

HISTORY COURSE

The History of the English Language

10 Chapters

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The History of the English Language

Course 1 · Chapter 1 · Where We Left Off

This course tells the story of English from about 1150 to today. It is the third in a series: Britain Before English covers the island before the English arrived, and The Story of Old English covers the first seven centuries of the language. This chapter gives a short recap so you can start here, and then looks at how historians cut the story into periods, which is less tidy than the textbook labels suggest.

The story in one box

Wikipedia's *History of English* article divides the language into Old English (from the 5th-century settlement until after 1066), Middle English (from about 1066 to the end of the 15th century), Early Modern English (from about 1500) and Modern English. The same pages give slightly different dates for the same boundaries, and the labels are a convenience, not events. English changed gradually all the way through.

Watch out

"1066" is the usual date given for the end of Old English, but nobody woke up speaking Middle English on 15 October. The *History of English* article says the change came "some time after" the Conquest, and the *Middle English* article says the shift from Late Old English was complete by the 1150s to 1180s. Treat every period date as a rounded marker on a slow change.

A short recap of Old English

For the full story, see The Story of Old English. In brief, according to Wikipedia's *History of English* and *Old English* articles:

- **The start:** the language is dated from the Germanic settlement of Britain in the 5th to 7th centuries (the *History of English* article cites about 450). The settlers spoke West Germanic dialects of the North Sea group, and early English shares features with Old Frisian, so an "Anglo-Frisian" grouping is sometimes used.

- **Length:** roughly the 5th to 12th centuries. The *Old English* article gives Albert Baugh's dates of 450 to 1150, and splits the period into prehistoric (about 450 to 650), early (about 650 to 900) and late (about 900 to 1150).
- **Dialects:** Kentish, Mercian, Northumbrian and West Saxon, with Late West Saxon as the classical literary standard.
- **Grammar:** heavily inflected, with case, gender and a dual number, and freer word order. It had demonstratives but no definite article "the" (the *History of English* article).
- **Contact:** Latin words came with Christianity around 600, and Old Norse from the Scandinavian settlement from the 9th century. The *Old English* article argues that Old Norse likely had a greater impact on English than any other language, and credits it with helping erode inflectional endings.
- **Vocabulary:** the article says about 85% of Old English words are no longer used, but the ones that survive form the basic elements of Modern English vocabulary. It gives no percentage of Modern English from Old English.

The four periods

The conventional division is into four periods. The articles agree on the shape and differ on the dates, so I give each source's own wording:

Period	Dates (per the articles)	What marks it
Old English	5th century to after 1066 (*History of English*); 450 to 1150 (*Old English*, after Baugh)	Full inflections, Germanic vocabulary, Norse and Latin loans
Middle English	From about 1066 to the end of the 15th century (*History of English*); 1150 to the late 15th century, with about 1470 as the end (*Middle English*)	Heavy French and Anglo-Norman vocabulary; loss of most inflections; no written standard at first
Early Modern English	"Around 1500" (*History of English*); from the 1540s, lasting until about 1650 (*Middle English*)	Great Vowel Shift, printing, Renaissance loans from Latin and Greek
Modern English	"In place by the late 17th century" (a claim the *History of English* page tags "citation needed"); Late Modern from Johnson's 1755 dictionary	Largely the language spoken today, with vocabulary expanded by the Industrial Revolution and the British Empire

The *History of English* page does not say outright that the divisions are conventions, but its hedged wording ("some time after", "often dated from") points the same way. The *Middle English* article adds a split inside the period: Early Middle English from 1150 to 1350, with Late Middle English covering the 14th and 15th centuries, including Chaucer. It gives no explicit start date for the late part.

Why use periods at all?

A reader of Old English and a reader of Chaucer need different tools, and the boundary events are real: the Norman Conquest changed who held power, and printing arrived in England with Caxton in the 1470s (the *Middle English* article). The labels let a historian say "this feature is typical of that stretch". The cost is that a date such as 1066 can make the change look sudden. The rest of the course follows the story through the periods, and each chapter says what its sources give as dates and where they differ.

The road ahead

Chapter	Title	Question it asks
2	French Arrives	What did the Norman Conquest do to English?
3	Middle English	How did the language change after the Conquest?
4	London Takes the Lead	Why did one dialect become the model?
5	The Printing Press	What did printing do to spelling?
6	The Great Vowel Shift	What changed in the sounds?
7	Shakespeare and the Bible	How did Renaissance English grow?
8	Dictionaries and Rules	Where do "correct English" rules come from?
9	English Goes Abroad	How did English spread and diverge?
10	English Today	What is happening to English now?

Words to know

Term	Meaning
Inflection	An ending that shows a word's grammatical role, such as case or number
Anglo-Norman	The variety of French spoken in England after the Conquest
Vernacular	The everyday spoken language of a people
Periodisation	Dividing history into named periods
Loanword	A word borrowed from another language
Standard	A variety of a language treated as the model for writing

🖍️ Try It Yourself

Think of the answer first, then click to check.

1. Name the four periods in order.

▼ Show answer

> Old English, Middle English, Early Modern English, Modern English.

2. Which event is the usual start of Middle English?

▼ Show answer

> The Norman Conquest of 1066, though the articles say the change came some time after it.

3. Give the two dates the articles use for the end of Old English.

▼ Show answer

> After 1066 (*History of English*) and 1150 (*Old English*, after Baugh).

4. Name two features of Old English grammar that Middle English lost or changed.

▼ Show answer

> For example most case endings, grammatical gender and the dual pronouns, as the *Middle English* article lists them.

5. Which language does the *Old English* article say likely had the greatest impact on English?

▼ Show answer

> Old Norse.

6. What does the article say about the Old English words that survive?

▼ Show answer

> About 85% of Old English words are no longer used, but the survivors form the basic elements of Modern English vocabulary.

7. When did printing arrive in England, and with whom?

▼ Show answer

> In the 1470s, with Caxton (per the *Middle English* article).

8. Why are period dates only markers, not events?

▼ Show answer

> The language changed gradually; the articles give different dates for the same boundary and use hedged wording such as "some time after" and "often dated from".

Note on sources

This chapter uses Wikipedia's *History of English* (the first 100,000 of about 158,443 characters, which covered the periods), *Old English* (the first 100,000 of about 207,822, through the orthography section) and *Middle English* (the first 100,000 of about 152,190, through the sample texts and the first references), each as the page tool summarised it. I did not read the later parts of these articles. The articles' period dates differ and I show both rather than choose. The recap of Old English is only what these pages say; the full

account is in The Story of Old English. The word definitions and the road-ahead table are mine and unverified.

Coming up in Chapter 2: French Arrives. The Norman Conquest of 1066, Anglo-Norman French and Latin, and who spoke what.

The History of the English Language

Course 1 · Chapter 2 · French Arrives

In 1066 a French-speaking duke became king of England. The ruling class changed almost completely, and for a few centuries the people at the top spoke a variety of French while most people went on speaking English. This chapter covers what happened in 1066 and after, what Anglo-Norman was, how long French and Law French lasted, and how many French words came into English.

The story in one box

According to Wikipedia's *Norman Conquest* article, the English aristocracy was almost entirely replaced, and Anglo-Norman, a northern dialect of Old French, displaced Old English as the language of the ruling classes. Borrowing into English was gradual: the *French influence on English* article says about 40% of the French words in English first appear between 1250 and 1400. Estimates of how much of English vocabulary is French range from about a third to two-thirds.

Watch out

The neat story that English peasants raised *cow*, *sheep* and *pig* while Norman nobles ate *beef*, *mutton* and *pork* is called a "Norman culinary myth" by the *French influence on English* article. It says the idea was popularised by Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe* (1819), and that recent scholarship finds French food terms first appearing around 1300 and, for centuries, referring to both the living animal and its meat. The strict split only became established after 1500.

1066 and after

The *Norman Conquest* article gives these dates:

Date	Event (per the article)
January 1066	Edward the Confessor dies; Harold Godwinson becomes king

Date	Event (per the article)
25 September 1066	Harold defeats and kills Harald Hardrada at Stamford Bridge
28 September 1066	William lands at Pevensey
14 October 1066	Battle of Hastings; Harold is killed
25 December 1066	William is crowned at Westminster Abbey
1069 to 1070	The Harrying of the North, in which William's forces devastated Northumbria
1071	End of the Ely rebellion, which marks the effective end of English resistance
1086	Domesday Book: only about 5% of land south of the Tees remained in English hands
1095	After Wulfstan died, no English bishop remained

The article says the old English aristocracy was almost entirely eliminated and its land given to continental followers. After 1075 all earldoms were held by Normans, and in the Church English office-holders were replaced as they died. It says official documents shifted from Old English to Latin, and that William never developed a working knowledge of English. Place-names, it says, were little affected by the Conquest. This is where the period division of Chapter 1 gets its usual start date, but the language change came more slowly than the change of rulers.

What was Anglo-Norman?

Wikipedia's *Anglo-Norman language* article describes it as a dialect of Old Norman used in England, and to a lesser extent elsewhere in Great Britain and Ireland. It notes that scholars disagree on the name: some prefer "Insular French", and some describe it as a full member of the medieval French dialect family rather than a mixed language.

