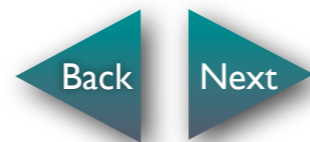# Syllable Structure and Consonant Clusters

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What are syllables?

- A syllable is a *rhythmic* unit. It's a unit of sound that gets one "beat" in a word.

- A syllable has a *vowel*. It might also have one or more consonants before the vowel and one or more consonants after it.

- A syllable can also have a *syllabic consonant* instead of a vowel. A syllabic consonant is a consonant that is stretched out and acts as a vowel. For example, the last syllable in *button* [bʌʔn̩] or *middle* [mɪdl̩] is usually pronounced as a syllabic consonant.
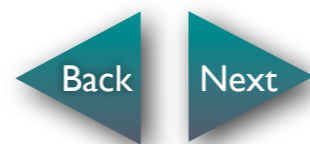
For example...

- *Eye* has one syllable (just one vowel sound: /ay/)

- *Bee* has one syllable (one consonant and one vowel: /biy/

- *Strength* also has one syllable (three consonants, one vowel, two consonants: /strɛŋθ/)

- *Potato* has three syllables: po-ta-to /pəˈteytow/

- *Pronunciation* has five syllables: pro-nun-ci-a-tion /prənənsiˈyeyʃən/
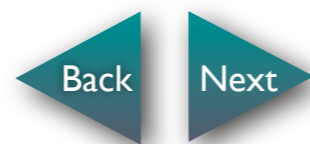
Consonant clusters

- When two or more consonants occur together, they are called a *consonant cluster.* ("Cluster" means "group.")

- There are restrictions on how many consonants can occur in a particular position, and which consonants can occur together.

- For example, in English, /sk/, /pl/, and /spl/ are possible combinations at the beginning of a word, but /sd/, /fp/, and /zpr/ are not.

- These sound like they could be possible English words, even though they're not real words: *skeb, plore, splib.*

- These are not possible words in English: *sdeb, fpore, zprib.*
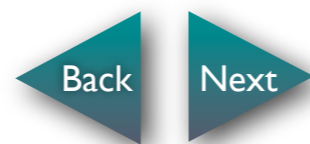
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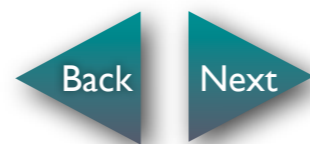
Possible clusters in syllable-initial position

- It is possible to have one, two, or three consonant sounds at the beginning of a syllable, but not more.

- Here are some words that illustrate common two-consonant clusters at the beginning of syllables:

  - Beginning with stops: *play, pray, pure, blue, brown, beauty, true, twin, dry, clean, cream, cute, quick, glow, green*

  - Beginning with fricatives: *fly, fry, few, three, slow, swim, spot, stone, skin, smile, snow, shriek, huge*

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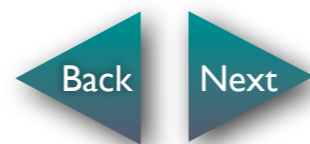
Possible clusters in syllable-initial position

- Some of these words have only one consonant *letter* at the beginning, even though they start with two consonant *sounds:*

    - *cute, beauty, pure, few, huge*

- These all have the vowel sound /uw/ preceded by an "invisible /y/." We hear a /y/ sound, which counts as a consonant, even though there's no letter "y." (*Cute* is pronounced /kyuwt/, not /kuwt/.)

- In words like *quick, quiet,* and *question,* the letters *qu* stand for the consonant cluster /kw/.

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Possible clusters in syllable-initial position

- When three consonants come together at the beginning of a syllable:

    - The first consonant is always /s/.
    - The second is always a voiceless stop: /p/, /t/, /k/.
    - The third consonant is always /l/, /r/, /w/, or /y/.

- Here are some words that illustrate common three-consonant clusters at the beginning of syllables:

    - *Splendid, spring, string, scrap, skewer, squirrel*
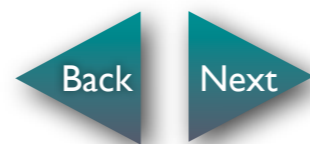
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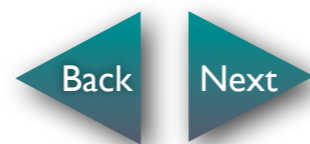
Possible clusters in syllable-final position

- At the end of a syllable, we can have one, two, three, or four consonants together. Many of the longer clusters are in words with the grammatical endings *-s* or *-ed*.

- Here are some words ending in two consonant sounds:

  - *Help, felt, old, milk, shelf, harp, curb, art, cord, mark, scarf, serve, bump, ant, hand, tense, ranch, strange, sink, health, else, bulge, film, earth, course, marsh, march, urge, arm, barn, girl, wasp, trust, ask, soft, apt, act, depth, tax, fourth, fifth, tenth*

- Did you notice that the letter *x* represents the consonant cluster /ks/?

