

Curious Question #20 – Silent *p*

Transcript

Harp: Hello everyone, this is Harp ...

Maura: And Maura ...

Harp: And we're bringing you the *Curious Questions* podcast at Culips.com.

Maura: Yeah, that's c-u-l-i-p-s.com. Please visit our website and check out all of the cool stuff we have there for you, including transcripts and more explanations for this episode and every episode at Culips.

Harp: Exactly. So, today it's a *Curious Questions* podcast and basically this podcast is where we take one of your questions and we answer it.

Maura: Exactly. So, you send us a question and we answer it in an episode. So please send us more questions, we love your questions and we always respond to your emails.

Harp: So the email address to send your questions to is: questions@culips.com.

Maura: Now this question is from Anaïs, who is from France, but lives in Montreal. Thank you so much for your question. Her question is not about an expression or vocabulary. It's different. This time the question is about pronunciation.

Harp: What's the question, Maura?

Maura : The question is: *Are there a lot of English words in which a letter is silent like the **p** in **psychology**?*

Harp: Anaïs, this is a great question. And for everyone listening this might seem a bit complicated because the words don't sound the way they are spelled, so check out the transcript and read along as you're listening.

Maura: So, she is really asking if we can give some other examples of words that are spelled with the letter *p* as the first letter, but we don't pronounce the *p*. She's asking for more examples of these words that start with a *p* that we don't pronounce.

- Harp: Did everyone out there know this already? That when we say the word **psychology**, we do not pronounce the *p* at the beginning. **Psychology** is the science and study of the mind and human behaviour.
- Maura: Of course, if you're listening, you only hear the *s* sound, but when we write the word **psychology**, it actually starts with the letter *p*, which is not pronounced.
- Harp: So, to answer Anaïs' question, there are not very many words where we do not pronounce the *p*. But there are a few words.
- Maura: All words like **psychology** that start with *p-s-y-c-h-*, have a silent *p*. We say: **psych**. We also have the word **psychologist**—which is a person who is a specialist in **psychology**.
- Harp: There is also **psychiatrist**—which is a person that practices **psychiatry**. **Psychiatry** is also related to the mind, but in this case, it is the science of **diagnosing** real mental disorders.
- Maura: **Psychiatrists** can prescribe medicine for mental disorders and **psychologists** don't. That is one simple way to know the difference.
- Harp: Now what else is there?
- Maura: **Psychic**.
- Harp: Good word! This is a person who can see into the future and predict what will happen to you.
- Maura: Other names for a **psychic** include: *fortune teller* or *clairvoyant*. Those words have the same meaning as **psychic**.
- Harp: Are there any other silent *p* words that begin with **psych-**, *p-s-y-c-h-*?
- Maura: One more that I can think of is: **psycho**.
- Harp: Ooh, **psycho**.
- Maura: Yeah, it's a scary word. **Psycho** or **psychopath** is a person who suffers really from a mental disease where they have immoral and sometimes dangerous behaviour.
- Harp: **Psycho** is often used in slang to mean that someone is acting crazy or strange.

- Maura: Right, like: *he's **psycho**, he was so strange.*
- Harp: Yeah, *he's **psycho**, he's crazy.*
- Maura: Exactly. There are more **psych** words and they're all connected to the brain or the behaviour of people. But we won't talk about them all right now, we'll include a more detailed list in our *Lipservice* on the website.
- Harp: Now, are there any other silent *p* words? I think I can think of a few.
- Maura: OK, what?
- Harp: **Pneumonia.**
- Maura: Right. This word begins with a *p* and then an *n*. Again, we don't pronounce the *p*; we start the word with an *n*. We say **pneumonia**, even though we have a *p* at the beginning we say **pneumonia**.
- Harp: Yeah. In case you're wondering, **pneumonia** is an illness. **Pneumonia inflames** and **congests** the lungs. When you have **pneumonia**, you have a fever and a cough and often difficulty breathing. It is a pretty serious illness, but it's less common nowadays.
- Maura: Right, right. How about **psalm**? This word is spelled *p-s-a-l-m*. Of course, again, we do not pronounce the *p*, but begin the word with an *s*: **psalm**.
- Harp: A **psalm** is a religious or sacred song. It could also be called a hymn.
- Maura: Let's do one more. Do you have an idea, Harp?
- Harp: I have one more that I can think of and this is actually Jessie's favourite *p*-word, it's **pterodactyl**.
- Maura: **Pterodactyl**, that's a strange one. So it starts with a *p*, but the next letter is a *t*, we don't pronounce the *p* we pronounce the *t*: **pterodactyl**.
- Harp: Exactly. So, a **pterodactyl** is a flying dinosaur.
- Maura: Right, so a dinosaur from many, many millions and **billions** of years ago that could fly.
- Harp: Exactly.