- **Who used it:** the Norman settlers and their descendants; it became the language of the king, his court and the upper class. It was also used by merchants for business, by jurors in court and by some churches. Ordinary people mostly spoke English, and Latin stayed in use for the Church and formal records.

- **Records:** Latin was the main language of official records until the late 13th century. From the mid-13th to the early 15th century Anglo-French was widely used in law reports, charters and official correspondence, and the first official document in Anglo-Norman was a statute of 1275.
- **Literature:** after the Conquest, literature in Britain was written in Latin or Anglo-Norman. From the 14th century some authors, including Geoffrey Chaucer, began writing in English.
- **Not the same as Parisian French:** it developed alongside the central Old French dialects, kept distinct features, and was influenced by Parisian French from the Plantagenet period onward. For example "del roy" became "du roi" by about 1330.
- **End:** the article dates it from the Conquest to the end of the 15th century, and the infobox lists it as extinct from the 15th century.

Law French

Wikipedia's *Law French* article describes an archaic form of French used in English law courts from about the 13th century. It began as Anglo-Norman, was later influenced by Parisian French and then by English.

Date	Event (per the article)
1258	The Provisions of Oxford is among the earliest known English legal texts written in French
1362	The Pleading in English Act requires court pleadings to be in English, so that people can understand the law
1628	Sir Edward Coke notes that Law French had nearly stopped being spoken
1730	The Proceedings in Courts of Justice Act makes English the required language of English courts, replacing Law French and Latin

The *Anglo-Norman language* article says Law French was banished from the common law courts in 1731, and the *Law French* article gives 1730 for the Act. I show both and do not choose. Many Law French terms survive: *arson*, *bailiff*, *jury*, *plaintiff*, *defendant*, *larceny*, *mortgage* and *tort*, and phrases with the French adjective-after-noun order such as *attorney general*.

French words in English

The *French influence on English* article says the main wave followed the Conquest, but that borrowing was gradual. The years 1250 to 1400 were the most prolific, and after 1400 borrowing slowed sharply without stopping. It says French lost prestige in England from the 1200s, and that English became the language of instruction at Oxford in 1349.

Area	Examples (per the article)
Government, law and society	*justice*, *parliament*, *heir*, *marriage*, *squire*
Church and war	*religion*, *abbey*, *army*, *battle*, *captain*
Commerce	*pay*, *debt*, *budget*, *bargain*
Home	*chamber*, *curtain*, *towel*, *chair*, *cushion*
Food	*mutton*, *beef*, *pork*, *veal*, *mustard*, *banquet*

On how much of English is French, the sources do not agree. The *French influence on English* article says about a third is commonly estimated, that Henriette Walter suggests it may be as high as two-thirds, and it tags the range as needing clarification. The *Anglo-Norman language* article cites a study estimating about 28%, which varies with how rare and technical words are counted, and says roughly 10,000 French loanwords are in English, about 90% first written after the mid-13th century and about three-quarters of the medieval ones still in use. The numbers depend on what is counted, so I report the ranges and do not choose.

Some words came in twice, from Norman and Parisian French, with different meanings. The articles give *catch* and *chase*, *warranty* and *guarantee*, and *warden* and *guardian*.

Words to know

Term	Meaning
Anglo-Norman	The French of England after 1066; also Anglo-French or Insular French
Law French	The later, increasingly anglicised French used in English courts
Doublet	Two words that come from the same source by different routes
Harrying of the North	William's devastation of Northumbria, 1069 to 1070

Term	Meaning
Domesday Book	The 1086 survey that shows who held the land
Statute	A written law passed by a legislature

🖍️ Try It Yourself

Think of the answer first, then click to check.

1. What happened on 14 October 1066?

▼ Show answer

> The Battle of Hastings; Harold was killed and William won.

2. What does Domesday Book show about land ownership in 1086?

▼ Show answer

> Only about 5% of land south of the Tees remained in English hands.

3. Which classes used Anglo-Norman, and which language did ordinary people mostly speak?

▼ Show answer

> The king, court and upper class (also merchants for business and jurors in court); ordinary people mostly spoke English.

4. What was the main language of official records until the late 13th century?

▼ Show answer

> Latin.

5. What did the 1362 Pleading in English Act require?

▼ Show answer

> That court pleadings be in English, so that people could understand the law.

6. Give the two dates the articles use for the end of Law French in the courts.

▼ Show answer

> 1730 (the *Law French* article, the Proceedings in Courts of Justice Act) and 1731 (the *Anglo-Norman language* article).

7. In which years were most French loanwords borrowed, according to the article?

▼ Show answer

> 1250 to 1400, with about 40% of the French words in English first appearing then.

8. Why does the article call the *cow* and *beef* story a myth?

▼ Show answer

> Recent scholarship finds French food terms first appear around 1300 and referred to both animal and meat for centuries; the strict split only became established after 1500.

Note on sources

This chapter uses Wikipedia's *Norman Conquest* (the first 100,000 of about 189,368 characters, through the historiography section), *Anglo-Norman language* (the first 100,000 of about 125,504), *French influence on English* (the whole article) and *Law French* (the whole article), each as the page tool summarised it. I did not read the rest of the *Norman Conquest* or *Anglo-Norman language* articles. The sources disagree on the Law French end date (1730 and 1731) and on how much of English is French; I show both. The word definitions are mine and unverified. I paraphrase the line about William's English rather than quote it.

Coming up in Chapter 3: Middle English. How the language changed after the Conquest: lost endings, new spellings, the dialects and Chaucer.

The History of the English Language

Course 1 · Chapter 3 · Middle English

While French was the language of the court, English carried on, with no royal standard to hold it still. In the two centuries after the Conquest it lost most of its endings, changed its spelling and split into regional dialects. By the late 14th century it was a literary language again, in the hands of Chaucer. This chapter covers those changes and the writers who show them.

The story in one box

According to Wikipedia's *Middle English* article, the shift from Late Old English was complete by the 1150s to 1180s. Most case endings disappeared and grammatical gender gave way to natural gender; written Old English ended and there was no standard, only regional dialects. Chaucer, who wrote in the emerging London dialect, is often called the father of English literature, though the *Geoffrey Chaucer* article calls the standardising claim an overstatement.

Watch out

"Ye olde" is not Old English or Middle English for "the". The *Middle English* article says the scribal abbreviation for *þe* ("the") looked like a Y, which led to the modern "ye olde" mispronunciation. The word is just *the*.

The Peterborough Chronicle: English in transition

Wikipedia's *Peterborough Chronicle* article describes a version of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* kept by monks of Peterborough Abbey, with unique material on English history after the Conquest. A fire on 4 August 1116 destroyed the monastery's library, and the abbey then copied other churches' chronicles up to about 1120. The entries from 1122 onward are unique to Peterborough and fall into two continuations:

Part	What the article says
First continuation (1122 to 1131)	Mixes Old and Middle English vocabulary and simplifies pronouns and strong verbs

Part	What the article says
Second continuation (1132 to 1154)	Mixed forms, ending in an early form of Middle English; grammatical gender almost completely lost; the feminine pronoun *she* (spelled "scæ") first recorded here
1154	The last entry, with the death of Abbot Martin and the arrival of a new abbot, which likely halted the writing

This is the 1150s end of Old English that Chapter 1 gave as one of the dates, seen in a manuscript.

What changed

The *Middle English* article describes these differences from Old English:

- **Endings:** most case endings disappeared, and the dative and instrumental were replaced by prepositional phrases. Only two noun declension patterns remained, and the dual pronouns were lost. The article links this to Norse contact and a shift to fixed word order.
- **Gender:** grammatical gender gave way to natural gender. Most of the roughly dozen Old English forms of the definite article were lost in Early Middle English, leaving *the*.
- **Vocabulary:** the core stayed Germanic, with Old Norse loans especially in the north and a large French and Anglo-Norman layer in government, law, the arts, religion and chivalry (Chapter 2). Scholastic Latin added abstract terms later.
- **Spelling:** early on, scribes used many regional forms. Ash (æ) faded; eth (ð) fell out of use in the 13th century, replaced by thorn; thorn (þ) was replaced by "th" in the 14th century; wynn (ƿ) became "w". Yogh and new letters such as k, q and z were added, and a silent final "e" marked vowel length.
- **Verb endings:** plurals varied by dialect, with the Southern forms keeping Old English *-eþ*, the Midland forms using *-en* from about 1200 and the Northern forms using *-es*.

Dialects

The *Middle English* article says the four main dialects in England were Northern, East Midland, West Midland and Southern. It gives little detail on their boundaries in the part I read.

Text	What the article says
Ormulum	A biblical commentary by Orrm, probably composed in Lincolnshire in the second half of the 12th century, with a unique phonetic spelling system
Layamon's Brut	A 12th- or 13th-century source that still inflects adjectives for case
Ancrene Wisse	Religious texts for anchoresses, apparently from the West Midlands in the early 13th century, linked to the Katherine Group and the "AB language"
Ayenbite of Inwyt (1340)	A translation of a French confessional work, written in the Kentish dialect

Chaucer

Wikipedia's *Geoffrey Chaucer* article gives his life as about 1343 to 25 October 1400: a London-born poet and civil servant, a page in a noble household, captured in France in 1360 and ransomed, later Comptroller of Customs for the port of London, a Member of Parliament for Kent and Clerk of the King's Works. It says he wrote in Middle English when Anglo-Norman French and Latin dominated court and literary life, and translated from French and Latin, including Boethius.

