

## Short Guide to German Pronunciation - *updated*

The following is a collection of individual German sounds and their pronunciation. For easier understanding they are being put into relation with familiar English and Irish sound features, i.e. explained from an English-speaking perspective.

### VOWELS

**ä** - The sound should be familiar through the way "bed" is pronounced in Irish English or "bad" or "hand" are pronounced in Received Pronunciation (RP).

**au** - The German sequence <au> is pronounced [au] as in English "plough" and not like in "Austin".

**ei, ie** - <ie> in German is pronounced [i:] as in English "fierce" and "grief"; German <ei> is pronounced [ai], as in English "tie". Good examples for this mix-up:

"Leid" means sorrow, "Lied" means song; depends on the pronunciation whether one is listening to a song or someone else's hardship.

Another example to practise this with the students:

"Sie schliefen im Bett." They slept in the bed.

"Sie schleifen im Bett." - They are sanding (possibly the bed frame) while in bed.

Fierce important!...could be a clue to remember.

**eu** - German <eu> is pronounced [oi] like English "boy", and not [ju] like "Europe".  
Boy, so many people do this wrong!

**ö** - The long ö, as in "schön", is pronounced starting with a long [e:] sound, such as in German "Leben" or Irish-, Scottish-, Ulster Irish English "face", and pursing the lips while holding the [e:] sound.

The method for pronouncing the short ö, like in German "Löffel", is the same, however, starting with the ä sound above.

**ü** - The long ü, as in German "üben" is pronounced starting with the long [i:] as in German "Lied" and English "cheap" and pursing the lips whilst holding the [i:] sound.

The method for the pronunciation of the short ü, like in German "müssen" or Scottish/Ulster Irish English "book", is the same, whilst the tongue is not raised quite as high as when pronouncing the long ü.

### SEMI-VOWELS

**j** - This is pronounced like English <y> as in "young". English "ya" and German "ja" sound exactly the same.

### CONSONANTS

**ach** - The German sound [X] corresponds with Scottish "loch" and a number of "ll" words in Welsh and, in most regions, equals the Irish "Gaeltacht".

**ich** - The German sound [ç] sounds like overdoing the /h/ in English "huge".

The common misconception that the German ich sound and the sound in Irish "fiche" or "iche" are the same is not true.

The ich sound in Irish is articulated further back in the mouth - it is a fricative sound where we usually pronounce the [k] as in "cat".

When we pronounce the German sound, the place where the tongue is closest to the roof of the mouth is the hard palate.

Makes a HUGE difference!

**pf, ps** - These consonant sequences as in German "Pferd" and "Psychologie" do not occur in English at the beginning of words but only cross-syllable, such as "top five" and at the end, such as "He sleeps."

**qu** - Unlike in English, <qu> in German is pronounced [kv]. You will recognize it in the example "...spoke very..." if you focus on the last sound in "spoke" and the first sound in "very".

**r** - For this sound we should look at a few other sounds first:

[f, v] - English "veal" is pronounced with a [v] whilst German "viel" is pronounced with an [f] sound, like English "feel". Sticking a finger (gently) into our ear and saying the word "feel" (or German "viel") and then the word "veal", we will feel our vocal cords vibrate when saying the latter.

[s, z] - English "sea" is pronounced with an [s] sound, whilst German "sie" is pronounced with a [z] sound, like in "New Zealand". Sticking a finger (gently) into our ear and saying "sea" followed by "New Zealand", we will feel a vibration again.

Hence [f] and [v] and [s] and [z] are pairs of voiceless-voiced sounds. Otherwise the pronunciation is the same.

The German <r> is basically a voiced version of the German <ach> sound; like [v] is the voiced form of [f] and [z] is the voiced form of [s].

Putting our finger into our ear and saying the word "Fach" we should not feel any vibration, but when saying "Fahrrad" we should feel it.

**s** - German <s> in the beginning of a word (or syllable) is always pronounced [z], such as in "sie", which sounds like "New Zealand". In English, <s> in the beginning of a word (or syllable) is always pronounced [s].

**sp, st** - This sequence is pronounced like it says in the Irish saying [shticks and shtones]. The same applies to "Spiel" being pronounced [shpeel].

**ß** - This unfamiliar letter is pronounced [s] as in "großen Spaß".

**v** - German knows two ways of pronouncing <v>, as [v], such as in "Verb", and as an [f] sound, like in [viel]. (The former applies to words of Latin origin and the latter to those of Germanic origin.)

If a written German word with [v] looks considerably like an English word, chances are good that <v> is pronounced the English way; for example, "Verb, Version, Observatorium, investieren, Vase".

If there is no English word that looks like the German word with <v>, the sound will be [f]; for example: "viel, vor, voll, Vater, verlaufen, verstecken" (and all the other ver-prefixes).

**w** - German <w> is pronounced [v], hence the Plural "die Verben" and the infinitive "werben" (to advertise) sound the same.

**z** - The sound sequence [ts] in the beginning of a word exists in English only in "tsunami", "tse-tse fly" and "t's me!". In German, the sound sequence [ts] can occur in all positions.

Furthermore, it is nearly always represented by the letter z (also tz). In English the letter z is pronounced [z], which causes difficulties for English-speaking learners of German. However, the German sound and the letter exist together in English in the word "pizza".

Once students have been made aware of this, we can practise little phrases like "die Zahl".

[ts] in "Pizza" and "die Zahl" occur in the same phonetic environment, therefore there is no reason why students should be unable to pronounce "z" in "Zahl" and other words with the letter.

**Should any questions remain unanswered:**

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