as if there is no *h* at all such as “honour” or “hour.”

Rule #18: Pronounce OO as a short U when it’s followed by K

Usually the *oo* combination is pronounced with a long *u* sound such as in “school” or “doom,” but sometimes it has a short *u* sound. This occurs when it is followed by a *k* such as in “look” or “book.”

Rule #19: Pronounce EI as a long E if it comes after C in a stressed syllable

Usually *ei* is pronounced as the long *a* sound such as in “neighbour” or “weight.” The exception to this is when *ei* follows a *c* in a stressed syllable such as words like “receive” or “fancies.”

Rule #20: Pronounce S, Z and G like a French speaker in specific words

Believe it or not, the French language had a big impact on the way English words are written and pronounced. One of the most evident French sounds in English is in some words with *s, z, or g*.

- *Z* is pronounced this way in words such as “seizure.”
- *G* can also make a French *j* sound as in the word “regime” or as in the second *g* in the word “garage.”
- *S* can have a French-like pronunciation in words like “vision” and “measure.” This sound is pronounced like the French *j* as in the French word *je* (I).

This sound is pretty rare and only occurs in specific words. I recommend memorizing these words as there is no rule for when the sound should be made.

Rule #21: OU has many pronunciations

You would expect *ou* to be pronounced almost like “ow” in most cases such as with words like “about,” or “shout.” There are also quite a few instances when this does not apply and the *ou* combination is pronounced differently.

If the combination is *oup*, a long *o* sound is formed, such as “soup” or “group.”

With *ould*, a schwa sound is created and it sounds more like *ood* with not much of an *l* sound like in “would” or “could.”

If the combination is *ough*, there is a variety of pronunciations, depending on the word. It can sound like there’s an *f* at the end such as in “cough” or “rough.” It could also just sound like a long *o* such as “through.” Lastly, if the combination is *ought*, it can sound like “ot” such as the word “thought.”

These ones can be a bit difficult and memorization is the best way to remember which words make which sounds with the *ou* combination.

Rule #22: Stress on the first syllable makes the word a noun

Word stress doesn't only affect the pronunciation of some letters, but it also changes the meaning of some words. As a matter of fact, changing the stress on some words changes them from nouns to verbs.

When word stress is on the first syllable of some words, that word is in its noun form. When stress is on the last syllable, that word is in its verb form.

This can be seen in the words “produce” (noun form) and “produce” (verb form) as in “the farm produces a lot of produce” and the words “increase” (noun form) and “increase” (verb form) “we have to increase our sales to see an increase in profit.”

Rule #23: TH can be voiced or unvoiced

Even though *th* is taught as a sound that is somewhat unique to English, its complication doesn't stop there. In fact, the “th” in English is pronounced as two distinct sounds.

- The first “th” sound is voiced (vocal cords vibrate) as in the words “though,” “then” and “they.”
- The second “th” is voiceless (vocal cords do not vibrate) as in the words “thought,” “thick” or “cloth.”

Unfortunately, there is no rule for when to use which sound. That means that you will have to memorize which words have which sound.

Do you speak #Italenglish, #Italinglish or #Englasiano?

“Last year I asked some informations about the courses at Wimbledon School of English to take a course for 6 months. My family thought I just wanted a long holiday and that I wouldn’t learn nothing. At the beginning I did many mistakes but after a few weeks I improved greatly because both the classes and the teachers were really funny! One week we were also ‘Class of the Week’ as we really applied ourselves and worked hard. One of my classmates was so happy that she said “Sorry teacher, can you do a photo with us?” so we all ended up on the school notice board, it was exciting! When I went to home my English was so much better that all my parents wanted to send their children to study at WSE as well. Now I am doing a stage in London, hoping I will help me improve my professional English too and that I will find a job after.”

Does the above paragraph make sense and look mostly correct? Sorry, *mi dispiace*, but you might need a little help identifying some of the most common mistakes that Italian students make while learning English – there are 10 so this one should definitely *farvi rizzare i peli*, make your hair stand on end!

- Informations: the word information, without s, is an uncountable noun and is always singular. E.g. “The information you have is correct”
- Wouldn’t learn nothing: while in Italian the double negative is fine, in English a negative construction in English is built with NOT plus ANY- E.g. “I don’t know anything about Italians making mistakes”.
- Did many mistakes: This is a classic error! Since fare translates as do and make in English, this is always a tricky one. Isn’t it hilarious that it refers to the word ‘mistake’? The correct one to use before a mistake is “make”. Think of M&Ms, Make & Mistake, and now that you know, don’t make the same mistake again!
- Funny: “funny” and “fun” equally translate in Italian as divertente. In English however the two have slightly different connotations: “funny” is used for something that causes laughter, e.g. “she told a funny joke”; “fun” is used for something which entertains but doesn’t necessarily cause laughter, e.g. “surfing is really fun”. In everyday English, funny is also used to express something bizarre and even weird – so it’s not always a compliment! When talking of someone or an activity, it’s better to use the word “fun”. E.g. “Your classmate is really fun, we should hang out with him more”.
- Sorry vs Excuse me: Sorry = mi dispiace, mostly to apologise for something; Excuse me = scusa/scusi/scusate, to get someone’s attention. Shouting “mi dispiace” to a bunch of strangers will not help you getting through a crowd or get someone to answer your question!
- Do a photo: no, no, no. You take a photo of someone, you don’t do or make one. End of.
- Went to home: why, oh why is this an exception? You go to work, to the gym, to school, to the hospital, to church, to class... but you never ‘go to home’. I guess so many people want to get there as quickly as possible after a long day out, so just remember to cut out the extra word, and your commute will seem shorter. Are you ready to go home and make yourself a cup of tea?
- All my parents: how many parents do Italian people have? In most countries everyone normally has two... maybe you meant relatives, *i parenti*?
- Stage: unless you work in a theatre and you are part of the team that is physically building the stage where the actors will stand during the performance, then what you’re doing is an internship, normally unpaid work experience. The good news is that you can use the word ‘stage’ to explain the same concept as internship to French people.
- Find a job after: after... what? The words ‘before’ and ‘after’ in English require you to specify what. E.g. “I’ll see you before/after dinner”, *ci vediamo prima di / dopo cena* or “I’ll see you later”, *ci vediamo dopo/piu’ tardi*. “I’ll see you after” is not an option... or at least, not a correct one!

- And one last thing: if you ever wish to compliment someone about their hair, make sure you say "Your hair is beautiful" because hair, *capelli*, is singular in English. Unless of course you genuinely want to compliment them on their arm and leg hairs, *i peli*!