- **Works:** *The Canterbury Tales* (begun in the early 1380s and left unfinished) and *Troilus and Criseyde*.
- **Reputation:** often called the "father of English literature"; his contemporary Thomas Hoccleve praised him as "the firste fyndere of our fair langage". About two thousand English words are first attested in Chaucerian manuscripts.
- **Dialect:** his work is often credited with helping standardise the London dialect, which blended Kentish and Midlands forms. The article calls this an overstatement and says court, chancery and bureaucratic usage mattered more. The *Middle English* article says he wrote in the emerging London dialect but gives some characters northern speech, as in *The Reeve's Tale*.

Here are the opening lines of the *General Prologue* as Wikipedia's *General Prologue* article prints them:

Middle English	Modern paraphrase (per the page)
Whan that Aprill, with his shoures soote The droghte of March hath perced to the roote And bathed every veyne in swich licour, Of which vertu engendred is the flour;	When April with its sweet showers has pierced March's drought to the root, bathing every vein in such liquid

The *Middle English* article prints the second line with a different letter, "dro3te", so the two pages spell the word differently. I show the *General Prologue* article's spelling and do not say which is better. Read aloud, much of it is close to Modern English, which is why a few notes on spelling make it readable. Chapter 6 covers the sound changes that make the spelling look odd.

Words to know

Term	Meaning
Natural gender	Gender that follows the real sex of what is named, not grammar
Thorn (þ)	The Old English letter for "th", later replaced by the digraph "th"
Yogh	A Middle English letter for some "gh" and "y" sounds
Continuation	A later section added to a chronicle by new writers
Rhyme royal	A stanza form Chaucer helped to introduce
Dialect	A regional variety of a language

🖍️ Try It Yourself

Think of the answer first, then click to check.

1. What happened to most case endings in Middle English?

▼ Show answer

> They disappeared, and the dative and instrumental were replaced by prepositional phrases.

2. What happened to grammatical gender?

▼ Show answer

> It gave way to natural gender.

3. What does the Peterborough Chronicle show about *she*?

▼ Show answer

> The feminine pronoun *she* (spelled "scæ") is first recorded there, in the second continuation.

4. How did the letters thorn and eth change?

▼ Show answer

> Eth fell out of use in the 13th century, replaced by thorn; thorn was replaced by "th" in the 14th century.

5. Name the four main dialects of Middle English in England.

▼ Show answer

> Northern, East Midland, West Midland and Southern.

6. Why is "ye olde" a mispronunciation?

▼ Show answer

> The scribal abbreviation for *þe* ("the") resembled a Y.

7. Which language did Chaucer write in, and which were dominant at court?

▼ Show answer

> Middle English; Anglo-Norman French and Latin dominated English court and literary life.

8. What does the *Geoffrey Chaucer* article say about the claim that he standardised London English?

▼ Show answer

> It calls it an overstatement: court, chancery and bureaucratic usage were more important.

Note on sources

This chapter uses Wikipedia's *Middle English* (the first 100,000 of about 152,190 characters, which covered the dialects, spelling and sample texts), *Peterborough Chronicle* (the whole article), *Geoffrey Chaucer* (the first 100,000 of about 181,062, up to the list of works) and *General Prologue* (the whole article), each as the page tool summarised it. I did not read the later parts of the *Middle English* or *Geoffrey Chaucer* articles, and I read no Middle English text directly. The two pages spell one word differently ("droghte" and "droȝte"); I show the *General Prologue* spelling. The *General Prologue* page gives no composition date, so I give none. The word definitions are mine and unverified.

Coming up in Chapter 4: London Takes the Lead. London English, the Chancery Standard, Wycliffe and the English Bible, and why one dialect became the model.

The History of the English Language

Course 1 · Chapter 4 · London Takes the Lead

In the 14th century English had no standard: every region wrote as it spoke. By the 15th century a London-based style of writing was spreading through records and letters. This chapter looks at how that happened, what the sources say and where they disagree, and at the English Bible that Church authorities tried to restrict.

The story in one box

Wikipedia's *Chancery Standard* article says an official written English based on the East Midlands-influenced speech of London emerged about 1430, with origins in Henry V's English letters from 1417. Its *Standard English* article says the old "Chancery" explanation was strongly contested, that most Chancery letters were in Latin, and that the standard was "an urban amalgam drawing on non-adjacent dialects" which did not fully settle until the early 19th century.

Watch out

"Chaucer and the Chancery made Standard English" is a tidy story that the sources only partly support. The *Chancery Standard* article says its influence on later written English is disputed, and the *Standard English* article lists three older theories (East Midlands, Central Midlands, Chancery) as superseded or contested. A standard has no single inventor.

Before a standard

Wikipedia's *Standard English* article traces the background:

- **Late West Saxon:** the Old English variety promoted after Alfred (Chapter 6 of The Story of Old English) influenced writing elsewhere, but the article calls it more a set of orthographic norms than a standardised dialect.
- **After 1066:** English writing was shaped by Latin and Anglo-Norman French, and a mixed system of Latin, French and English was common in accounts and records in the 14th and 15th centuries.

- **From the 1370s:** monolingual English spread, with heavy regional and spelling variation. Later, supralocal varieties emerged that reduced regionally marked features, first in urban areas.
- **The change of roles:** trade, merchants, lawyers and estate administrators spread writing conventions, and English took over the record-keeping roles previously held by Anglo-Norman. The article dates the abandonment of Anglo-Norman to about 1375 to 1425.

The Black Death and English

Wikipedia's *Black Death in England* gives the dates: it arrived about June 1348 at Weymouth, reached London by autumn 1348 and covered the country by summer 1349, dying down by December 1349. The article says a death toll of 40 to 60% is widely accepted, with estimates ranging from about 23.6% (Russell) to 62.5% (Benedictow). It says the plague "may have promoted the use of vernacular English" as the number of French-proficient teachers fell, and links this to the late-14th-century flowering of English literature. It says nothing about a change in the official status of English or French. Labour shortages raised wages, and the article lists the resentment as a factor in the Peasants' Revolt of 1381. I treat the language link as a possibility, not a proof.

The Chancery Standard

The *Chancery Standard* article describes an official written English, an administrative script that set a uniform style and directly influenced modern spelling.

Date	Event (per the article)
August 1417	Henry V begins issuing Signet letters to officials in English
about 1430	The Chancery Standard emerges, used by royal bureaucrats for most official purposes
1470s	Caxton's press helps stabilise English (Chapter 5)
1540s	Early Modern English begins, after the English Bible and Prayer Book spread the new standard

The article says multilingual clerks, skilled in French and Latin, shaped it by blending London speech with Central East Midland Lollard texts. The Church and the courts initially resisted and kept using Latin and Law French (Chapter 2). It notes that Chancery spellings often kept the letters *gh* even as the sound was being lost, and that by the 15th century spelling was relatively standardised.

What the other article says

Wikipedia's *Standard English* article is more cautious. It describes older explanations and what happened to them:

Theory	Status according to the article
East Midlands (Ekwall)	East Midland merchants influencing London; the article says this rested on limited data and unsupported assumptions
Central Midlands (Samuels)	London texts classified into Types I to IV; later scholars found the categories poorly defined, and one wrote that "it is time to lay the types to rest"
Chancery Standard (Fisher)	Strongly contested; Dodd's work showed most Chancery letters were in Latin

The page does not identify a single cause. It points to writing conventions spreading through trade and professional networks, to the administrative roles and spelling uniformity taken over from Anglo-Norman, and to the influence of the literate middling classes. It also says the standard has no national academy, that its codification comes from prescriptive consensus, and that its prestige is a social association rather than evidence of linguistic superiority. The *Chancery Standard* article does not name Samuels, Fisher or Benskin, so I give each article's account separately and do not say one is right.

The English Bible

Wikipedia's *Wycliffe's Bible* article describes a series of Middle English translations from the Latin Vulgate, appearing roughly between 1382 and 1395, in two textual families: a very literal Early Version (about 1382) and a more idiomatic Later Version (revised around 1388 and 1395).

- **Who:** tradition credited John Wycliffe, but the article says scholars now doubt his direct role. John Purvey is linked to the Later Version, though that attribution is uncertain, and Nicholas Hereford is named in a manuscript note as the translator of the early part of the Early Version.
- **Church response:** because of its association with Lollardy the Church moved to restrict vernacular Bibles. The article dates the Oxford Convocation vote to 1407 in the body and 1408 in the lead, and says the Constitution *Periculosa* took effect between 1407 and 1409. It required bishops' authorisation for new literal translations. Enforcement was inconsistent.
- **Why it matters:** over 250 manuscripts survive, the largest body of surviving Middle English manuscript literature. Some renderings were adopted by the Rheims New Testament, a basis of the King James Version (Chapter 7). Tyndale's later translation overshadowed it.

Words to know

Term	Meaning
Chancery	The royal writing office that produced official documents
Standard	A variety treated as the model for writing
Supralocal	Spread over a wider area than one place
Lollard	A follower of the reforming ideas linked to Wycliffe
Vulgate	The Latin Bible that the Middle English versions were translated from
Orthography	The spelling system of a language

🖍️ Try It Yourself

Think of the answer first, then click to check.

