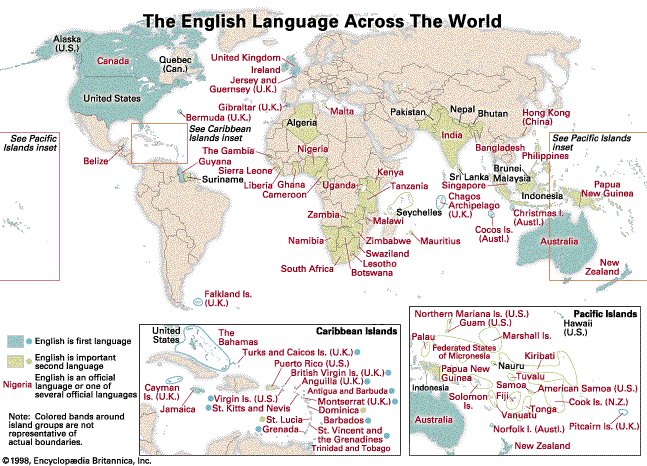
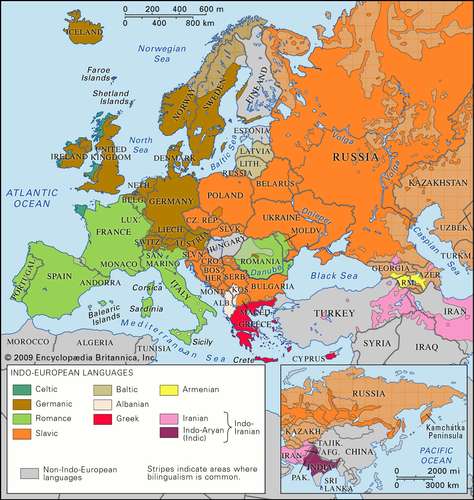
**English language**, [West Germanic language](https://www.britannica.com/topic/West-Germanic-languages) of the [Indo-European language family](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Indo-European-languages) that is closely related to [Frisian](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Frisian-language), [German](https://www.britannica.com/topic/German-language), and [Dutch (in Belgium called Flemish)](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Dutch-language) languages. English originated in [England](https://www.britannica.com/place/England) and is the dominant language of the [United States](https://www.britannica.com/place/United-States), the [United Kingdom](https://www.britannica.com/place/United-Kingdom), [Canada](https://www.britannica.com/place/Canada), [Australia](https://www.britannica.com/place/Australia), [Ireland](https://www.britannica.com/place/Ireland), [New Zealand](https://www.britannica.com/place/New-Zealand), and various island nations in the [Caribbean Sea](https://www.britannica.com/place/Caribbean-Sea) and the [Pacific Ocean](https://www.britannica.com/place/Pacific-Ocean). It is also an official language of [India](https://www.britannica.com/place/India), the [Philippines](https://www.britannica.com/place/Philippines), [Singapore](https://www.britannica.com/place/Singapore), and many countries in sub-Saharan Africa, including [South Africa](https://www.britannica.com/place/South-Africa). English is the first choice of foreign language in most other countries of the world, and it is that status that has given it the position of a global [lingua franca](https://www.britannica.com/topic/lingua-franca). It is estimated that about a third of the world’s population, some two billion persons, now use English.



**Origins And Basic Characteristics**

English belongs to the [Indo-European family of languages](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Indo-European-languages) and is therefore related to most other languages spoken in [Europe](https://www.britannica.com/place/Europe) and western [Asia](https://www.britannica.com/place/Asia) from [Iceland](https://www.britannica.com/place/Iceland) to [India](https://www.britannica.com/place/India). The parent tongue, called Proto-Indo-European, was spoken about 5,000 years ago by nomads believed to have roamed the southeast European plains. [Germanic](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Germanic-languages), one of the language groups descended from this ancestral speech, is usually divided by scholars into three regional groups: [East](https://www.britannica.com/topic/East-Germanic-languages) (Burgundian, Vandal, and [Gothic](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Gothic-language), all extinct), North ([Icelandic](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Icelandic-language), [Faroese](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Faroese-language), [Norwegian](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Norwegian-language), [Swedish](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Swedish-language), and [Danish](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Danish-language)), and [West](https://www.britannica.com/topic/West-Germanic-languages) ([German](https://www.britannica.com/topic/German-language), [Dutch [and Flemish]](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Dutch-language), [Frisian](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Frisian-language), and English). Though closely related to English, German remains far more [conservative](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/conservative) than English in its retention of a fairly elaborate system of [inflections](https://www.britannica.com/topic/inflection). Frisian, spoken by the inhabitants of the Dutch province of [Friesland](https://www.britannica.com/place/Friesland) and the islands off the west coast of [Schleswig](https://www.britannica.com/place/Schleswig-Germany), is the language most nearly related to Modern English. Icelandic, which has changed little over the last thousand years, is the living language most nearly resembling [Old English](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Old-English-language) in grammatical structure.

