

# 24

## listen, bottle, politician, etc. Syllabic consonants

A

B36

Important for listening

Most syllables contain a vowel sound. However, sometimes a syllable consists only of a consonant. In dictionaries, these are usually shown either with a <sup>1</sup> symbol under the consonant or a <sup>2</sup> symbol before the consonant. Consonants like this are called *syllabic consonants*.

**article** /'ɑ:ˌtɪ.kl̩/

**listen** /'lɪs.ən/



It is always possible to pronounce a syllabic consonant as an ordinary syllable with a vowel (/ə/) and a consonant (or consonants), although the syllabic consonant is usually more natural and fluent:

article = /ɑ:tɪkəl/ or: /ɑ:tɪkl̩/

listen = /lɪsən/ or: /lɪsn̩/

B

B37

Important for listening

/l̩/ syllabic consonants are usually found in unstressed syllables after the following consonants:

/t/	bottle, little, hospital, pistol	/s/	hassle, parcel, whistle, colossal
/d/	saddle, muddle, handle, pedal	/z/	puzzle, drizzle, dazzle, hazel
/p/	couple, people, example, principal	/k/	knuckle, article, classical, comical
/b/	able, trouble, global, jumble	/ŋ/	communal, channel, tunnel, panel

Most of these consonants are spelt *-le*, but a few are spelt *-al*, *-el* and *-ol*.

/n̩/ syllabic consonants are usually found in unstressed syllables after the following consonants:

/t/	button, rotten, threaten, kitten	/f/	often, deafen, stiffen, soften
/d/	sadden, widen, garden, pardon	/v/	seven, given, eleven, proven
/p/	happen, deepen, open, sharpen	/θ/	marathon, python, strengthen, lengthen
/s/	listen, loosen, comparison, person	/ʃ/	fashion, action, politician, musician
/z/	cousin, horizon, poison, prison	/ʒ/	illusion, collision, occasion, precision

Most of these consonants are spelt *-en*, *-on*, *-ion* or *-ian*.

Words ending *-sm* have an /m̩/ syllabic consonant. For example:

Buddhism, capitalism, criticism, journalism, mannerism, socialism, chasm, enthusiasm



Note: Contracted forms such as *didn't*, *haven't*, *shouldn't*, *wouldn't*, etc. have a syllabic 'nt':

haven't = /hævnt̩/ or /hævənt̩/

C

B38

Important for listening

Some words have two syllabic consonants together, including: *conditional*, *diagonal*, *general*, *literal*, *national*, *veteran*. But notice that these can be pronounced in a number of ways. For example:

diagonal = /daɪæɡənəl/ or /daɪæɡən̩l/ or /daɪæɡnəl/ or /daɪæɡn̩l/

D

B39

Important for listening

When *-ing* is added to a verb ending with a syllabic consonant (e.g. *handling*, *troubling*, *happening*, *gardening*) the consonant + *-ing* is usually said as one syllable. The syllabic consonant is the first consonant of the last syllable:

handle /hænd̩l/      -      handling /hændlɪŋ/  
happen /hæp̩n/      -      happening /hæpnɪŋ/

Notice that it is also possible to say the syllabic consonant with a vowel (/ə/): /hændəlɪŋ/, /hæpənɪŋ/