- Maura: That's funny that we had silent *p*'s that long ago. Well there are even a few more words with a silent *p*. They're not so common, but they do exist, we'll include some more of them in our *Lipservice*, so if you are curious go to our website and click on the *Lipservice*.
- Harp: All right, Anaïs. I hope that answers your question about the silent *p*.
- Maura: Thanks again for your question, we really appreciated it.
- Harp: Yeah, remember to send your questions out there if it has anything to do with pronunciation, English grammar, anything really.
- Maura: Yeah, or even culture, we like cultural questions.
- Harp: Exactly.
- Maura: So thanks a lot for listening to this *Curious Questions* episode and don't forget to check out our website, or you can also find us on iTunes in the iTunes store.
- Harp: Exactly, so in the iTunes store search *Culips* and you can subscribe, and then you can listen to Culips wherever you go with your iPod.
- Maura: All right, thanks again. This has been Maura ...
- Harp: And Harp ...
- Maura: And we'll talk to you next time.
- Harp: Bye everyone!
- Maura: Bye!

Detailed Explanation

Psych

The prefix **psych** is actually of Greek origin and means the mind or mental process. All **psych** words are associated with the mind, soul or spirit. It is called a prefix (grammar alert!) which is a part of a word that comes at the beginning of many words, like **psychology**.

Let's look at a quick review of the **psych** words we heard in this episode:

Psychology is the study of the science and study of the mind.

A **psychologist** is the person who studies the mind and works with people to improve their behaviour or mental processes.

Psychiatry is very similar to **psychology**.

Psychiatrists are the people who **diagnose** mental problems and can prescribe medicine to help people.

Psychics are people who can see into the future and know what will happen. A person can be a **psychic** or have **psychic** abilities. This is quite different from **psychology** or **psychiatry**, but it is still connected to the power of the mind or soul.

The last couple of words we mention with **psych** are **psycho** and **psychopath**. **Psycho** is just the short form for **psychopath**. Someone who is a **psychopath** is often a dangerous person who does not understand the difference between right and wrong. We often use **psycho** in a playful way, when someone is acting funny.

There are other words connected to the words mentioned above.

Psychology – psychological, psychologically

Psychiatry – psychiatric

Psychopath – psychopathy, psychopathic

And there are many other words that start with **psych**, but they are not common words. They are very technical, scientific words. Most native speakers do not know the meaning of these words unless they study something related.

Here is a short list of some of the **psych** words that are more common:

- psyche
- to be psyched

- psychedelic
- psychoanalyze
- psychobabble
- psychotherapist

Few

The word **few** can be used in different ways. The way Harp uses it is pretty simple. She says, “But there are a **few** words.” When we say a **few** it means a small amount. There is no precise amount, it is generally from two to seven items, but this can change depending on what item you are talking about.

We can also use **few** by itself, as in this example: ***Few** people have called about the apartment.* In this case **few** means *not many but at least two*.

Here is another example: *We planted many seeds, but **few** have started to grow.* This means not many planted have started to grow.

Diagnosing

Diagnosing is from the verb *to diagnose*. *To diagnose* means to determine a kind of illness or disease. When a person feels sick and goes to see a doctor, the doctor then **diagnoses**, or determines the name of, the illness that the person has.

In the example from this episode, we talk about **psychiatrists diagnosing** mental disorders, other kinds of illnesses.

Anais’s

Sometimes there is confusion about the apostrophe s (’s), especially when there is already an s on the end of the noun. Here is a breakdown of the rules.

To show possession with singular nouns:

This is **Jim’s** house.

We should take **Dawn’s** car.

To show possession with plural nouns:

Go see them in the **boys’** room.

The **students'** word is excellent.

To show possession with singular nouns that end in an s:

This was **Anaïs's** question.

OR

This was **Anaïs'** question. (This way is also acceptable and more modern)

James's house is always so clean.

OR

James' house is always so clean.

Pneumonia

Pneumonia is also a word with Greek origins. They seem to like the silent *p* in Greece!

Many people can get **pneumonia** around the world and it affects people of all ages. Many people live a healthy life after having **pneumonia**. It is the number one killer of elderly people and children under five years old. The common symptoms of **pneumonia** include cough, chest pain and difficulty breathing.