1. What did Henry V begin doing in 1417?

▼ Show answer

> Issuing Signet letters to officials in English.

2. About when did the Chancery Standard emerge, according to its article?

▼ Show answer

> About 1430.

3. What does the *Standard English* article say about Chancery letters?

▼ Show answer

> The idea of a Chancery origin was strongly contested; Dodd's work showed most Chancery letters were in Latin.

4. Which language had Anglo-Norman's record-keeping roles passed to by about 1375 to 1425?

▼ Show answer

> English.

5. What does the *Black Death in England* article say about the plague and English?

▼ Show answer

> It "may have promoted the use of vernacular English" as the number of French-proficient teachers fell; it says nothing about an official status change.

6. What are the two versions of Wycliffe's Bible?

▼ Show answer

> The very literal Early Version (about 1382) and the more idiomatic Later Version (revised about 1388 and 1395).

7. Why do scholars doubt that Wycliffe himself translated it?

▼ Show answer

> The article says scholars now doubt his direct role; manuscript notes name Hereford for the early part, and Purvey is linked to the Later Version.

8. When did the *Standard English* article say the standard fully settled?

▼ Show answer

> Not until the early 19th century.

Note on sources

This chapter uses Wikipedia's *Chancery Standard* (the first 100,000 of about 152,412 characters), *Wycliffe's Bible* (the first 100,000 of about 154,650), *Standard English* (the whole article) and *Black Death in England* (the whole article), each as the page tool summarised it. I did not read the later parts of the *Chancery Standard* or *Wycliffe's Bible* articles. The articles differ on whether Chancery English shaped the standard, and on whether the Oxford vote was in 1407 or 1408; I show both. The language link to the Black Death is the article's "may have", not a settled fact. The word definitions are mine and unverified.

Coming up in Chapter 5: The Printing Press. William Caxton and printing in England, the effect on spelling, and why English spelling and speech drifted apart.

The History of the English Language

Course 1 · Chapter 5 · The Printing Press

Printing did not change how English was spoken, but it changed how it was written, and it made one set of spellings widely available. This chapter covers Gutenberg's press, William Caxton and the first English printing, what the sources say about printers and spelling, and why English spelling and speech parted company.

The story in one box

According to Wikipedia's *Printing press* article, Gutenberg invented the movable-type press around 1440, and by 1480 printers were active in 110 places, including England. The *William Caxton* article says he set up England's first press at Westminster in 1476. The *English orthography* article says standardisation began to develop when movable type reached England in the late 15th century, while pronunciation kept changing.

Watch out

Caxton is often said to have "fixed" English spelling. The *William Caxton* article says he helped standardise English around the London dialect, a process that continued with Richard Pynson and the Chancery Standard, and the *Chancery Standard* article gives Pynson the leading role in pushing standardisation. Spelling was not fixed overnight, and one printer did not do it.

Gutenberg and the spread of printing

Wikipedia's *Printing press* article gives these facts:

Date	Event (per the article)
1439	First known mention of Gutenberg's work, in a lawsuit
about 1440	Gutenberg invents the movable-type press
1453	The Mainz Psalter, likely designed by him and printed by his successors

Date	Event (per the article)
1476	Caxton sets up the first press in England (in the "See also" list)
by 1480	Printers active in 110 places across Europe, including England
by 1500	About 270 European cities involved in printing; western European presses had produced over 20 million copies

Caxton

Wikipedia's *William Caxton* article gives his life as about 1422 to about 1491 (it says the birth may fall between 1415 and 1424, and the death is uncertain, possibly early 1492). He was an English merchant, diplomat, writer and printer, apprenticed in London to a mercer in 1438, who settled in Bruges and became governor of the Merchant Adventurers of London.

- **Bruges:** he set up a press with Colard Mansion after seeing the printing industry in Cologne. His translation of the *Recuyell of the Historyes of Troye* is considered the first book printed in English, in about 1473.
- **Westminster, 1476:** his press there is described as England's first. The first book known from it, according to the article, was Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*.
- **What he printed:** chivalric romances, classical works and histories, including Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*, and the first English *Aesop's Fables* in 1484. The article says his translations were often weak, sometimes carrying French words straight into English.
- **The eggs story:** in the prologue to his 1490 *Eneydos*, Caxton describes a mercer who asked for *egges* and was misunderstood until a bystander suggested *eyren*. He concludes that it is hard to please every man because of the diversity and change of language. I paraphrase and do not quote the line.
- **Language:** the article credits him with helping to standardise English around the London dialect.

Printers and spelling

Wikipedia's *English orthography* article gives a more specific picture:

- **Standardisation:** it "began to develop when movable type spread to England in the late 15th century".
- **Multilingual compositors:** some of the earliest mass-produced English publications were typeset by people who sometimes used the spelling patterns of other languages. The example is *ghost*, spelled *gost* in Middle English until a Flemish pattern was accidentally substituted and accepted. The *William Caxton* article is more cautious, saying the silent *h* in *ghost* "may have" come from Flemish habits and presenting this as an assertion.
- **Basis of modern spelling:** most conventions come from the phonemic spelling of Middle English, and generally do not reflect sound changes since the late 15th century, such as the Great Vowel Shift (Chapter 6).
- **Etymological spellings:** a few words were altered to match perceived Latin origins: a *b* was added to *debt* (originally *dette*) to link it to Latin *debitum*, and an *s* to *island* to link it to Latin *insula*, although the word actually comes from Old English.
- **Silent letters:** many, such as the *l* in *talk* and the *w* in *sword*, are remnants of earlier pronunciations.
- **The gap:** spelling has changed less than pronunciation, and loanwords, the lack of an official spelling authority and sound change have widened the gap.

The History section of the *English orthography* article was not in the text I received, so this is only the related material from its other sections.

Why spelling and speech drifted apart

Put the pieces together: a London-based written standard had spread through records (Chapter 4), printing then multiplied copies of those spellings, and the sounds kept changing. Printed spellings tended to stay where they were while speech moved on, and a few spellings were changed on purpose. That is the shape of the explanation the sources give; none of the articles I read puts it as one cause, and any single date for "fixed" spelling would be misleading.

Words to know

Term	Meaning
Movable type	Individual metal letters arranged and reused to print pages

Term	Meaning
Compositor	The person who sets type for printing
Orthography	A language's spelling system
Etymological spelling	A spelling altered to show a word's supposed origin
Mercer	A merchant dealing in textiles
Prologue	An introductory section before a main text

🖍️ Try It Yourself

Think of the answer first, then click to check.

1. Who invented the movable-type press, and roughly when?

▼ Show answer

> Johannes Gutenberg, around 1440.

2. When did Caxton set up his press at Westminster?

▼ Show answer

> 1476.

3. Which book is considered the first printed in English, and about when?

▼ Show answer

> Caxton's translation of the *Recuyell of the Historyes of Troye*, in about 1473, printed in Bruges.

4. What is the point of the eggs and *eyren* story?

▼ Show answer

> It shows how much English varied by region: a request using one word was not understood in another dialect.

5. How did *ghost* get its *h*, according to the articles?

▼ Show answer

> A Flemish spelling pattern was substituted for *gost*, in the *English orthography* article's account; the *William Caxton* article says it "may have" come from Flemish habits.

6. Give two words whose spelling was changed to match a supposed Latin origin.

▼ Show answer

> *Debt* (a *b* added, from Latin *debitum*) and *island* (an *s* added, from Latin *insula*, though the word is from Old English).

7. What does the *l* in *talk* and the *w* in *sword* show?

▼ Show answer

> They are remnants of earlier pronunciations: the spelling stayed while the sound was lost.

8. Why is "Caxton fixed English spelling" too simple?

▼ Show answer

> The articles say standardisation was a process that continued with Pynson and the Chancery Standard, and the spelling basis is Middle English, not one printer's choices.

Note on sources

This chapter uses Wikipedia's *William Caxton* (the whole article), *Printing press* (the first 100,000 of about 128,461 characters, to the start of the bibliography) and *English orthography* (the first 100,000 of about 205,599 characters; its History section was not in the text I received), each as the page tool summarised it. The *English orthography* article does not mention Caxton or Low Countries printers in the part I read, so the chapter does not say it does. I did not read the rest of those articles or any printed book. The articles differ on how sure the *ghost* story is, and I show both. I paraphrase the eggs anecdote rather than quote it. The word definitions are mine and unverified.

Coming up in Chapter 6: The Great Vowel Shift. What changed in the long vowels, roughly when, what scholars still dispute, and what it explains about spelling today.

The History of the English Language

Course 1 · Chapter 6 · The Great Vowel Shift

Why do the letters in meet, bite and mate not match the sounds as they would in many other languages? Much of the answer, according to the sources, is the Great Vowel Shift, a series of changes to English long vowels between about 1400 and 1700. This chapter sets out what the sources say changed, when, and what scholars still argue about.

The story in one box

Wikipedia's *Great Vowel Shift* article describes a set of pronunciation changes to the long vowels, "mainly between 1400 and 1700", starting in southern England. It says the shift is "the major reason English spellings now often deviate considerably" from pronunciation, because spelling did not adapt to the changes. The causes, and the exact order of the changes, are disputed.

Watch out

The sound symbols below (in slashes) are the International Phonetic Alphabet, used by the article; the colon-like mark means a long vowel. The values are the article's reconstructions, not recordings, and the article says scholars dispute some of them. The *Early Modern English* article also flags its own vowel section as possibly original synthesis needing more citations. Treat the details as a model, not a transcript.

