

English

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HISTORY OF ENGLISH SPELLING. The first writings in English are the *Old English* or *Anglo-Saxon* glosses in Latin church documents (see FIGURE 45B on page 318). The earliest are from the late seventh century C.E.; literary as well as ephemeral manuscripts survive only from the time of King Alfred (r. 871–899).

The spelling system of English—often stigmatized as chaotic—reflects quite well several unique circumstances that have befallen the language. Old English absorbed loanwords (and their spellings) in a normal way from Scandinavian invaders and Greek- and Latin-speaking missionaries. But then the Norman Conquest of 1066 (the conventional boundary of *Middle English*) began an influx of Romance (Norman

French) words, which pertained to more cultivated levels of society—domestic animals have Germanic names but their flesh is eaten in French (*cow/beef, calf/veal, sheep/mutton*), for instance. Ever since, the vocabulary of science and other intellectual pursuits has been formed from Latin and Greek roots rather than Germanic ones (as has been preferred in German—it's not as if the native resources would have been inadequate). As is often the case (cf. SECTION 62), the spelling conventions of the originating language have been retained as words are borrowed.

The second unusual circumstance concerned the timing of the introduction of printing to England, by William Caxton in 1476 (taken as the start of *Modern English*). He is largely responsible for establishing norms of spelling based on the usage of the capital, London. Unfortunately, just when printers had settled on an orthographic system conforming with the general European use of the vowel letters, the vowels were undergoing a change in pronunciation, the Great English Vowel Shift—whereby, e.g., mid front [e:] became high front [i:]. (Such wholesale reorganizations are not unusual in the world's languages, and indeed a very similar shifting can be observed in progress in present-day American English.) Certain other vowels merged (*meat* and *meet* do not rhyme in many nonstandard dialects, for instance). Spelling, however, was not reformed (the arguments against rendering all the past's literature obsolete are powerful), so English vowel orthography is now inconsistent with that of every other language that uses the Roman alphabet. (Seeming consonant anomalies, such as *rough/ruff/through/threw*, result from quite normal changes, here the loss of velar fricatives in different contexts.) The large number of identifiable, regular spellings of vowels that have merged differentially in different dialects provide a convenient metric for categorizing the worldwide variety of English dialects (Wells 1982 uses the 24 keywords KIT, DRESS, TRAP, LOT, STRUT, FOOT, BATH, CLOTH, NURSE, FLEECE, FACE, PALM, THOUGHT, GOAT, GOOSE, PRICE, CHOICE, MOUTH, NEAR, SQUARE, START, NORTH, FORCE, and CURE).

Lastly, the birth of the new American nation afforded the rare opportunity to carry out a spelling reform, led by Noah Webster: it involved mostly the omission of unnecessary letters such as the *u* in *-our* and the change of *-re* to *-er*. This innovation, coupled with a certain conservatism in pronunciation (such as the retention of postvocalic *r* in many American dialects), means that American spelling reflects the pronunciation of English a bit more faithfully than English spelling does.

SYMBOLS. English has always used the Roman alphabet, but a number of sounds not found in Latin have been accommodated in two different ways (Cummings 1988: 207–12). Early on, either *ð* (called *edh*) or *þ* (*thorn*) was used for either [θ] or [ð], a symbol (*wen*) with a shape intermediate between *p* and *þ* was [w] (an example appears in FIGURE 45B), and *ȝ* (*yogh*) was [ɣ]; these letters are said to have Runic origins (cf. SECTION 25). Subsequently, Norman scribes, adapting Latin usage for rendering borrowed Greek sounds, created digraphs with *h* for unfamiliar English sounds: *ch* represents [tʃ] (Old English *c*)—after a short vowel spelled *cch*, which be-

came *tch*; *gh* represents [ɣ]—which persists in spelling long after the sound was lost (*gh* for [g] is later and irregular); *ph* [f], the Latin version of Greek φ, alternates with native *f*; *sh* [ʃ] (Old English *sc*) was probably simplified from *sch*; *th* [θ, ð] is the Latin version of Greek θ; and *wh* [ʍ] (sometimes becoming [w] or [hw]) also represents [h] *whole*. (*W* is the doubling of the *v* shape of *u* for the consonantal value [ʍ], i.e. [w]; cf. *y*, the Latin adaptation of Greek Y [y], which alternated with *i* for both [i] and [j], i.e. [j]. *X* and *z* received their current pronunciations, differing from the Greek originals, in Latin.)