[](https://cdn.britannica.com/83/1983-050-705E524C/locations-languages-Indo-European-Eurasia.jpg)

Modern English is [analytic](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/analytic) (i.e., relatively uninflected), whereas Proto-Indo-European, the ancestral tongue of most of the modern European languages (e.g., German, French, Russian, Greek), was [synthetic](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/synthetic), or inflected. During the course of thousands of years, English words have been slowly simplified from the inflected variable forms found in [Sanskrit](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Sanskrit-language), [Greek](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Greek-language), [Latin](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Latin-language), [Russian](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Russian-language), and German, toward invariable forms, as in [Chinese](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Chinese-languages) and [Vietnamese](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Vietnamese-language). The German and Chinese words for the noun man are [exemplary](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/exemplary). German has five forms: Mann, Mannes, Manne, Männer, Männern. Chinese has one form: ren. English stands in between, with four forms: man, man’s, men, men’s. In English, only nouns, pronouns (as in he, him, his), adjectives (as in big, bigger, biggest), and verbs are inflected. English is the only European language to employ uninflected adjectives; e.g., the tall man, the tall woman, compared to Spanish el hombre alto and la mujer alta. As for verbs, if the Modern English word ride is compared with the corresponding words in Old English and Modern German, it will be found that English now has only 5 forms (ride, rides, rode, riding, ridden), whereas Old English ridan had 13, and Modern German reiten has 16.

In addition to the simplicity of inflections, English has two other basic characteristics: flexibility of function and openness of vocabulary.

Flexibility of function has grown over the last five centuries as a consequence of the loss of [inflections](https://www.britannica.com/topic/inflection). Words formerly distinguished as nouns or verbs by differences in their forms are now often used as both nouns and verbs. One can speak, for example, of planning a table or tabling a plan, booking a place or placing a book, lifting a thumb or thumbing a lift. In the other [Indo-European languages](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Indo-European-languages), apart from rare exceptions in [Scandinavian languages](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Scandinavian-languages), nouns and verbs are never identical because of the necessity of separate noun and verb endings. In English, forms for traditional pronouns, adjectives, and adverbs can also function as nouns; adjectives and adverbs as verbs; and nouns, pronouns, and adverbs as adjectives. One speaks in English of the Frankfurt Book Fair, but in German one must add the suffix -er to the place-name and put attributive and noun together as a [compound](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/compound), Frankfurter Buchmesse. In French one has no choice but to construct a phrase involving the use of two prepositions: Foire du Livre de Francfort. In English it is now possible to employ a plural noun as adjunct (modifier), as in wages board and sports editor; or even a conjunctional group, as in prices and incomes policy and parks and gardens committee. Any word class may alter its function in this way: the ins and outs (prepositions becoming nouns), no buts (conjunction becoming noun).

Openness of vocabulary implies both free admission of words from other [languages](https://www.britannica.com/topic/language) and the ready creation of [compounds](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/compounds) and derivatives. English adopts (without change) or adapts (with slight change) any word really needed to name some new object or to denote some new process. Words from more than 350 languages have entered English in this way. Like French, Spanish, and Russian, English frequently forms scientific terms from Classical Greek word elements. Although a Germanic language in its [sounds](https://www.britannica.com/science/phonology) and [grammar](https://www.britannica.com/topic/grammar), the bulk of English vocabulary is in fact [Romance](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Romance-languages) or Classical in origin.

English possesses a system of orthography that does not always accurately reflect the pronunciation of words; see below [Orthography](https://www.britannica.com/topic/English-language/Vocabulary#ref74808).