What changed

The *Great Vowel Shift* article describes the long vowels moving up, and the highest ones breaking into diphthongs (two-part vowels). Its examples:

Before	After	Example word	What happened
/iː/	/aɪ/	*bite*	The close front vowel became a diphthong
/uː/	/aʊ/	*out*	The close back vowel became a diphthong
/eː/	/iː/	*meet*	A close-mid vowel rose

Before	After	Example word	What happened
/oː/	/uː/	*boot*	A close-mid vowel rose
/ɛː/	/eː/, then /iː/	*meat*	An open-mid vowel rose in two steps
/ɔː/	/oː/, then /oʊ/	*boat*	An open-mid vowel rose, then changed again
/aː/	/æː/, /ɛː/, then /eɪ/	*mate*	The open vowel rose in several steps

The article adds that /uː/ did not shift before labial consonants or after /j/, as in *soup*, which is why *soup* does not sound like *out*. Some consonant changes where sounds became silent are sometimes included under the same name.

When

- **Overall:** mainly between 1400 and 1700, according to the article. Changes after 1700 are not counted as part of it.
- **First phase:** completed around 1500.
- **Second phase:** /aː/ was raised around 1550, and the open-mid vowels after 1600.

The *Middle English* and *Chancery Standard* articles, as read in Chapters 3 and 4, place the start of spelling standardisation in the same century, the 15th, so the spellings were fixed while the sounds were moving. The *Early Modern English* article says its period began in the late 15th century and that Modern English was "fully" in place by 1714, with spelling still fluid until Johnson's *Dictionary* in 1755.

Why did it happen?

The article does not say. It gives two proposals about the order of the changes:

Model	Proposed by	Idea
Push chain	Lass	The close-mid vowels rose first and pushed the closest vowels, /iː/ and /uː/, into diphthongs

Model	Proposed by	Idea
Drag chain	Handke	The closest vowels broke into diphthongs first, leaving a gap the others rose into; based on a phonetic split between *high* and *like/my*

The article does not discuss social theories, so I do not describe any. On the values of the new diphthongs, it says Lass thinks /iː uː/ became /ei ou/ around 1500 and shifted further later, while Dobson, Kökeritz and Cercignani argue they were centralised and lowered at once, and Stockwell (1961) proposed a third route. I show these disagreements and do not choose.

What it explains about spelling

The article says "English spelling did not adapt to the changes", while German spelling did (the example it gives is *bīzen* becoming *beißen*). Spelling kept the older vowel values, so the vowel letters in English words such as *bite* and *mate* no longer match the sounds the same letters stand for in the older values. The *Early Modern English* article gives related evidence: both Early Modern and Modern English "retain various orthographical conventions that predate the Great Vowel Shift", and *doom* and *come* rhyme in Shakespeare.

Other sound changes in Early Modern English

The *Early Modern English* article lists other changes in the same centuries, with the caution above:

- Initial clusters such as /wr kn gn/ were pronounced in full and had reduced by the 16th to 17th centuries (compare the silent letters in *write* and *knee*).
- The /h/ of *wh* was kept for a time, so *wine* and *whine* differed.
- The sound of *gh* was lost.
- *Would* and *should* began losing the /l/ by the 1640s.

Words to know

Term	Meaning
Long vowel	A vowel held longer than a short one; in Middle English a separate sound, not just a spelling
Diphthong	A vowel that glides from one sound to another
Push chain	A change where one sound moves and pushes the next out of the way
Drag chain	A change where a sound moves into a gap and drags others after it
IPA	The International Phonetic Alphabet, a system for writing sounds
Merger	When two sounds become one

🖍️ Try It Yourself

Think of the answer first, then click to check.

1. What are the dates the article gives for the Great Vowel Shift?

▼ Show answer

> Mainly between 1400 and 1700, with the first phase completed around 1500.

2. What happened to the highest long vowels, /iː/ and /uː/?

▼ Show answer

> They became diphthongs: /iː/ to /aɪ/ (*bite*) and /uː/ to /aʊ/ (*out*).

3. What happened to /eː/ and /oː/?

▼ Show answer

> They rose to /iː/ (*meet*) and /uː/ (*boot*).

4. What is the difference between a push chain and a drag chain?

▼ Show answer

> In the push chain (Lass) the close-mid vowels rose first and pushed the closest ones into diphthongs; in the drag chain (Handke) the closest vowels broke up first and the others rose into the gap.

5. Why does *soup* not sound like *out*?

▼ Show answer

> The article says /uː/ did not shift before labial consonants or after /j/.

6. What does the article say about German spelling and the shift?

▼ Show answer

> German spelling was changed to match the changes (*bīzen* became *beißen*), while English spelling did not adapt.

7. Which rhyme in Shakespeare is given as evidence of sounds moving away from the spelling?

▼ Show answer

> *Doom* and *come* rhyme (per the *Early Modern English* article).

8. Name two other sound changes in this period.

▼ Show answer

> For example the reduction of initial *wr* and *kn* clusters, the loss of the sound of *gh*, and the loss of /l/ in *would* and *should* by the 1640s.

Note on sources

This chapter uses Wikipedia's *Great Vowel Shift* (the whole article) and *Early Modern English* (the first 100,000 of about 113,063 characters), each as the page tool summarised it. The *Great Vowel Shift* article, as the page tool gave it, does not mention *mice* and *mouse*, Chaucer's spelling or social theories, so I do not describe them. I use only the words the article gives as examples. The *Early Modern English* article flags its vowel section as possibly original synthesis, and I say so. I did not read any phonetic study. The word

definitions and the sentence on what spelling "now often represents" are mine and unverified.

Coming up in Chapter 7: Shakespeare and the Bible. The Renaissance flood of new words, Shakespeare's English, the King James Bible, and what is and is not a "Shakespeare coinage".

The History of the English Language

Course 1 · Chapter 7 · Shakespeare and the Bible

The 16th and early 17th centuries are the period of Shakespeare and of the King James Bible, and of a flood of new words from Latin and Greek. The popular claims about this period are often bigger than the evidence, so this chapter gives each claim with the source's own figure and its caveat.

The story in one box

According to Wikipedia's *Inkhorn term* article, English writers debated the flood of Latin and Greek loans from the mid-1500s to the mid-1600s. The *Shakespeare's influence* article gives a critic's figure of 1,700 words first used by Shakespeare but says he is "often credited with the first use of words" found in other writers. The *King James Version* article says it was published in 1611 and drew on Tyndale and the Bishops' Bible.

Watch out

"Shakespeare invented the word" usually means "the earliest example anyone has found is in Shakespeare". The *Shakespeare's influence* article says Victorian scholars compiling the first *Oxford English Dictionary* read Shakespeare most closely, so he is often credited with first uses that can be found in other writers. The article's figures also conflict: the body gives 1,700, while one reference is titled "The 422 Words That Shakespeare Invented", and the article does not reconcile them.

The inkhorn controversy

Wikipedia's *Inkhorn term* article describes loanwords, or words coined from existing roots, that critics considered unnecessary or pretentious, named after the inkhorn, an ink container that became a symbol of writers. The phrase appears as early as 1543.

Side	Who (per the article)	Position
For borrowing	Thomas Elyot, George Pettie	Enthusiastic borrowers

Side	Who (per the article)	Position
Against	Thomas Wilson, John Cheke	Cheke wanted English kept "cleane and pure"; Wilson warned against affecting strange inkhorn terms
Advice	George Gascoigne, Edward Phillips	Use more short English words; beware long borrowings

The article says inkhorn terms still in use include *absurdity*, *capacity*, *celebrate*, *commit*, *dismiss*, *encyclopedia*, *habitual* and *lunar*. Many are longer than their Germanic counterparts, such as *conflagration* for "fire". It says many survived but over a third faded quickly: *expede* became obsolete, while *expedite* and *impede* endured. Older native words often persist beside Latinate ones, giving sets such as *ask*, *question* and *interrogate*. The article puts this in context: English was competing with Latin as the language of learning after displacing French, and borrowing filled real gaps in medicine, science, mathematics and philosophy.

Shakespeare

Wikipedia's *Shakespeare's influence* article says that before and during his time, English grammar and usage were not standardised, that his plays' popularity in the late 1600s and 1700s helped standardise the language, and that Samuel Johnson's dictionary (Chapter 8) quoted Shakespeare more than any other writer.

- **Numbers:** critic Warren King is cited as giving his total vocabulary across the plays, sonnets and narrative poems as 17,677 words, of which 1,700 were first used by Shakespeare. The article also gives a looser estimate of "several thousands" of introduced or invented words. Several of its claims on this carry "citation needed" tags.
- **How:** by turning nouns into verbs and verbs into adjectives, combining words not paired before, adding affixes, and inventing words outright.
- **Phrases:** the article lists *seen better days*, *strange bedfellows*, *a sorry sight* and *full circle* as still in common use, as examples and not a complete list.

Tyndale

Wikipedia's *William Tyndale* article gives his life as born about 1494 and executed in October 1536 near Vilvoorde in the Habsburg Netherlands, strangled and then burned after a conviction

of heresy. An incomplete New Testament appeared in 1525 and a full edition in 1526, printed in Worms, called the first full printed English edition. It says his translations were the first English scriptures drawn directly from Hebrew and Greek, and that his phrasing was largely adopted by later English editions, including the Great Bible and the Bishops' Bible.

