

M1 L2: Pronunciation

Die Aussprache

Double vowels

In German, double vowels are often used. They are two vowels that follow each other, e.g., "ei", "ie", "ai", "eu", "äu" and "au". They are treated as one sound.

ei: Eis (ice), Eisenbahn (railway), Eimer (bucket)

ai: Mai (May), Hai (shark), Kaiser (emperor)

ie: Liebe (love), Dieb (thief), Miete (rent) (here, the 'e' is not pronounced, but it indicates that it makes the 'i' longer)

eu: Eule (owl), Euter (udder), Europa (Europe)

äu: Häuser (houses), Läuse (lice), Mäuse (mice)

au: Haus (house), Laus (louse), Maus (mouse)

The letter "h" and the sounds "ch" and "sch"

In addition to doubled letters, there are the letter combinations "sch" and "ch" as well as the silent "h", which is written but not pronounced.

h can be pronounced in two ways:

- At the beginning of words as [h], like in English:

Hund (dog), Haare (hair), Haus (house)

- As a silent h, mostly before the consonants l, m, n, r as well as before and after vowels. The vowel before the h must be pronounced long:

fehlen (to miss), nehmen (to take), Zahn (tooth), Lehrer (teacher), sehen (to see), gehen (to go)

ch can be pronounced in two different manners:

- After back vowels (a, o, u, au) as a guttural [χ]:

Ach (ah), Buch (book), Loch (hole), Fach (subject), Dach (roof), doch (but)

- After all other vowels, l, n, r and in the ending -chen, as a soft [ç]:

ich (I), Milch (milk), Kirche (church), manchmal (sometimes), Mädchen (girl)

- Before a, o, u, l, r, s as [k]:

Chaos (chaos), Chor (choir), sechs (six), wachsen (to grow), Fuchs (fox)

sch is pronounced:

- The combination "sch" is always pronounced [ʃ] (English "sh"):

Fisch (fish), Kirsche (cherry), Mensch (man), falsch (wrong)

- The letter combinations "st" and "sp" are also pronounced as [ʃ]:

Strafe (penalty), Stimme (voice), steil (steep), spät (late), Spaß (fun), Sport (sport)

Double vowels and consonants

In many words, the same vowel is written twice, which indicates that it is pronounced long:

Saal (hall), Meer (sea), leer (empty), Fee (fairy)

Unlike doubled vowels, doubled consonants indicate that the previous vowel is pronounced short:

Mann (man), dann (then), komm (come), Bann (spell)

The letters "s", "ß" and "ss"

A voiced s (English z) is usually simply written as -s-:

singen (to sing), Segel (sail), Rasen (lawn), lesen (to read)

A voiceless s can be written either -ss- or -ß-. The rules are:

- After single short vowels, in principle, it is written -ss-:

Fass (barrel), Pass (passport), Tasse (cup), fressen (to eat), Kuss (kiss), Fluss (river)

- The prefix miss- is also always written with ss:

Missverständnis (misunderstanding), missachten (to disregard)

- -ß- is written after long vowels or double vowels:

Maß (measure), Soße (sauce), außen (on the outside), Straße (street), süß (sweet), fließen (to flow), heiß (hot)

Remark: In Switzerland, ß is not used and is always replaced by ss.