

Syllabic Consonants

In certain circumstance in English, a consonant can constitute the center (peak) of a syllable instead of a vowel. Syllabic consonants are transcribed with a small vertical line underneath.

There are syllables in which no vowel is found and even then they are considered weak syllables. In these cases, a consonant, either /l/, /m/, /n/, /ŋ/, or /r/, stands as the center of the syllable instead of the vowel. It is usual to indicate that a consonant is syllabic by means of small vertical mark under the sound, for example:

cattle /kæt̩/

bottle /bot̩/

able /eɪb̩/

little /lɪt̩/

happen can be pronounced as /hæpən/ or /hæp̩n/ or /hæpm̩/

button /bʌt̩n/

broken /brəʊk̩n/

syllabic /r/ occurs in words like:

history /hɪstr̩/

Hungary /hʌŋg̩r̩/

Syllabic l /l̩/

Syllabic ‘l’ is perhaps the most noticeable example of the English syllabic consonant, though it would be wrong to expect it in all accents. It occurs after another consonant and the way it is produced depends, to some extent, on the nature of that consonant. If the preceding consonant is alveolar as in bottle, muddle, tunnel, the articulatory movement from the preceding consonant to the syllabic /l̩/ is quite simple. The sides of the tongue which are raised from the preceding consonant are lowered to allow air to escape over them to produce the dark /l̩/ in some accents. This is called lateral released.

Lateral Released: is represented by keeping the tip of the tongue touching the alveolar ridge to allow the air escape. It is allowing of the air to pass over both sides of the tongue in the production of the syllabic /l̩/ after alveolar consonant.

bottle /bot̩/

little /lɪt̩/

Spelling Rules for Syllabic /l/:

- 1- The syllabic /l/ is usually found in the form 'le' or in the case of noun plurals or third person singular verb 'les':
 - a- Following alveolar consonant as in: **cattle** /kætəl/, **wrestle** /resəl/, **castles** /ka:səls/.
 - b- After non-alveolar consonant + (le(s)) as in: **couple** /kʌpl/, **struggle** /strʌgləs/, **trouble** /trʌbl/, **knuckle** /nʌkl/.
- 2- Usually in such words, the final 'e' must be dropped when adding a suffix beginning with a vowel, however, the sound /l/ remains syllabic, e.g.: **bottle** + ing = **bottling** /botlɪŋ/, **struggle** + ing = **struggling** /strʌglɪŋ/ also in the word coddling which is derived from the verb **coddle** + ing = **coddling** /kodlɪŋ/, but the word **codling** (cod + the suffix -ling-) /kodlɪŋ/ the sound /l/ is NOT syllabic because we don't have (le) at the end of the base of the word.
- 3- Syllabic /l/ can be found in word spelt with 'el' or 'al' preceded by one or more consonant letters as in: **kernel** /kə:nəl/, **pedal** /pedəl/, **petal** /petəl/, **panel** /pænəl/, **Babel** /beɪbəl/. (cf, your book p. 68).
- 4- In technical words as in: **missal** and **acquittal**, it is not obligatory to pronounce a syllabic /l/ and the /əl/ may be used instead i.e. /mɪsəl/ or /mɪsəl/, /əkwaɪtəl/ or /əkwaɪtəl/ are both acceptable.

Syllabic /ŋ/:

Syllabic /ŋ/ is usually found in medial and final position but not initial, especially, when it is preceded by a plosive and fricatives consonant plus /ən/ e.g. “**tonight**” /tənaɪt/ and “**canary**” /kəneəri/ so they are not with syllabic /ŋ/. It is one of the commonest nasal syllabic after alveolar, plosive and fricatives medially and finally as in: “**threaten**” /θreɪtən/ --- final position, and “**threatening**” /θreɪtɪŋ/ ---- medial position.