There have been a number of attempts to catalog the correspondences between sound and spelling of English. The most successful is that of Edward Carney, who presents both speech-to-text correspondences (1994: 134–255) and text-to-speech correspondences (pp. 280–380, summary pp. 381–94) for British spelling. Cummings (1988) presents the former sort of correspondence, though not exhaustively (omitting the spellings of shwa and other unstressed vowels, p. xxvi), for American spelling. Venezky (1970) presents the latter sort, very compactly—but the laurel for compression must go to W. A. Ainsworth, whose 159 rules for driving a minimal speech synthesizer from written input can be reproduced on a single page (Carney 1994: 265). (Contemporary speech synthesizers rely on a list of exceptional correspondences in addition to an algorithm for generating pronunciations from spellings deemed to be regular.)

SPELLING, SPELLING REFORM, AND READING INSTRUCTION. Calls are continually heard for the wholesale reform of English spelling, so that one letter would correspond to one phoneme—it is argued that an alphabet ought to reflect the pronunciation of its language. But it is not difficult to demonstrate that current spelling does this quite well, on the whole; the reflection, though, is of a slightly abstracted form of the language, at the level of the morpheme rather than of the spoken word. A standard example is *photograph*, which is pronounced several ways depending on its surroundings. It is /fówtəgræf/ (alone), /fətágrɪf/ (in *photography*), and /fówtəgræf/ (in *photographic*). If the spelling reflected the pronunciation of the words rather than the identity of their base, their relationship would be obscured.

Another benefit of the extended resources of English orthography is the availability of different spellings for homophones, such as *to*, *two*, and *too*; *its* and *it's*; and *presence* and *presents*. Furthermore, the native versus Romance versus Classical (i.e. Latin/Greek) origin of the word, as marked by some feature of its spelling, can indicate which suffixes may be applied, on the pattern of *similarity*, not **similarity*, cf. *sameness*. An example of native versus Classical spelling is *f* versus *ph* for [f]; and [ʒ] occurs nearly exclusively in words of Romance origin (*beige*, *genre*) as well as resulting from the palatalization of [z] before [j] (*confusion*, *usual*).

Words that do not obey any of the rules for these subsystems are of two kinds. They can be borrowings from non-European languages, such as *gnu* and *Iraq* (English is unusually hospitable to foreign words, one of the features that suits it to be an

international language—see Strevens 1985, little known but very insightful). Or they can result from meddling by sixteenth- and seventeenth-century pedants who tried to assimilate English to the Classical languages, as in *debt*, historically *dett* but awarded a *b* by analogy with Latin *debitus*.

To the extent that the historic richness of English vocabulary and spelling result in sets like *bomb/comb/tomb* and *cove/love/move*, where each word has to be learned separately, English writing can be considered logographic. But the spelling never deviates far from the pronunciation—*tomb* can never be read ‘grave’, for instance. It is thus generally agreed among linguists that strategies for teaching reading that do not incorporate the study of phonics (correspondence between spelling and sound) are at least inefficient, and probably ineffective as well. Spelling/sound correspondence is highly amenable to computerization, and was in fact one of the first linguistic phenomena to be so studied (Hanna et al. 1966). However, the Hanna study (despite its title) used not a phonemic analysis of American English, but the pronunciation key in a standard dictionary, as its input, and suffers from conceptual weaknesses as well as the sorts of problems that beset early, massive computerized investigations (Carney 1994: 86–96). Its indeed rather chaotic findings (“English spelling is 50% regular”) ought not to have been cited against the phonics approach to teaching reading.

