

Sounds & Spelling of Irish/Fuaimeanna 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:

tae ('t' is broad), *te* ('t' is slender), *taistil* (the first 't' is broad; 's', the second 't' and 'l' are all 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)
slender d	/dʲ/	<i>Dia, cuidiú, leid</i>	Joe, vigil, ledge
slender l	/lʲ/	<i>Liam, bileog, cáil</i>	million, will you
slender n	/nʲ/	<i>níl, sloinne</i>	sinew, minion (rare at start of words in US Eng.)

Vowels

Spelling rule: *Cool 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, ríthfídh, 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 /u/	<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)

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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.)

broad / leathan a, o, u	When you add <i>séimhiú</i> to this consonant, ⇐ you get ⇐	slender / caol e, i
/w/ <i>bhain, abhaile, dabht, gabh</i> wow, tower (/v/ in Munster dialect)	b	/v/ <i>a bheith, leibhéal, sibh</i> village, eve
/x/ <i>chomh, nócha, nach</i> loch (Scottish), Nacht (German)	c	/ç/ <i>an cheist, fiche, deich</i> hue (pronounced strongly)
/ɣ/ dhún no equivalent	d	/j/ <i>ar dheireadh, a Dhia</i> yell
silent <i>an fhuaim, m'fhoireann</i> : ^	f	silent <i>an fhéile, an fhiacail</i> : ^
/ɣ/ <i>ghasúr, ghlór</i> no equivalent	g	/j/ <i>mo ghile, oighear</i> yell
no séimhiú possible	h	no séimhiú possible
no séimhiú possible	l	no séimhiú possible
/w/ <i>gan mhoill, amháin, domhan</i> wow, tower (/v/ in Munster dialect)	m	/v/ <i>mo mhéar, séimhiú, nimh</i> village, eve
no séimhiú possible	n	no séimhiú possible
/f/ <i>sa pholl, phós siad</i> follow	p	/f/ <i>an pheil</i> fell
no séimhiú possible	r	no séimhiú possible
/h/ <i>Nollaig shona, mo shaol</i> honey	s	/h/ <i>mo shiopa, ar sheift</i> hello
/h/ <i>mo thóin, tharla</i> honey	t	/h/ <i>trí thine, an-the</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:	urú adds this letter at the beginning of the word	so it looks like this:	and sounds like this:	
b	m	mb	/m/ ar an mb ord, i mB éal Feirste moo	
c	g	gc	/g/ i g Corcaigh, bhur gc istin goo	
d	n	nd	broad /n/ i nD oire not	slender /nʲ/ i nd iaidh si <u>n</u> ew
f	bh	bhf	broad /w/ an bh fuair tú woo (always /v/ in Munster dialect)	slender /v/ i bh Fear Manach vein
g	n	ng	broad /ŋ/ i nG aillimh wing	slender /ŋʲ/ i nge all sing <u>y</u> our song
h, l, m, n	no urú possible	---	---	
p	b	bp	/b/ i bP áras, ár bp ictiúr boy	
r	no urú possible	---	---	
t	d	dt	broad /d/ i dT rá Lí date	slender /dʲ/ ár dte ach jet

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

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**"
- féin /he:n/ rhymes with Spain
- teaghlach /tʃai lax/ rhymes with "my loch"

Which syllable gets the stress in a word?

If only one syllable has a fada on it, that syllable usually gets the stress. Otherwise, the first syllable usually gets the stress.