When we produce the syllabic /ŋ/ which is preceded by alveolar, plosive, or fricative /t/ and /d/, the alveolar sound is nasally released by lowering the soft palate as in the word “**eaten**” /i:tən/.

Spelling Rules:

- 1- /ŋ/ is not found after /l/, /tʃ/ or /dʒ/ within the medial or final position, e.g. “**Christian**” /krɪstʃən/, “**sullen**” /sʌlən/ and “**pigeon**” /pɪdʒən/.
- 2- /ŋ/ is more common after alveolar, plosive and fricatives.
- 3- Velar + an or on, /ŋ/ is rare (it is rarely found). It is heard as /ən/, e.g. “**toboggan**” /təbɒgən/, “**wagon**” /wægən/.

- 4- Bilabial + /n/ might be pronounced /ŋ/, /m/ or /ən/, they are equally acceptable as in the word “**happen**” it might be pronounced as /hæpən/, /hæpŋ/ or /hæpm/ as an assimilation. The word “**ribbon**” might be pronounced as /ribŋ/, /ribən/ or /ribm/.
- 5- /ŋ/ might be found after velar /k/, it is possible to be /ən/, /ŋ/ or /ŋ/ as in: “**thicken**” /θikən/, /θikŋ/ or /θikŋ/.
- 6- /ŋ/ might be found after labiodental /f/ and /v/, however, it is more common than /ən/, and also it is very rare in initial position. It occurs medially and finally, e.g. “**seven**” /sevŋ/ or /sevən/, “**heaven**” /hevŋ/ or /hevən/. While after /f/ the commonest pronunciation is /ŋ/ and the less common is /ən/, e.g. the word “**often**” /ofŋ/ or /ofən/.
- 7- It is possible to find /ŋ/ after more than one consonant i.e. consonant cluster e.g. *ltn*, *ntn* but it is not possible to find /ŋ/ in cluster *ndn*, e.g. “**Wilton**”, the pronunciation will be /wiltŋ/ and /wiltən/, both of them are possible, while cluster formed by nasal + plosive + syllabic nasal are very unusual and normally has /ə/ in the last syllable as in: “**Minton**”, “**lantern**”, “**London**”, “**abandon**” and “**Camden**”. They are pronounced respectively as /mintən/, /ləntən/, /lʌndən/, /əbəndən/ and /kæmdən/.

Syllabic /m/ and /ŋ/:

The syllabic pronunciation of these consonants may occur as a result of processes such as assimilation and elision. They are more likely to be found in rapid and casual speech as it is mentioned above with the word “**happen**” /hæpən/, /hæpŋ/ or /hæpm/ which are equally acceptable. The word “**uppermost**” could be pronounced as /ʌpəməʊst/ or /ʌpməʊst/, other examples are:

“**thicken**” /θeikən/, /θeikŋ/ or /θeikŋ/

“**waken**” /weikən/, /weikŋ/ or /weikŋ/

The phrase “**broken key**” where the nasal consonant occurs between velar consonant, the phrase could be pronounced as /brəʊkŋki:/ again /ŋ/ or /ən/ could be substituted for /ŋ/.

Syllabic /r/:

It is mostly found in many accents of type called *Rhotic* (American, Scots and West England accents) which have the sound /r/ in final position and before a consonant. Syllabic r /r/ is very common in the word “**particular**”, it is pronounced by Americans as /pɹtɪkjəlɹ/, while the BBC speakers pronounce it as /pətɪkələ/. We have some words (minimal pairs) in which difference in meaning appear to depend on whether /r/ is syllabic or not, as in:

Hungary: /hʌŋɡri/ or /hʌŋɡəri/

hungry: /hʌŋɡri/

In other case, we could find some words could be pronounced with or without syllabic r, e.g. “**history**” /hɪstɹi/ or /hɪstri/, “wanderer” /wɒndəɹ/ or /wɒndrə/ but rarely pronounced as /wɒndərə/, also. The word “**flattery**” /flætɹi/ or /flatəri/.