

## A Brief History of Old English

When the Anglo-Saxons first came to England from northern Germany (Saxony) in the fifth and sixth centuries, they brought their language with them. It is a Germanic language and has some fundamental similarities to Modern German.

If Anglo-Saxon had then developed undisturbed for several centuries we might have no more trouble reading an Old English text than we do reading something written by Chaucer at the end of the fourteenth century (students can start reading Chaucer with no special linguistic instruction, although they may need the help of footnotes for the first few weeks of a course).

But political and cultural events changed the Anglo-Saxon language into the language we speak today.

The most important influence upon the language was the Norman Conquest of 1066, when William the Conqueror, a prince of Normandy (a part of France) conquered England. William made French the official language of the aristocracy and the law courts. Anglo-Norman French was an elite language, and the common people did not necessarily learn it as children, but it was the official language of the nation.

Over the next two centuries, however, Anglo-Norman French mixed with Anglo-Saxon, probably because the children of the Norman-French aristocracy were being raised by servants who spoke Anglo-Saxon among themselves. Eventually the two languages blended together, mixing the grammars and vocabularies of Anglo-Norman and Anglo-Saxon. This mixture, which was also influenced by the Latin used by the Church, became the language we recognize as Middle English, the language of Chaucer, William Langland, and the anonymous poet who wrote *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

But as you can see by reading even a brief passage from Chaucer, Chaucer's language is not our language. Around the year 1500, a linguistic event called "The Great Vowel Shift" occurred. No one really knows why, though there are many speculations, but within a generation or so the pronunciation of Middle English vowels was rearranged. For example, the "ee" sound in Chaucer's word "sweete" (pronounced to rhyme with "eight") became the "ee" sound in Modern English "sweet." Also the "i" in "April," which is Chaucer's time was pronounced to rhyme with Modern English "peel" became the short "i" sound in Modern English "April." All the vowels were rearranged in a complex pattern... .

Once this vowel shift is complete, we have Early Modern English and, soon after, Modern English. Thus while Chaucer takes some getting used to, students can successfully read the writings of Shakespeare with no formal instruction in his language; our language, for all the new words added and changes in manners and style, is essentially the same as Shakespeare's. We could have understood Shakespeare, and he would have understood us, but he could not have understood the Anglo-Saxon writer Aelfric, even though approximately the same amount of time separates Aelfric from Shakespeare as separates Shakespeare from us.

Despite the differences between Old English and Modern English, the language retains a fundamental kinship to our own. Thus students can expect to find learning Old English to be somewhat easier than learning a new "foreign" language such as Spanish or French. A semester's worth of hard work should be enough to give a student the ability to translate Old English poetry and prose. The key to success in this endeavor is to lay a solid foundation of grammatical understanding... .

from "King Alfred's Grammar Book"

<http://acunix.wheatonma.edu/mdrout/GrammarBook2005/KAGrammar.html>

## Chapter 2: Orthography

A few of the letters in Old English texts may be unfamiliar to you.

*þ* and *ƿ* (thorn): In Modern English we represent the sounds at the beginning of the word "the" and end of the word "with" with the digraph "th" (**digraph** is a term meaning two letters used to represent one sound). Old English had two separate letters for the "th" sound. The first is written like this: *þ*. It is called *thorn*.

*ð* and *Ð* (eth): Old English scribes could also represent the "th" sound with the letter *ð* (the capital letter version looks like a capital D with a short horizontal line: *Ð*). The letter is called "eth," pronounced so that it rhymes with the first syllable in the word "feather."

Thorn and eth are used interchangeably to represent both **voiced** and **unvoiced** "th" sounds (the sound at the beginning of "thud" is voiced; the sound at the end of "with" is unvoiced).

*Æ* and *æ* (ash): This letter, called "ash," may be familiar to you from old-fashioned spellings of words like "Encyclopædia." The **digraph** *æ* in Old English is pronounced the same way as the "a" in the words "bat" or "cat."

Below you will find some Modern English words with the "th" sound replaced by "eth" or "thorn" and some of the "a" sounds replaced with "ash."

Dat	=	that
ðousand	=	thousand
sixþ	=	sixth
þin	=	thin
wiðer	=	wither
bæckground	=	background
Æppetite	=	Appetite
æt	=	at
hæmmer	=	hammer
Æcknowledge	=	acknowledge

### Note:

In addition to *thorn*, *eth*, and *ash*, there were a few additional manuscript letters used in Old English that are unfamiliar to Modern English speakers. The letter *ȝ*, called *yogh*, is pronounced like Modern English "y" or "g" depending upon the word in which it is found. *Yogh* (the name is pronounced so that it rhymes with the Scottish word "loch") is the antecedent of modern English "yoke").

A letter *ƿ*, which looks like Modern English "p," called "wynn" (which comes from a **rune** by that name) is pronounced like Modern English "w."

Although *yogh* and *wynn* are found in Old English manuscripts, modern editors replace them with their Modern English equivalents, while they leave *thorn*, *eth*, and *ash* in place. The reasons for this inconsistency are bound up in the early history of Anglo-Saxon studies and the preferences of the editors who made the first print editions. If you decide to learn about **paleography**, the study of ancient writing, or work directly with Anglo-Saxon **manuscripts** or **facsimiles**, you will have to learn to recognize "yogh," "wynn" and also special forms of the letters "s," "r," and "f." We give a brief guide in the *Appendix on Manuscripts*. But most Old English texts are edited so that the only unfamiliar letters printed are *thorn*, *eth*, and *ash* (*þ*, *ð* *æ*).