

# Sounds & Spelling of Irish/Fuaimneanna agus Litriú na Gaeilge

The traditional Irish alphabet has 18 letters: A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H, I, L, M, N, O, P, R, S, T, U which it uses to express over 40 different sounds. Spelling reform in the 1940s – 50s aimed to simplify and unify spelling.

**Vowels (*gutaí*)** : a, e, i, o, u

**Consonants (*consain*)** : all the other letters

**Broad vowels (*gutaí leathana*)** : a, o, u

**Slender vowels (*gutaí caola*)** : i, e

**Consonants are considered broad and slender, too;** One way to think of it is that they take on the flavor of the nearest vowel:  
*tolg* ('t' is broad), *te* ('t' is slender), *taistil* (the first 't' is broad; 's', the second 't' and 'l' are both slender).

The broad (velarized) consonants b, c, f, g, m can sound as if they're being followed by a very subtle "w". Slender (palatalized) consonants can sound as if they're followed by a slight "y".

You may need some practice before you can hear the difference between some broad and slender consonants, or pronounce them yourself.

Here are the most important slender consonants to master first.

slender s	/ʃ/	<i>Síle, mise, anois</i>	shoe, fish
slender t	/tʃ/	<i>te, leite, Cait</i>	(similar to: chin, rich, but closer to the front of your mouth)
slender d	/dʲ/	<i>Dia, cuidiú, leid</i>	Joe, vigil, ledge
slender l	/lʲ/	<i>líne, bileog, cáil</i>	million, <u>will</u> you
slender n	/nʲ/	<i>níl, sloinne</i>	sinew, minion (rare at start of words in US Eng.)

## Vowels

**Spelling rule: *Caol le caol; leathan le leathan.*** The vowels on either side of a consonant, or group of consonants, must both be slender or both be broad, e.g. *déanfaidh, rithfidh, eitleán, páirceanna, cupán, cipín, madra, maidrín*, etc. (A couple notable exceptions: *anseo, ansin* )

**Fadas (*sintí fada*)** add length and stress to vowels, and change their pronunciation, too. They don't change the broad or slender quality of a vowel.

a /a/	<i>hata, mac</i> father, spa	á /a:/	<i>tá, bád</i> call, far
e /ɛ/	<i>te, ceist</i> tell, get	é /e:/	<i>cé, éist</i> bait, pay
i /i/	<i>ith, bille, i</i> in, hit	í /i:/	<i>Síle, trí, íseal</i> tree, mean, he
o /ɔ/	<i>olc, moch</i> tug, wonder	ó /o:/	<i>ól, bóthar</i> roll, toe, road
u /ʌ/	<i>dubh, punt</i> good, pull	ú /u:/	<i>tú, cúpla</i> too, rude

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## Vowel combinations

### Most consistent:

ae	/e/	<i>tae, laethanta</i>	day
ao	/i/ (/e/ in Munster dialect)	<i>daor, saol</i>	feel (Munster: quail)
aoi	/i/	<i>Aoife, saoirse</i>	me
ei	/ε/	<i>eisean, ceimic</i>	meh
eo	/o/	<i>Eoin, ceol, beo</i>	no
ia	/iə/	<i>bia, pian</i>	deal
ua	/uə/	<i>fuath</i>	tool

### Less consistent:

io, oi, ui	/i/ (usually)	<i>briosca, coileach, duine</i>	fit
-faidh, -fidh	/i/ or /ɪ/	<i>tiocfaidh, feicfidh</i>	see
-(e)adh	Munster: /ε/ or /u/ or /ə/ Ulster: /u/ Connacht: /ə/	<i>deireadh, cuireadh</i> <i>deireadh, cuireadh</i> <i>deireadh, cuireadh</i>	meh, moo, huh meh, moo, huh meh, moo, huh
ea	/æ/ or... /a/ or /iə/ or... /ia:/ (/iau/ in Munster dialect)	<i>eagrán, bean, ceacht</i> <i>seacht, fear</i> <i>Bealtaine, nead</i> <i>geall, peann, gearr</i>	apple shot yonder yawn (Munster: town)

A couple other notes:

- ae is broad, so consonants on either side of it are also broad: Gael, aer
- r is broad at the beginning of words, before t, d, n, l, th and after s: cuairt, gairdín, muirín, srian
- a vowel followed by a double consonant (ll, nn, rr) may be pronounced as if it had a fada on it: fonn, tinn, clann, barr, poll

## Syllable stress

Which syllable gets the stress in a word?

The first syllable usually gets the stress.

measártha coitianta dialann machnamh insint

If only one syllable has a fada on it, that syllable often gets stressed.

