

## **Consonants and Vowels : Differences**

A vowel is a speech sound made with your mouth fairly open, the nucleus of a spoken syllable.

A consonant is a sound made with your mouth fairly closed.

When we talk, consonants break up the stream of vowels (functioning as syllable onsets and codas), so that we don't sound like we've just been to the dentist for four fillings and the anaesthetic hasn't worn off yet.

Consonants require more precise articulation than vowels, which is why children find them harder to learn, and often end up in speech therapy after having become so cross at not being understood that they've started hitting people.

Only a few children with severe speech sound difficulties (often called dyspraxia or apraxia) sometimes need therapy to help them produce vowel sounds correctly.

Most syllables contain a vowel, though vowel-like consonants can occasionally be syllables. And to complicate matters, many English vowels are technically two or three vowels shmooshed together.

The last four consonant sounds on the above list – “y”, “w”, “r”, “l” – are produced with less mouth constriction than other consonants, and in linguistics are called “approximants”.

Approximants occupy a kind of linguistic grey area between vowels and consonants, in fact “w” and “y” are also known as semivowels.

There's very little difference between the consonant sound “y” and the vowel sound “ee” as in “see/sea/me”, and between the consonant sound “w” and the vowel sound “ooh” as in “moon/rule/grew”.

These sounds are classified as consonants because they generally *behave like consonants*, that is, they're (in) syllable onsets not syllable nuclei.

### **Syllabic consonants**

In many English dialects, the sound “l” can be a syllable all by itself in words like “bottle” and “middle”. This is also true of the sound “n” in words like “button” and “hidden”.

In these words, the tongue has just said “t” or “d”, so it’s already in the right place to go straight into the sound “l” or “n”, without saying a vowel first. However, we still write a “vowel letter” in this syllable (le, on, en) and we say a vowel sound in other words with similar final spellings, like “giggle” and “dabble”, “ribbon” and “beckon”, “happen” and “embiggen”.

The sound “m” can also act as a syllable in words like “rhythm” and “algorithm”, again because the sounds “th” and “m” are physically very close together. In this case we don’t *write* a “vowel letter” in the last syllable, but we do *say* a vowel sound in the last syllable of most words spelt like this, like “autism” and “criticism” ([click here](#) for more, see right column).

Tell language mavens who insist a consonant is never a syllable to stick that up their jumpers.