

Tutor Tip

Pronunciation of Final "s"

Did you know that there are three different ways in which to pronounce written 's' at the end of a word? Bet you didn't because native speakers don't pay attention to these intricacies of sound! But non-native speakers of English do usually have difficulty in the pronunciation of written 's' at the end of a word, particularly when the 's' is preceded by one of two consonants. The reasons for this difficulty may result from the speaker's first language (L1) that will permit a limited number of single consonants (which don't include either the /s/ or /z/ sounds) and/or no multiple consonants, or the verb in the L1 doesn't change to reflect change in tense. No matter what the reason, this final 's' (with its three different pronunciations) carries grammatical information and can never be omitted. Omission of this final 's' doesn't necessarily impede comprehension of the message BUT the speaker may be considered uneducated by the native speaker.

Generally speaking, the pronunciation of written 's' at the beginning of a word doesn't pose any difficulties to most non-native speakers. 'The sound of 's' in English – in all positions of the word – is high pitched and clear, and is produced by a) having the lips in a 'smiling' position in contrast to the 's' of many other languages where the lips are in a more relaxed position, and by b) having more 'push' (force) behind the sound which allows the sound to be very clear and thus very audible at the end of a word. The sound is produced with friction in the area of the blade of the tongue and the tooth ridge. If you put your palm just below your jaw and make the 's' sound as you would normally do in English, you will feel the air on your palm. The sound of 'z' is made with the mouth and lips holding the position for 's' but with the addition of voice. If you put your fingers in the middle of the front of your neck and make a 'z' sound, you will feel the vibration of your vocal chords. NOTE: the sound of 'z' is absent in many languages. Students may have to concentrate to say this sound, most particularly at the end of words.

Final written 's' in English carries important information. Please remember that it's not only plurals or third person singular present tense that are covered with these sound rules. Possessives are also included here! Final 's' is pronounced in *three* different ways that depend on the final sound in the basic word.

Let's look at these three possibilities:

1. **Basic word ends in a voiceless sound (e.g. p, t, k, f, th BUT NOT s, sh or ch/tch)**

What to do? *Simply add the sound of 's' to the basic word.*

NOTE: this may cause difficulty because of the two consonants that are always present.

Examples:

Basic Word	Basic Word+'s' ('s' is 's' sound here)
<i>stop</i>	<i>stops</i>
<i>Kate</i>	<i>Kate's</i>
<i>cake</i>	<i>cakes</i>
<i>laugh</i>	<i>laughs</i>
<i>path</i>	<i>paths</i>

2. **Basic word ends in a voiced sound (e.g. in all vowels and all other consonants BUT NOT z, j or the sound that appears at the end of the word *beige*)**

What to do? *Simply add the sound of 'z' to the basic word.*

NOTE: as noted earlier, this is generally more difficult because the 'z' sound is absent in many languages and speakers may resort to some sort of 's' sound here. When 'z' is combined with a second consonant, the speaker may resort to insertion of a vowel to make the consonant group more pronounceable. This extra vowel will add another syllable to the word, and can cause momentary confusion in the listener.

Examples:

Basic Word	Basic Word+'s' ('s' is 'z' sound here)
<i>Bob</i>	<i>Bob's</i>
<i>lad</i>	<i>lads</i>
<i>dog</i>	<i>dogs</i>
<i>move</i>	<i>moves</i>
<i>breathe</i>	<i>breathes</i>
<i>gum</i>	<i>gums</i>
<i>Don</i>	<i>Don's</i>
<i>sing</i>	<i>sings</i>
<i>roar</i>	<i>roars</i>
<i>doll</i>	<i>dolls</i>
<i>Ray</i>	<i>Ray's</i>

<i>go</i>	<i>goes</i>
<i>shoe</i>	<i>shoes</i>
<i>flea</i>	<i>fleas</i>
<i>eye</i>	<i>eyes</i>
<i>sow</i>	<i>sows</i>
<i>boy</i>	<i>boys</i>

Some very common words are written with an ‘s’ but this ‘s’ is pronounced as ‘z’: is, was, has, goes, his, these, those, sometimes, always. **NOTE:** With the words “it is”, when these are contracted to “it’s” or “its”, the rule of 1. above applies so that the ‘s’ of “is” is pronounced as an ‘s’.

3. Basic word ends in the six sounds that were ignored in 1. and 2. above (e.g. s, z, sh, sound that appears at the end of the word *beige*, ch/tch, and j)

What to do? *Simply add a separate syllable that is sounds like ‘iz’.*

NOTE: normally students have little difficulty in the pronunciation of this syllable. The difficulty is that many students forget to pronounce it! This is especially true for L1 Spanish, Cantonese, French, Vietnamese speakers.

Examples:

Basic Word	Basic Word+’iz’
<i>boss**</i>	<i>bosses or boss’ **</i>
<i>buzz</i>	<i>buzzes</i>
<i>wash</i>	<i>washes</i>
<i>beige</i>	<i>beiges (as in different shades of beige)</i>
<i>watch</i>	<i>watches (same form for noun and verb)</i>
<i>language</i>	<i>languages</i>

**if the word already ends in written ‘s’ (or written ‘ss’), when making the word possessive, just add an apostrophe.

PRACTICE

In the underlined words below, please add the correct spelling so that the sentences are grammatical; please provide the correct sound (s, z or iz) for these words. Check the answers at the bottom of the page. Please remember that the representations of the answers will be what you hear, and not necessarily what you write.

1. The boy ski every weekend and usually forget to do his homework.
2. George (possessive) parents work very hard so that there is enough money for all his book (plural).
3. The bus usually pass by at 8:15 every morning.
4. Liz (possessive) dog (plural) are very noisy.
5. Johnny want to go to see the concert tonight.
6. Mr. Jones (possessive) daughter is very pretty. She live in Vancouver.
7. Question: How many horse are there in that field? Answer: there are 15 horse in that field.
8. My ache (plural) and pain (plural) get worse when the weather get cold.
9. Joe watch too much television! His grade (plural) are suffering!
10. My Dad drive me to hockey twice a week during hockey season. While I play or practice, Dad run around doing errand (plural).
11. Ron just love a strong coffee to wake him up! He's such a sleepy-head!
12. It's such a nice day today. It make me want to get outside and smell the fresh air!
13. The meeting will be in Mr. Smith (possessive) office at 11:00 tomorrow morning. He like meeting (plural) to start on time, so don't be late!
14. Question: When do John go to Ottawa? Answer: he go on Saturday afternoon.
15. Question: Is Mary ready to begin the course? Answer: It seem that she won't be ready until next semester.

Answers:

1. s, s. 2. iz, s. 3. iz, iz. 4. iz, z. 5. s. 6. iz, z. 7. iz, iz. 8. s, z, s. 9. iz, z. 10. z, z, z.
11. z, z. 12. s, s. 13. s, s, z. 14. z, z. 15. z, z.