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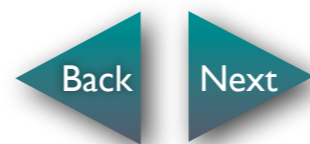
Possible clusters in syllable-final position

- Here are some words that illustrate common three-consonant clusters at the end of syllables:

  - *Text, sixth, exempt, against, waltz, quartz, first, world.*

- These words end in consonant clusters that are longer because of a grammatical ending.

  - *Bends, linked, ends, lengths, texts, sixths, exempts, worlds, desks, robbed, begged, glimpsed, walked, waltzed*
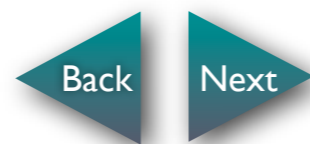
Consonant cluster reduction

- There is one situation when it's acceptable to simplify a consonant cluster, that is, to omit one of the consonants. (Yes, native speakers do this too.) When there are three or more consonants in a row, the *middle* one is sometimes dropped. (The first or last consonant is *not* dropped.) This happens most often when the middle consonant is a stop, /θ/, or /ð/. For example:

C C C

- *tests* might sound like /tɛsts/ or /tɛs/
- *asked* might sound like /æskt/ or /æst/
- *months* might sound like /mʌnθs/ or /mʌns/
- *sixths* might sound like /sɪksθs/ or /sɪks/

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Resyllabification

- Another way native speakers make consonant clusters easier to pronounce is by resyllabification. That is, they sometimes split up a consonant cluster so that the last consonant goes with the syllable after it. For example when we say:

    The list sare long.

    the final /s/ in *lists* sounds like it joins the following word.

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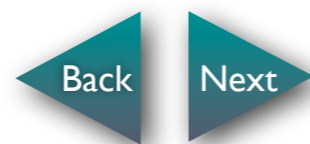
Different languages have different syllables

- Languages have different restrictions on what kinds of syllables and consonant combinations are possible. Some languages never have consonants at the ends of syllables or words. Other languages allow only certain consonants to occur at the ends of words.

- Some languages don't have consonant clusters at all, or don't have as many as English has. (On the other hand, some languages have even more consonant clusters!)

- Students whose languages have different syllable structure rules than English may have trouble pronouncing some English words.
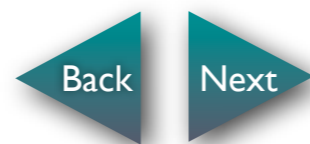
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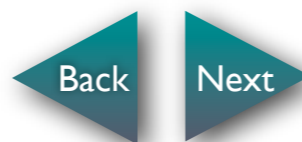
Students' problems with final consonants

- Consonants at the ends of words are often more troublesome than the same consonants at the beginnings of words. Students try to cope in two main ways:

- They might omit the final consonants, for example, pronouncing *meet* as

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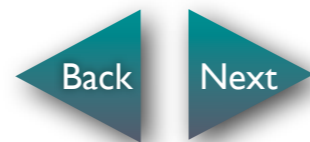
or *back* as

<p style="text-align:center">back</p>

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Students' problems with final consonants

- Or they might add an extra vowel after the final consonant, pronouncing *meet* as

meetə

- or *back* as

backu

- Both of these changes make it very hard for listeners to recognize the words that these speakers are trying to say.
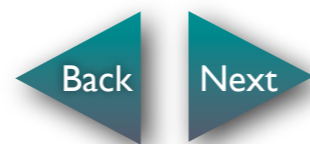
Students' problems with consonant clusters

- In the same way, students may do two things when they have problems with consonant clusters:

- They might skip one or more of the consonants. For example, they might pronounce *section* as

se tion

or *west* as
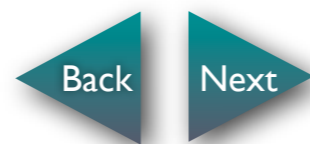
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Students' problems with consonant clusters

- Or they might add an extra vowel before or between the consonants. For example, *school* might become

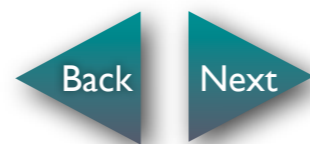*eschool*

or *street* might become

sutoreeto

- These changes also make it hard for listeners to understand what the speaker is trying to say.

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Students' problems with consonant clusters

- Learners unconsciously produce these changes to make words easier to pronounce. However, they also make it much harder for listeners to understand what the speaker is trying to say.

- It is important to help students understand and practice the patterns of English syllable structure to make their speech more understandable.

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Summary

- It's important for students to know what syllables are and how to count them.

- Each language has its own rules about what patterns of sounds are possible in syllables.

- In English, there are many consonant clusters. For many students, these can be hard to pronounce. They may cope with this difficulty by dropping consonants or adding vowels. Both of these make their pronunciation hard to understand.