



The august origins of August: A month and so much more!

Posted on August 21, 2023

written by Sophia Desir, Language Portal of Canada

While I was writing a blog post on the different ways to pronounce the French word *août*, (**August**, in English), my curiosity got the better of me: I wanted to know whether there were also any difficulties with the English pronunciation of the word, since English isn't my mother tongue. I quickly looked at the resources available online and learned far more than just how to pronounce the word!

Pronunciation

I found a 30-second video that provided a clear explanation of the different pronunciations, which vary depending on whether you're in North America or the United Kingdom. The difference lies in the first syllable: in North America, **August** is pronounced like the first vowel sound in **father** or **daughter**; in the United Kingdom, like the vowel sound in **more** or **war**.

Word origin: From Augustus to August



In English, August comes from the Latin *Augustus*, the name of the Roman emperor for whom the eighth month of the year was named in 8 BCE. Before this time, the month was known as *Sextilis*, because it was the sixth month in the original 10-month Roman calendar.

The proper noun: August

You're probably very familiar with the proper noun **August**. Here in the Northern Hemisphere, it's used to refer to the summer month, during which we are likely to be out soaking up the last of the summer sun before returning to our fall routines.

Like all months of the year, **August** is capitalized in English. Its French equivalent *août* isn't. In French, the months and days of the week are written in lowercase, unless, of course, they appear at the beginning of a sentence.

Here are some examples of the word August used as a proper noun:

Half the staff takes their vacation in August.

This year in Quebec, the school year starts on Monday, August 28.

The adjective: august

Did you know that **august** (with a lower case **a**) is used as an adjective? Don't be surprised if it's not part of your everyday vocabulary! It's not an everyday word! The word **august** (with a lower case **a**) is a formal word that can mean "great," "grand," "impressive" or "dignified."

Here are some examples of the word **august** used as an adjective:

The graduates wish to thank the King for honouring the ceremony with his august presence.

We enjoyed many august performances at the Shaw Festival in Niagara-on-the-Lake.

And you might think that the proper noun "August" and the adjective "august" are pronounced the same way, but they're not. With the proper noun "August," you put the stress on the first syllable; with the adjective "august," you put the stress on the second syllable.

Derivatives: Adverb and noun

Derivatives of the word **august** include the adverb **augustly** and the noun **augustness**.

Just like **august** (the adjective), **augustly** is a formal word used to emphasize great importance.

Here's an example of **augustly** used as an adverb:

The University of Ottawa's Tabaret Hall stands augustly in front of a large lawn on campus.

The noun **augustness** is rarely used these days. It refers to the state or quality of being august, majestic or grandiose.

Both a first name and a last name

In some French-speaking regions, such as in my native Haiti, the last name *Auguste* is quite common and is generally spelled with an **e** at the end. According to the GENEANET website, the name was often given to former black slaves after 1848 in the Antilles (specifically, Haiti) and on the French island of La Réunion.

August can also be a first name in English and French (*Auguste*). Some babies are still given this name today. However, it hasn't topped the list of the most popular baby names in recent decades. According to the French website *Journal des femmes*, approximately 757 children were named *Auguste* in 2021.

Many famous (or should I say august?) personalities have been given the once-popular first name **August**/*Auguste* over the years. Some of these include Canadian Indigenous actor August Schellenberg, an award-winning performer, who worked in theatre, television and film; American playwright August Wilson, a two-time winner of the Pulitzer Prize for Drama; and French impressionist painter Pierre-Auguste Renoir.

The last word on August

So, if you're looking for a not-so-common name for your family's new arrival, why not slip **August** or *Auguste* onto the list? And if you've been eagerly awaiting the month of August to take your vacation and visit **august** tourist sites like Ottawa's Parliament Hill or Quebec's Chateau Frontenac, I hope you're enjoying your time off!