The King James Version

Wikipedia's *King James Version* article gives this account:

Date	Event (per the article)
January 1604	King James convenes the Hampton Court Conference in response to Puritan grievances; a new translation is proposed
1604 to 1611	About 47 scholars (54 were originally approved), all Church of England members and all but one clergy, work in six committees at Oxford, Cambridge and Westminster; a General Committee reviews their drafts
1611	The translation is published
1769	The Oxford standard text makes it more accessible

- **Sources:** the New Testament drew on the *Textus Receptus*; the Old Testament on the Masoretic Hebrew text, revised from the Bishops' Bible. The Bishops' Bible was the primary guide, and the translators could consult a pre-approved list including Tyndale's Bible.
- **Tyndale's share:** the *King James Version* article cites a recent estimate that about 84% of the KJV New Testament is word-for-word identical to Tyndale's. The *William Tyndale* article cites estimates of 55% to 83% of Tyndale's wording in the KJV New Testament, and about 76% for the first half of the Old Testament. The figures differ and I show both without choosing.
- **Influence:** in continuous use for over four centuries, and shaping English literature, hymnody, liturgy and everyday idioms "more than any other English Bible", the article says.
- **Language:** it reflects Early Modern English with archaisms and "false friends", words whose meanings have shifted. Printing was inconsistent and later printings introduced errors, such as the "Wicked Bible".

I did not see the King James article's discussion of *thee* and *thou*, so I do not describe it.

Words to know

Term	Meaning
Inkhorn term	A learned borrowed word that critics found pretentious
Coinage	A newly invented word
First attestation	The earliest written example found, which may not be the first use
Archaism	An old-fashioned word or form
False friend	A word whose meaning has changed so that it misleads a modern reader
Doublet	Two words from the same source by different routes

🖍️ Try It Yourself

Think of the answer first, then click to check.

1. What were inkhorn terms?

▼ Show answer

> Loanwords or coinages from Latin and Greek roots that critics thought unnecessary or pretentious.

2. Name one defender and one critic of borrowing.

▼ Show answer

> Defenders: Thomas Elyot and George Pettie. Critics: Thomas Wilson and John Cheke.

3. Give two inkhorn words that survived and one that did not.

▼ Show answer

> For example *absurdity* and *capacity* survived; *expede* became obsolete.

4. Why is "Shakespeare invented 1,700 words" a risky claim?

▼ Show answer

> The article says he is often credited with first uses that can be found in other writers, and another count in its references is 422; the article does not reconcile them.

5. Name two ways the article says Shakespeare made words.

▼ Show answer

> For example turning nouns into verbs, combining words not paired before, adding affixes, or inventing words outright.

6. What was special about Tyndale's New Testament of 1526?

▼ Show answer

> It was the first full printed English edition, and the first English scriptures drawn directly from Hebrew and Greek, according to the article; Tyndale was executed in 1536.

7. When was the King James Version commissioned and published?

▼ Show answer

> Proposed at the Hampton Court Conference in January 1604, and published in 1611.

8. How much of the KJV New Testament is Tyndale's, per the two articles?

▼ Show answer

> The *King James Version* article cites an estimate of about 84% word-for-word identical; the *William Tyndale* article cites 55% to 83%.

Note on sources

This chapter uses Wikipedia's *Inkhorn term* and *Shakespeare's influence* (whole pages), *King James Version* (the first 100,000 of about 267,193 characters, to the 1769 standard text) and *William Tyndale* (the first 100,000 of about 145,812), each as the page tool summarised it. I did not read the rest of the last two articles, any Shakespeare text, or the Bible text. I show the sources' differing figures (1,700 and 422 words; 84% and 55% to 83% of Tyndale's wording) and do not choose. The word definitions are mine and unverified.

Coming up in Chapter 8: Dictionaries and Rules. Early dictionaries, Johnson's 1755 dictionary, the grammar writers, and where "rules" such as the split infinitive come from.

The History of the English Language

Course 1 · Chapter 8 · Dictionaries and Rules

By 1600 English had a written standard and a flood of new words. The next question was who would keep order. Dictionaries tried to list the words, and grammar books tried to say what was correct. This chapter looks at the first English dictionaries, Samuel Johnson's of 1755, Robert Lowth's grammar of 1762, and the sources' account of where two famous "rules" came from.

The story in one box

Wikipedia's *A Table Alphabeticall* article calls Robert Cawdrey's 1604 book the first monolingual English dictionary. The article on Johnson's *Dictionary* says it was published in 1755 and recorded English "as it appeared in use". The *Split infinitive* article finds no prohibition in any text before the 19th century, and the *Linguistic prescription* article says tentative advice, such as marking a form as colloquial, can turn into an absolute ban in the classroom.

Watch out

Some rules attributed to eighteenth-century grammarians are less strict than their reputation. The *Robert Lowth* article says his preposition rule was tentative and that he used the construction himself, and the *Split infinitive* article finds no objection in Lowth at all. The "rules" often became rules later, in schools.

Hard words and first dictionaries

Wikipedia's *A Table Alphabeticall* article describes a 1604 English dictionary by Robert Cawdrey, published in London, considered the first monolingual English dictionary.

- **Size:** about 120 pages with 2,543 headwords in the first edition (the *Johnson* article gives 2,449 words; I show both). The fourth edition of 1617 had 3,264.
- **Purpose:** to explain "hard words" that spread with the printing press and the English Bible. The article quotes Cawdrey's aim of helping "unskillful persons".
- **Content:** very brief definitions, often a single word, working as synonyms.
- **Survival:** the only known surviving copy is in the Bodleian Library, Oxford.

The article on Johnson's *Dictionary* lists earlier works: Elyot's Latin-English wordbook (1538), Mulcaster's (1583) and Florio's (1598), the first to use quotations. The Early Modern English article read in Chapter 6 gives 1604 as the date of the first English dictionary, which matches.

Johnson's Dictionary

Wikipedia's article on *A Dictionary of the English Language* gives these facts:

Item	What the article says
Commission	By London booksellers in June 1746, for 1,500 guineas
Time taken	Seven years, though Johnson had claimed he could finish in three; he worked largely alone, with clerical help copying quotations
Publication	15 April 1755 (the page elsewhere gives 4 April for the folio volumes; both shown)
Size	A 42,773-word list, with around 114,000 literary quotations from about 500 authors, most often Shakespeare, Milton and Dryden
Method	Illustrated meanings with quotations, separated senses, added usage notes; his *Plan* compared usage to legal precedent, treating custom as the authority
Weak point	The article calls his etymologies weak by modern standards
Later influence	The *OED* reproduced about 1,700 of his definitions, marked "J."; it was translated into French and German

The article says Johnson wanted to fix grammar, definitions and spelling for a growing reading public, and that earlier dictionaries were mostly glossaries of "hard words". It calls much of the work prescriptivist and linguistically conservative, with traditional spellings such as *publick*. It also says Johnson himself doubted that language could be fixed: the *Linguistic prescription* article quotes his Preface saying sounds remain too volatile and subtle for legal restraints, and notes his example of the French Academy's failure to stop change. Famous definitions include a lexicographer as "a harmless drudge" and excise as a "hateful tax", both from the article.

Grammar books and rules

Wikipedia's *Linguistic prescription* article defines prescriptivism as setting rules for preferred usage, and descriptivism, the approach of academic linguistics, as recording how language is actually used without judgement. It says the two overlap, and lists its caveats: standards often favour one class or region, prescription can present non-standard forms as mistakes, and rules become entrenched and slow to update.

Wikipedia's *Robert Lowth* article says he published *A Short Introduction to English Grammar* in 1762 to fill a gap, since simple textbook grammars were scarce, and that it stayed in standard school use until the early 20th century.

- **Method:** he criticised "false syntax", drawing examples from Shakespeare, the King James Bible, Milton, Pope and others. His grammar was shaped by Latin, which he admitted was problematic.
- **Prepositions at the end of a sentence:** he tentatively suggested this is inappropriate in formal writing, though he used it himself; the article notes Dryden expressed the same view in 1672. The *Linguistic prescription* article says his remark that it "sounds colloquial" later hardened into a rule.
- **Other judgements:** he judged *whose* for things improper and condemned a "Who should I meet" construction. The article calls his assertions "dogmatic" and says his stylistic opinions came to carry the force of law in schools.

Case study: the split infinitive

Wikipedia's *Split infinitive* article defines it as an adverb between *to* and the verb, as in "to boldly go".

Date	Fact (per the article)
early 13th century	Layamon's *Brut* has a pronoun splitting the infinitive, possibly for metre
14th century	Wycliffe's prose splits infinitives often
1803	John Comly's objection, the earliest the article cites
1834	An anonymous American writer advises against it
1864	Henry Alford's *Plea for the Queen's English* makes the objection widely known

Date	Fact (per the article)
1890	The term "split infinitive" is first recorded

The article finds no prohibition in Lowth or in any text before the 19th century. Critics often cited Latin, where the infinitive is a single word, but the article notes little primary evidence that early critics actually relied on this. It says modern style manuals generally accept simple split infinitives, and that some guides still advise avoiding them in formal writing. The *Linguistic prescription* article gives the same 1834 advice and says the old prohibition persists.