There are some other words that begin with a silent *pneu-* like **pneumonia**, but they are not used often at all (unless you are a doctor) in regular conversation.

Inflames and congests

These are two words that we use to talk about **pneumonia**. **Inflames** means that something becomes red and swollen.

A flame is a part of a fire, which is red and hot. Do you see the connection? In a way unrelated to the physical body, we can also use **inflamm** to talk about starting a fire.

The verb **to inflame** is also used to talk about someone getting excited or passionate. Here are some examples:

The speech **inflamed** the angry protest.

(The speech made the protesters become more angry and passionate about their cause.)

Their separation only **inflamed** their love.

(The separation made their love grow stronger.)

The verb *to congest* means that a lot of fluid has caused something to be blocked. When we say we *feel congested*, it means that we are having trouble breathing because something is blocking our airway. People say they are **congested** when they have a cold.

In another way, we often use **congest** to talk about traffic. Here is an example:

The highway was so **congested** the cars were barely moving.

Psalm

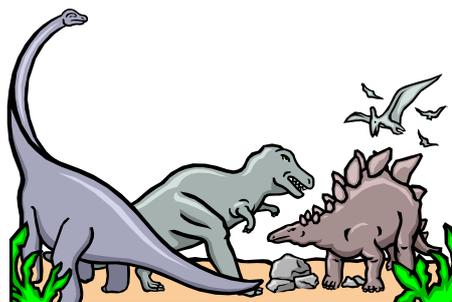
This word **psalm** is really only used in a religious context. **Psalm** really only has one definition: *a sacred song or poem*. This word is of Greek origin, too.

There are a few (a small amount) of other words that begin with *psal-* but they are not commonly used.

Pterodactyl

A **pterodactyl** is a kind of reptile that can fly, and also has only a small tail and a beak like a bird. Like we say, this is a dinosaur that no longer exists.

There are other words that begin with *pt-* which also are of Greek origin, but none are used often.



Billions

Have you hear of this number? First we have thousands (1000s) and then millions (1 000 000s), and after that comes **billions** (1 000 000 000s). Most of us don't have a reason to count this high normally! We can use it to mean a very big number in general.

Like how we use it this episode for example:

Dinosaurs could fly millions and **billions** of years ago. (many, many years ago)

Or another example:

There are **billions** of different kinds of insects. (A very large number)

And in case you are curious, after **billions** is trillions. (1 000 000 000 000s)

Sometimes we also use the pretend words *kajillion* or *bajillion* to represent a very, very large number. These are not real numbers, and not real words either. *Kajillion* and *bajillion* are slang for a very large amount of something.

Here is one example of how someone might use it:

She can't come to the party tonight because she has a bajillion things to do.
(She has lots of things to do.)

Maura's joke

Maura says, "That's funny that we had silent *p*'s that long ago," and then Harp laughs. What was so funny? Did you understand her joke?

Before this joke, we talk about the word ***pterodactyl*** which is a dinosaur. So Maura makes the joke that words with silent *p*'s are as old as the dinosaurs. It is funny because, of course, when the **pterodactyls** were here on earth there were not any people calling them **pterodactyls**.

Often when we explain jokes they are not funny anymore. Do you think this joke is funny?

Quiz (see the answers at the end of this Lipservice)

1. Which is the first silent p-word that we speak about in this episode?

- a) psychiatry
- b) psychology
- c) psalm
- d) pterodactyl

2. What is the meaning associated with the prefix *psych-*?

- a) mind, head, face
- b) head, heart, hands
- c) mind, soul, spirit
- d) soul, feet, toes

3. Which are synonyms for *psychic*?

- a) fortune teller, clairvoyant
- b) crazy person
- c) psychopath
- d) dinosaur, reptile

4. Jennifer: He was acting so strange and crazy, it was like he was _____.

Please fill in the blank.

- a) psychic
- b) psycho
- c) psychedelic
- d) psychological

5. What is the name of the illness that inflames and congests the lungs?

- a) psychology
- b) psychiatry
- c) psychedelic
- d) pneumonia

6. Which number represents a billion?

- a) 1 000
- b) 1 000 000
- c) 1 000 000 000
- d) 1 000 000 000 000

7. Which placement of the apostrophe s is correct for a plural subject (girls)?

- a) the girls's toys
- b) the girl's toys
- c) the girls' toys
- d) the girls'es toys

Answers: 1.b 2.c 3.a 4.b 5.d 6.c 7.c