Carney (1994: 473–88) updates Mencken’s (1936: 397–407, 1948: 287–316) survey of spelling reform proposals. Some of the suggestions of reformers have been more or less widely accepted—e.g. *catalog* for *catalogue*, *thru* for *through*—but most have not. The case of the reformers is not advanced when they construct, by ignoring etymology and morphophonemics, examples even more ridiculous than G. B. Shaw’s specious *ghoti* [fi]: *gh* can only be [f] at the end of a word after *ou*, *o* is [ɪ] only in the truly anomalous *women*, and *ti* is [ʃ] only in Latinate suffixes such as *-tion*. Crystal (1995: 273) reprints an epic piece of doggerel by one G. N. Trenité, writing as “Charivarius,” which both makes and breaks the case for spelling reform: H. I. Aronson suggests that in memorizing the poem, one learns every irregularly spelled English word! The first stanza: “Dearest creature in Creation, / Studying English pronunciation, / I will teach you in my verse / Sounds like *corpse*, *corps*, *horse* and *worse*.”

SAMPLE OF ENGLISH

The passage is followed by transcriptions into British “Received Pronunciation” (by M. K. C. MacMahon) and “General American” (by P. T. Daniels, reflecting New York origin and Chicago influence). RP is a prestigious accent spoken by a minority and admired by many; General American is often used in formal speaking and broadcasting, largely devoid of regional characteristics. Stress marks note only the location of stress within polysyllabic words; nothing is indicated of sentence-accent or intonation.

1. <i>English:</i>	All	attempts	to	connect	particular	types	of
2. <i>RP:</i>	ɔl	ə'tempts	tə	kə'nekt	pə'tɪkjələ	tajps	əv
3. <i>Gen. Amer.:</i>	ɔl	ə'temts	tə	kə'nekt	pɹɪ'tɪkjələ	tajps	əv

1. linguistic morphology with certain correlated stages of
 2. lɪŋ'gwɪstɪk mɔ'fɒlədʒɪ wɪð 'sɜ:ɪ'n 'kɒrə,leɪtɪd 'steɪdʒɪz əv
 3. lɪŋ'gwɪstɪk mɔ:ɪ'faliðdʒɪ wɪð 's,ɪ:ɪ'n 'kɔ:ɪ,leɪtɪd 'steɪdʒɪz əv

1. cultural development are vain. Rightly understood, such
 2. 'kʌɪtʃərət dɪ'veləp'mənt ə 'veɪn 'raɪtɪ ɹ,ʌndə'stʊd sʌtʃ
 3. 'kʌɪtʃɪt də'veləp'mənt aɪ veɪn 'raɪtɪɪ ɹ,ʌndɪ'stʊd sʌtʃ

1. correlations are rubbish. ... When it comes to linguistic
 2. ,kɒrə'leɪʃnɪz ə 'rʌbɪʃ wɛn ɪt kʌmz tə lɪŋ'gwɪstɪk
 3. ,kɔ:ɪ'leɪʃnɪz aɪ 'rʌbɪʃ wɛn ɪt kʌmz təw lɪŋ'gwɪstɪk

1. form, Plato walks with the Macedonian swineherd,
 2. fɔ:m 'pleɪtəw wɔks wɪð ðə ,mæsi'dəwnɪən 'swaɪn,hɛd
 3. fɔ:m 'pleɪ,t'əw wɔks wɪð ðə 'mæsə,dɔwnɪjən 'swaɪn,hɪd

1. Confucius with the head-hunting savage of Assam.
 2. kən'fju:wʃəs wɪð ðə 'hɛd,hʌntɪŋ 'sævɪdʒ əv æ'sæm
 3. kn'fju:wʃɪs wɪð ðə 'hɛd,hʌntɪŋ 'sævɪdʒ əv ,æs'sæ:m

—Sapir 1921: 219.

Note: Sapir was mistaken in placing headhunters in Assam; they occupied a neighboring area.

ENGLISH

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