Words to know

Term	Meaning
Monolingual dictionary	A dictionary that explains words in the same language
Headword	The word listed and defined in a dictionary entry
Prescriptive	Saying how language should be used
Descriptive	Recording how language is actually used
Preposition stranding	Ending a clause with a preposition, as in "the man I spoke to"
Lexicographer	A person who writes a dictionary

🖍️ Try It Yourself

Think of the answer first, then click to check.

1. What is *A Table Alphabeticall*, and when was it published?

▼ Show answer

> Robert Cawdrey's 1604 dictionary, considered the first monolingual English dictionary, explaining "hard words".

2. Why do the two articles disagree about its size?

▼ Show answer

> The *Table Alphabeticall* article gives 2,543 headwords and the *Johnson* article gives 2,449; they do not reconcile them, so both are shown.

3. When was Johnson's *Dictionary* published, and how long did it take?

▼ Show answer

> 1755 (15 April, with 4 April given for the folios); commissioned in 1746, it took seven years.

4. What was new about Johnson's use of quotations?

▼ Show answer

> He illustrated meanings with about 114,000 literary quotations from about 500 authors; the article says Florio's 1598 work was the first to use quotations at all.

5. What is the difference between prescriptive and descriptive approaches?

▼ Show answer

> Prescriptive sets rules for preferred usage; descriptive records how language is actually used without judgement.

6. What does the article say about Lowth's rule on ending a sentence with a preposition?

▼ Show answer

> He suggested it tentatively and used it himself; the rule hardened later.

7. When does the article say the split infinitive objection first appears?

▼ Show answer

> With John Comly in 1803; it finds no prohibition in any earlier text.

8. Why does the article doubt that Latin was the real reason?

▼ Show answer

> Critics cited Latin's one-word infinitive, but the article notes little primary evidence that early critics relied on it.

Note on sources

This chapter uses Wikipedia's *A Dictionary of the English Language*, *A Table Alphabeticall*, *Split infinitive* and *Robert Lowth* (all whole pages) and *Linguistic prescription* (the first 100,000 of about 108,567 characters), each as the page tool summarised it. The *Linguistic prescription* page did not discuss Murray, Swift or English academy proposals, and the *Robert Lowth* page did not mention double negatives, so I do not cover them. I did not read the dictionary or any grammar. The articles differ on Cawdrey's headword count (2,543 and 2,449) and on Johnson's publication date, and I show both. The phrases quoted from Johnson's definitions are the articles' own wording. The word definitions are mine and unverified.

Coming up in Chapter 9: English Goes Abroad. English in North America and elsewhere, the beginnings of American English, and why varieties differ.

The History of the English Language

Course 1 · Chapter 9 · English Goes Abroad

For most of its history English was spoken on one island. From the 17th century it crossed the Atlantic, and over the next centuries it was carried to every continent. This chapter covers the colonial beginnings of American English, Noah Webster and his dictionary, and the idea of "world Englishes", with a model that sorts them into three circles.

The story in one box

Wikipedia's *American English* article says the first English-speaking settlers arrived in North America in the early 17th century, that dialects from many regions of the British Isles mixed in every colony, and that firsthand descriptions of a fairly uniform American English became common after the mid-18th century. Its *World Englishes* article describes two diasporas, one to North America and the southern-hemisphere settlements, and a second through colonisation of Asia and Africa that produced "New Englishes".

Watch out

"American English is just old English preserved" and "British English is the standard and American is a variation" are both too simple. The *American English* article describes a new, more uniform variety that formed from mixing, and the *World Englishes* article says the circles model is a framework with weaknesses: the categories are not fixed, and the article says critics fault two other models for lumping or leaving out groups.

The first English in America

Wikipedia's *American English* article describes English in the United States as the result of British colonisation. My look at the *Colonial history of the United States* article, which I could read only from the start, gives the colonial era as 1607 to 1776 in its infobox and says the Pilgrims reached Plymouth Plantation in 1620. It did not name Jamestown in the part I saw, and it gave no colonist counts.

- **Mixing:** dialects from many regions of England and the British Isles coexisted in every colony, which led to "extensive dialect leveling and mixing". The article says this made

English across the Thirteen Colonies more uniform than that of the British Isles.
- **Dominance:** English was dominant in the colonies by the end of the 17th century, even after immigration from Western Europe and the slave trade from Africa began.
- **A distinct variety:** firsthand descriptions of a fairly uniform American English became common after the mid-18th century, and speakers' identification with it grew.
- **Later varieties:** since the 18th century American English has produced new varieties. The article names Appalachian English, helped by 18th-century Ulster Scots immigrants, and African-American Vernacular English, brought to Great Lakes cities by the 20th-century Great Migration.

The article's History section does not describe divergence from British English as such, and it covers specific differences, such as rhoticity and vowel mergers, in the Phonology section, which I did not read. It also has a Vocabulary section with Dutch, Spanish and German loanwords, which I also did not read.

Noah Webster

Wikipedia's *Noah Webster* article gives his life as born 16 October 1758 and died 28 May 1843.

Item	What the article says
The dictionary	He began in 1807, and it took about 26 years; the 1828 *American Dictionary of the English Language* had about 70,000 words, roughly 12,000 not in any earlier published dictionary
Reception	Poor at first; Federalists found it too inclusive, Republicans mocked the project; a second edition came in 1840 and his estate sold the rights to the Merriam brothers in 1843
Spellings that stuck	*center*, *color*, *check*, *defense*, *traveler*
One that did not	*tung* for *tongue*
His aim	A distinct American English to separate the nation culturally from Britain, which he saw as intellectual independence, and as supporting republican values and social order

The article stresses that he did not invent most of these spellings: many already existed as alternatives, and he popularised them through his speller and dictionary. It also records criticism: Charlton Laird and Thomas Pyles are cited as critical of his grasp of Anglo-Saxon grammar and German; his first dictionary reportedly sold only 2,500 copies; and the article contains an inconsistency, with one passage referring to "Webster's 1844 dictionary" while 1828 is used elsewhere. It also relies in places on popular or journalistic sources, so I treat its details with care.

World Englishes

Wikipedia's *World Englishes* article defines them as localised or indigenised varieties of English, especially in territories influenced by the UK or the US. It distinguishes this from "World English", meaning English as a lingua franca in business and diplomacy. It describes two diasporas:

- **First:** migration of English speakers to North America, the Caribbean, Australia, South Africa and New Zealand, where dialects diverged and contact with indigenous populations shaped them.
- **Second:** colonisation of Asia and Africa, producing "New Englishes" as second-language varieties. The 19th-century British Empire and global trade spread English further.

The article also describes Kachru's three circles:

Circle	What it is	Examples (per the article)
Inner	English is a primary language; "norm-providing"	UK, US, Australia, New Zealand, Ireland, anglophone Canada
Outer	Former colonies where English is a lingua franca and often official; "norm-developing"	India, Nigeria, Kenya, Singapore, the Philippines, Jamaica
Expanding	No historical or governmental role but used internationally; "norm-dependent"	China, Japan, South Korea, Russia, much of Europe and the Middle East

The article's caveats: the total number of Englishes is hard to establish because new varieties keep emerging; estimates for the Expanding Circle range from 100 million to one billion, and it calls this the hardest to estimate; Singapore may be shifting toward the Inner Circle; and critics say McArthur's model conflates three kinds of English use while Görlach's leaves one out. It also describes Schneider's five-phase model, developed partly to avoid the purely geographic

approach of the circles. The internet-language figures it cites from Crystal are from 2001, so I do not use them.

Words to know

Term	Meaning
Dialect leveling	Differences between dialects shrinking when speakers mix
Diaspora	A spread of a people or language from its homeland
Lingua franca	A language used between speakers of different languages
Indigenised	Adapted to a local setting
Norm-providing	Setting the standards others follow (Kachru's term)
New English	A second-language variety that developed in a former colony

🖍️ Try It Yourself

Think of the answer first, then click to check.

1. When did the first English-speaking settlers arrive in North America, according to the article?

▼ Show answer

> In the early 17th century; the colonial era is given as 1607 to 1776, and the Pilgrims reached Plymouth in 1620.

2. What is "dialect leveling", and why did it matter in the colonies?

▼ Show answer

> Mixing that reduces differences between dialects; the article says it made English across the Thirteen Colonies more uniform than that of the British Isles.

3. When did descriptions of a fairly uniform American English become common?

▼ Show answer

> After the mid-18th century.

4. What was Webster's 1828 dictionary, and how was it received?

▼ Show answer

> The *American Dictionary of the English Language*, with about 70,000 words; it was poorly received at first.

5. Name two spellings that stuck and one that did not.

▼ Show answer

> For example *color* and *center* stuck; *tung* for *tongue* did not.

6. Why is "Webster invented American spelling" too simple?

▼ Show answer

> The article says he did not invent most of them: many already existed as alternatives, and he popularised them.

7. Name Kachru's three circles with one example country each.

▼ Show answer

> Inner (for example the UK), Outer (for example India) and Expanding (for example China).

8. Give one weakness of the circles model the article mentions.

▼ Show answer

> For example the categories are not fixed (Singapore may be shifting toward the Inner Circle), or Expanding Circle numbers are hard to estimate (100 million to one billion).

