

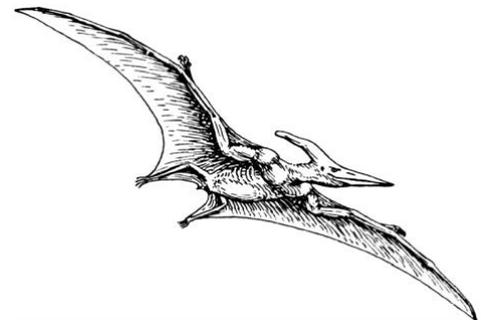
Mind Your (Aviation) Language....

(Not So) Silent Letters

Ever wondered why English spelling has so many letters that aren't pronounced? Well, there are various reasons, but one group of silent letters are silent simply because they're too hard to pronounce – usually because they come into English from other languages!

Take for example “pterodactyl” pronounced “terodactyl”. Try saying the “p” at the beginning. It's hard, isn't it?

Pterodactyl comes from the Greek:
pteron = wing, and
daktulos = finger



In English there are combinations of letters we find easy to say, and combinations of letters we find difficult say. “St” is easy – Steven, stand, step. But “Pt”? Not so easy. Or is it?

Actually, we only find it difficult at the beginning of a word. When the “pt” follows a vowel, it suddenly becomes easy!

Take for example “helicopter”. Helicopter comes from the Greek:
helix = spiral, and
pteron = wing



Any problems pronouncing “pt” in helicopter? No. Not so silent “p” in this form.

Another similar example is the silent “m” in “mnemonic” – you know that little phrase you use to remember something more complicated – such as BUMPH Brakes, Undercarriage, Mixture, Propeller, Hatches/Harnesses; or “I’m Safe” used in aviation to self-assess your fitness to fly.

Try pronouncing the “m” at the beginning of “mnemonic”. Got your lips twisted yet?

Mnemonic comes from the Greek:
mnemon = of the mind / memory

Again, we drop the “m”, simply because it's too hard to pronounce. But as soon as we put a vowel in front of it, it becomes easy.

For example “amnesia”
Amnesia comes from the Greek:
a-mne-sia = not having memory

Aside: English isn't the only language that has problems with certain consonant clusters. The Spanish can't manage “st” so the name Steven becomes Esteban. Also, in the middle ages, Europeans used the name Stamboul, but the Turks called the city Istanbul because they also struggle with a starting “st”.