ábhar scoláire inmheánach

In the Munster dialect, if there's a fada on a final syllable, it gets the stress.

cupán comhdháil coirnéal cipín

Recommended resources

- [Understanding Irish Spelling - Nancy Stenson and Tina Hickey](#)
- [Fuaimeanna na Gaeilge: The Sounds of Irish](#)
- [Irish Pronunciation Database](#)

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**Initial Mutations** are a noteworthy feature of Irish. These are changes that occur at the beginning of words.

**Séimhiú.** Putting 'h' after a consonant is a device to show that the sound of the consonant is softened. It's called a *séimhiú* (*séimh* = soft) and used to be indicated by a dot above the letter: ch = *cḣ*, gh = *gḣ*, th = *tḣ*. It's also known as **aspiration** or **lenition**. It often happens at the beginning of words. Pronunciation of bh\*, ch, dh, gh, mh\* differs depending on whether it's in a broad or a slender context. (\* Munster Irish uses the same pronunciation for bh and mh in either context.)

<b>broad / leathan</b> <b>a, o, u</b>	When you add <i>séimhiú</i> to this consonant, ⇐ you get ⇐	<b>slender / caol</b> <b>e, i</b>
/w/ <i>bhain, abhaile, dabht, gabh</i> wow, tower (/v/ in Munster dialect)	<b>b</b>	/v/ <i>a bheith, leibhéal, sibh</i> village, eve
/x/ <i>chomh, nócha, nach</i> loch (Scottish), Nacht (German)	<b>c</b>	/ç/ <i>an cheist, fiche, deich</i> hue (pronounced strongly)
/ɣ/ dhún no equivalent	<b>d</b>	/j/ <i>ar dheireadh, a Dhia</i> yell
silent <i>an fhuaim, m'fhoireann</i> : ^	<b>f</b>	silent <i>an fhéile, an fhiacail</i> : ^
/ɣ/ <i>ghasúr, ghlór</i> no equivalent	<b>g</b>	/j/ <i>mo ghile, oighear</i> yell
no séimhiú possible	<b>h</b>	no séimhiú possible
no séimhiú possible	<b>l</b>	no séimhiú possible
/w/ <i>gan mhoill, amháin, domhan</i> wow, tower (/v/ in Munster dialect)	<b>m</b>	/v/ <i>mo mhéar, séimhiú, nimh</i> village, eve
no séimhiú possible	<b>n</b>	no séimhiú possible
/f/ <i>sa pholl, phós siad</i> follow	<b>p</b>	/f/ <i>an pheil</i> fell
no séimhiú possible	<b>r</b>	no séimhiú possible
/h/ <i>Nollaig shona, mo shaol</i> honey	<b>s</b>	/h/ <i>mo shiopa, ar sheift</i> hello
/h/ <i>mo thóin, tharla</i> honey	<b>t</b>	/h/ <i>trí thine, ritim</i> hello

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**Urú** inserts a letter at the beginning of a word. The new letter suppresses the first letter of the word; you only pronounce the new letter. This is also known as **eclipsis** or **nasalization**.

If the word begins with:	<b>urú</b> adds this letter at the beginning of the word	so it looks like this:	and sounds like this:	
<b>b</b>	m	mb	/m/ ar an <b>mb</b> ord, i <b>mB</b> éal Feirste moo	
<b>c</b>	g	gc	/g/ i <b>gC</b> orcaigh, bhur <b>gc</b> istin goo	
<b>d</b>	n	nd	broad /n/ i <b>nD</b> oire not	slender /nʲ/ i <b>nd</b> iaidh s <u>in</u> ew
<b>f</b>	bh	bhf	broad /w/ an <b>bhf</b> uair tú woo (always /v/ in Munster dialect)	slender /v/ i <b>bhF</b> ear Manach vein
<b>g</b>	n	ng	broad /ŋ/ i <b>nG</b> aillimh wing	slender /ŋʲ/ i <b>nge</b> all sing <u>yo</u> ur song
<b>h, l, m, n</b>	no urú possible	---	---	
<b>p</b>	b	bp	/b/ i <b>bP</b> áras, ár <b>bp</b> ictiúr boy	
<b>r</b>	no urú possible	---	---	
<b>t</b>	d	dt	broad /d/ i <b>dT</b> rá Lí date	slender /dʲ/ ár <b>dte</b> ach jet

A video to accompany this handout is available at <https://youtu.be/oIokUII7LX0> (based on an earlier version of this handout, containing some known errors)

Some common words which don't follow these rules and behave similarly across dialects:

- ag /ɛg/ sounds like "egg"
- ar /e:r/ sounds like "air"
- caint /kaintʃ/ rhymes with the middle of "**fine child**"
- is /ɪs/ rhymes with "kiss"
- féin /he:n/ rhymes with "Spain"
- teaghlach /tʃai lax/ rhymes with "my loch"