Note on sources

This chapter uses Wikipedia's *American English* (the first 100,000 of about 240,606 characters, which included the History section but not the Phonology or Vocabulary sections), *Noah Webster* (the first 100,000 of about 101,295, the whole article), *World Englishes* (the whole article) and *Colonial history of the United States* (the first 100,000 of about 462,038 characters, which did not reach the English colonies section), each as the page tool summarised it. I therefore give no colonist counts and do not say the last article names Jamestown. I did not read any census, language survey or colonial text. The *Noah Webster* article's own 1828 and 1844 dates for the dictionary conflict, and I give 1828. I paraphrase Webster's aims. The word definitions are mine and unverified.

Coming up in Chapter 10: English Today. English as a global language, change now, a recap of all ten chapters with a self-test, and pointers back to the other two courses.

The History of the English Language

Course 1 · Chapter 10 · English Today

The last chapter looks at where the story has reached: how many people speak English, what it is used for, and why the sources say it is still changing. It ends with a recap of the ten chapters, a self-test, and a pointer back to the two earlier courses in the series.

The story in one box

Wikipedia's *English language* article gives 380 million native speakers and 1.077 billion second-language speakers in 2021, for a total of 1.457 billion (Ethnologue), and calls English the de facto global lingua franca. Its *Language change* article says all living languages keep changing and that calling change "corruption" is a value judgement that modern linguistics rejects.

Watch out

Speaker counts depend on definitions. The *English language* article says second-language counts depend on how proficiency is defined, ranging from 470 million to over 1 billion, and gives an older figure of 400 million native and 1.1 billion second-language speakers for 2016. Two of its figures come without a named source in the part I read. Treat any single number as an estimate.

How many, and where

The *English language* article (I read only the first 100,000 of about 253,821 characters) gives:

Item	What the article says
Native speakers (2021)	380 million (infobox; the source is not named in the part I read)
Second-language speakers (2021)	1.077 billion, per Ethnologue
Total (2021)	1.457 billion

Item	What the article says
Rank	Most spoken language overall; third among native languages, after Mandarin Chinese and Spanish
Official status	Official or co-official in 57 sovereign states and 30 dependent territories; co-official in the UN and the EU
Regulation	Unregulated, with no language regulator
Non-native to native ratio	In 2003, David Crystal estimated non-native speakers outnumbered native speakers about three to one

The article calls English the most widely learned second language and the de facto lingua franca of diplomacy, science, technology, trade, tourism, aviation, entertainment and the Internet. It did not give a vocabulary-size figure in the part I read, so I give none.

English between people with other first languages

Wikipedia's *English as a lingua franca* article (ELF) defines it as English used among speakers of different first languages, defined by its function and not by native-speaker norms. It says native speakers are outnumbered by non-native speakers, and that English became the main lingua franca of academia after the 1940s, when French and German had been equally important. Its areas include business, diplomacy, medicine and the Internet, where English is "the most used language on the Internet".

- **The debate:** Sowden argued that ELF scholars want to replace standard English as the teaching model; Cogo replied that ELF is not a single variety and that researchers describe usage rather than prescribe it; Sewell argued the debate polarises native and non-native speakers.
- **Criticism:** some see ELF data as learner error, some think scholars treat it as a single variety, and some see it as masking English-speaking dominance, a view the article attributes to Phillipson's "linguistic imperialism".
- **Reliability:** the article has several "citation needed" tags and one error, expanding ELF as "English as a foreign language" in one section. I use it for the debate and not for numbers.

Change that is still going

Wikipedia's *Language change* article lists reasons languages change: economy of effort, loss of force in overused words, analogy, contact, cultural change, imperfect learning and social prestige. It gives English examples:

Kind of change	Example from the article
Pejoration (meaning gets worse)	*villain* moved from "peasant" to a negative sense
Amelioration (meaning gets better)	*wicked* is moving toward a positive colloquial sense
Narrowing	*hound* narrowed from "any dog" to a specific breed
Broadening	*dog* became the general term
Reduction in speech	*going to* reduced to *gonna*
Prestige	the loss of rhoticity in British Received Pronunciation

The article says calling change "corruption" is a value judgement and that modern linguistics rejects it, because innovations cannot be scientifically labelled good or bad. That fits what you have read: Chapter 8 showed rules that were later than their reputation, and Chapter 6 showed a sound change that left the spelling behind.

The internet and English

Wikipedia's *Internet linguistics* article describes a field advocated by David Crystal, studying new styles that arose from the Internet and media such as SMS texting. It says text and chat limits encouraged shortened forms such as *lol*, *omg* and *gtg*, that emoticons and capital letters make up for the "loss of emotivity" of plain text, and that virtual worlds and games produced slang such as *pwn* and *noob*.

- **Does it damage language?** the article says there is "no scientific evidence to confirm the proposed connection" between internet use and writing errors; Naomi Baron argues student writing suffers little; a 2009 study found students who texted regularly had a wider vocabulary; and Crystal views change as creativity, not decline.

- **The apostrophe:** the claim that internet slang caused the "death" of the apostrophe is, the article says, a folk-linguistic claim and not a research finding.
- **Age of the sources:** the article says much of its sourcing dates from 2010 or earlier and needs updating, so its examples are old for a topic that moves quickly.

The whole story

Ch.	Title	The point in a line
1	Where We Left Off	The four periods are conventions; the articles give different dates for the same boundaries
2	French Arrives	The Conquest replaced the ruling class; most French words came gradually, 1250 to 1400
3	Middle English	Endings and gender were lost; the Peterborough Chronicle shows it happening; Chaucer wrote in English
4	London Takes the Lead	A London-based written standard grew from records and letters; the sources disagree about Chancery's role
5	The Printing Press	Caxton in 1476 and printing helped fix spelling while speech kept changing
6	The Great Vowel Shift	Long vowels shifted from about 1400 to 1700, which is why spelling and sound diverge
7	Shakespeare and the Bible	Inkhorn words, Shakespeare's disputed coinages, Tyndale and the 1611 King James Version
8	Dictionaries and Rules	Cawdrey 1604, Johnson 1755, Lowth 1762 and the late history of the split-infinitive rule
9	English Goes Abroad	American English, Webster, and the three circles of world Englishes
10	English Today	A global lingua franca, still changing

Where this fits

This is the third course in a series. Britain Before English covers the island before the English arrived, and The Story of Old English covers the first seven centuries of the language, to about 1150. Together the three run from the first humans in Britain to the present day. Middle English grammar and reading courses are planned but not written yet.

Words to know

Term	Meaning
L1 / L2	First language / second language
Lingua franca	A language used between speakers of different languages
Pejoration / amelioration	A word's meaning becoming worse / better
Folk linguistics	Popular beliefs about language that are not based on research
Internet linguistics	The study of language use online
Language regulator	An official body that sets rules for a language, such as an academy

🖍️ Try It Yourself: a self-test on the whole course

The first six questions look back over the course; the last two are about this chapter. Think of the answer first, then click to check.

1. Which event is the usual start of Middle English, and why is the date only a marker?

▼ Show answer

> The Norman Conquest of 1066; the articles say the change came some time after it, and they give different dates for the same boundaries (Chapter 1).

2. When were most French loanwords borrowed, and what is the *cow* and *beef* story called?

▼ Show answer

> 1250 to 1400 (about 40% of the French words first appear then); the article calls the story a "Norman culinary myth" (Chapter 2).

3. What does the Peterborough Chronicle show, and which pronoun is first recorded there?

▼ Show answer

> English changing from Old to Middle English, with gender almost lost; *she* (spelled "scæ") (Chapter 3).

4. Give the printing date for England and the date of the Great Vowel Shift range.

▼ Show answer

> Caxton set up the first press in England in 1476 (Chapter 5); the shift ran mainly between 1400 and 1700 (Chapter 6).

5. Name the dictionary published in 1755 and the grammar published in 1762.

▼ Show answer

> Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary* and Robert Lowth's *A Short Introduction to English Grammar* (Chapter 8).

6. Name Kachru's three circles.

▼ Show answer

> Inner, Outer and Expanding (Chapter 9).

7. Why should you be careful with the figure of 1.457 billion English speakers?

▼ Show answer

> It is a 2021 estimate, second-language counts depend on how proficiency is defined (470 million to over 1 billion), and two of the article's figures had no named source in the part I read.

8. What does the *Language change* article say about calling change "corruption"?

▼ Show answer

> It is a value judgement; modern linguistics rejects it because innovations cannot be scientifically labelled good or bad.

Note on sources

This chapter uses Wikipedia's *English language* (the first 100,000 of about 253,821 characters, to the start of the geographical distribution section), *English as a lingua franca* and *Language change* (whole pages) and *Internet linguistics* (the first 100,000 of about 122,401 characters), each as the page tool summarised it. I did not read the *English language* article's Vocabulary section, so I give no vocabulary-size figures, and its native and total speaker figures show no named source in the part I read. The *English as a lingua franca* article gives no population figures, and I do not use the Crystal figures from 2001 that the *World Englishes* article cites (Chapter 9). The recap table and the word definitions are mine and unverified. I read no linguistic study.

Course complete. The appendix has two pages: a **Timeline** of the dates in the ten chapters and a **Map** with a sketch of England's Middle English dialect areas and a grid of the three circles of world Englishes.