

## **Syllable Consonant Clusters**

**This is to Complete Assignment of:  
English Phonetic and Phonology**

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## A. Syllables

Vowel and consonant sounds combine into syllables. It can be helpful to think of the structure of English syllables as:

[consonant(s)] + vowel + [consonant(s)]

This means that various combinations of vowels and consonant are possible:

- vowel only (e.g. in a)
- consonant + vowel (e.g. in me)
- vowel + consonant (e.g. in eat)
- consonant + vowel + consonant (e.g. in bag)

At the beginning of syllables, up to three consonant sounds are possible, as in *string* /strɪŋ/ or *split* /splɪt/, while at the end; up to four consonants are possible, as in *glimpsed* /glɪmpst/ and *texts* /teksts/. These combinations of consonants are often referred to as consonant clusters. It is not very common in other major languages to have consonant clusters at the beginning of syllables and very rare to have more than two possibilities of syllables, as occurs in English.<sup>1</sup>

## B. Consonant Clusters

In linguistic, a consonant cluster (*CC*) is a group of two or more consonant sounds that come before (*onset*), sounds that come after (*coda*), or between (*medial*). Also known simply as a cluster, these occur naturally in written and spoken English, though sometimes may be altered phonetically.<sup>2</sup> Let us now look in more detail at syllable onsets. If the first syllable of the word begins with a vowel we say that initial syllable has a zero onset. If the syllable begins with one consonant, that initial consonant may be any

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Hewings, *Pronunciation Practice Activities* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) pg. 4

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.thoughtco.com/what-is-consonant-cluster-cc-1689791>. Accessed on October 19, 2017 at 07:10 am.

consonant phoneme except ɲ and ʒ is rare. .

Table 1. Two-consonant clusters with pre-initial s.

Pre-initial	Initial																		
	s	P	t	k	b	d	g	f	θ	s	ʃ	h	v	ð	z	ʒ	m	n	ŋ
		spin	stɪk	skɪn	-	-	-	sfiə	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	smel	snəu	-

**Note:** Two-consonant clusters of s plus l, w, j are also possible (e.g. slɪp, swɪŋ, sju:), and even perhaps sr in *syringe* /srɪndʒ/ for some speakers. These clusters can be analyzed either as pre-initial s plus initial l, w, j, r or as initial s plus post-initial l, w, j, r. There is no clear answer to the question of which analysis is better, here they are treated in the latter way and appear on table 2.<sup>3</sup>

Table 2. Two-consonant clusters with post-initial l, r, w, j.

Post-initial	Initial																						
		p	t	k	b	D	g	f	θ	s	ʃ	h	v	ð	z	ʒ	m	n	ŋ	l	r	w	j
	l	pleɪ	-	kleɪ	blæk	-	glu:	flat	-	slɪp	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
	r	preɪ	treɪ	kraɪ	brɪŋ	dɪp	grɪn	fraɪ	θrəʊ	ʔ <sup>1</sup>	ʃru:	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
	w	-	twɪn	kwɪk	-	Dwel	ʔ <sup>2</sup>	-	θwɔ:t	swɪm	ʔ <sup>3</sup>	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

<sup>3</sup>Peter Roach, *English Phonetics and Phonology: A Practical Course*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) pg. 69

	j	pjuə	tju:n	kju:	bju:ɾɪ	dju:	? <sup>4</sup>	fju:	? <sup>5</sup>	sju:	-	hju:dʒ	vju:	-	-	-	mju:z	nju:z	-	lju:d	-	-	-
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### Notes on doubtful cases:

1. Some people pronounce the word *syringe* as /srɪndʒ/, there are no other cases of sr, unless one counts foreign place names (Sri Lanka).
2. Many Welsh names (including some well-known outside Wales), such as girl's names like Gwen and place names like the country of Gwent, have initial /gw/ and English speakers seem to find them perfectly easy to pronounce.
3. Two cases make /ɹw/ seem familiar: the vowel name *schwa* /ɹwa/, and the name of the soft drinks firm Schweppes. However, those were rarely to use in consonant cluster.
4. The only possible occurrence of /gj/ would be in the archaic word *gules*, which is very few people's vocabulary.
5. /θj/ occurs in the archaic word *thew* only.<sup>4</sup>

Initial two consonant clusters are of two sorts in English. One sort is composed of s followed by one of small set of consonants, examples of such clusters are found in words such as *sting* /stɪŋ/, *sway* /sweɪ/, *smoke* /sməʊk/. The s in these clusters called the pre-initial consonant and the other consonant (t, w, m, in the above examples) are the initial consonant. The other sort begins with one of a set of about fifteen consonants, followed by one of the set l, r, w, j, as in, for example, *play* /pleɪ/, *try* /traɪ/, *quick* /kwɪk/, *few* /fju:. We call the first consonant of these clusters the initial consonant and the second is the post-initial.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., pg. 70

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., pg. 71

### Bibliography

Hewings, Martin. 2004. *Pronunciation Practice Activities*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Roach, Peter. 1991. *English Phonetics and Phonology: A Practical Course*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

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