# Characteristics Of Modern English

## [Phonology](https://www.britannica.com/science/phonology)

British [Received Pronunciation](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Received-Pronunciation) (RP), traditionally defined as the standard [speech](https://www.britannica.com/topic/speech-language) used in [London](https://www.britannica.com/place/London) and southeastern [England](https://www.britannica.com/place/England), is one of many forms (or accents) of standard speech throughout the English-speaking world. Other pronunciations, although not standard, are often heard in the public domain. A very small percentage of the population of England is estimated to use “pure” RP (although the actual percentage is as unknown as what [constitutes](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/constitutes) “pure” RP). It is considered the [prestige](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/prestige) accent in such institutions as the [civil service](https://www.britannica.com/topic/civil-service) and the [BBC](https://www.britannica.com/topic/British-Broadcasting-Corporation) and, as such, has fraught associations with wealth and privilege in [Britain](https://www.britannica.com/place/United-Kingdom).

The chief differences between RP, as defined above, and a variety of American English, such as Inland Northern (the speech form of western [New England](https://www.britannica.com/place/New-England) and its derivatives, often popularly referred to as General American), are in the pronunciation of certain individual [vowels](https://www.britannica.com/topic/vowel) and [diphthongs](https://www.britannica.com/topic/diphthong). Inland Northern American vowels sometimes have semiconsonantal final glides (i.e., sounds resembling initial w, for example, or initial y). Aside from the final glides, that American accent shows four divergences from British English: (1) the words cod, box, dock, hot, and not are pronounced with a short (or half-long) low front sound as in British bard shortened (the terms front, back, low, and high refer to the position of the tongue); (2) words such as bud, but, cut, and rung are pronounced with a central vowel as in the unstressed final [syllable](https://www.britannica.com/topic/syllable) of sofa; (3) before the [fricative](https://www.britannica.com/topic/fricative) sounds s, f, and θ (the last of these is the th sound in thin) the long low back vowel a, as in British bath, is pronounced as a short front vowel a, as in British bad; (4) high back vowels following the alveolar sounds t and d and the nasal sound n in words such as tulips, dew, and news are pronounced without a [glide](https://www.britannica.com/topic/approximant) as in British English; indeed, the words sound like the British two lips, do, and nooze in snooze. (In several American accents, however, these glides do occur.)

The 24 consonant sounds [comprise](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/comprise) six [stops](https://www.britannica.com/topic/stop-speech-sound) (plosives): p, b, t, d, k, g; the [fricatives](https://www.britannica.com/topic/fricative) f, v, θ (as in thin), ð [eth] (as in then), s, z, ∫ [esh] (as in ship), Ʒ (as in pleasure), and h; two affricatives: t∫ (as in church) and dƷ (as the j in jam); the nasals m, n, ŋ (the sound that occurs at the end of words such as young); the [lateral](https://www.britannica.com/topic/lateral-speech-sound) l; the postalveolar or retroflex r; and the semivowels j (often spelled y) and w. These remain fairly stable, but Inland Northern American differs from RP in two respects: (1) r following vowels is preserved in words such as door, flower, and harmony, whereas it is lost in RP; (2) t between vowels is voiced, so that metal and matter sound very much like British medal and madder, although the pronunciation of this t is softer and less aspirated, or breathy, than the d of British English.

Like [Russian](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Russian-language), English is a strongly stressed [language](https://www.britannica.com/topic/language). Four degrees of accentuation may be differentiated: primary, secondary, tertiary, and weak, which may be indicated, respectively, by [acute](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/acute) (´), circumflex (ˆ), and grave (ˋ) accent marks and by the breve (˘). Thus, “Têll mè thĕ trúth” (the whole truth, and nothing but the truth) may be contrasted with “Têll mé thĕ trûth” (whatever you may tell other people); “bláck bîrd” (any bird black in colour) may be contrasted with “bláckbìrd” (that particular bird Turdus merula). The verbs permít and recórd (henceforth only primary stresses are marked) may be contrasted with their corresponding nouns pérmit and récord. A feeling for antepenultimate (third syllable from the end) primary [stress](https://www.britannica.com/topic/stress-linguistics), revealed in such five-syllable words as equanímity, longitúdinal, notoríety, opportúnity, parsimónious, pertinácity, and vegetárian, causes stress to shift when extra syllables are added, as in histórical, a derivative of hístory and theatricálity, a derivative of theátrical. Vowel qualities are also changed here and in such word groups as périod, periódical, periodícity; phótograph, photógraphy, photográphable. [French](https://www.britannica.com/topic/French-language) stress may be sustained in many borrowed words; e.g., bizárre, critíque, duréss, hotél, prestíge, and techníque.

[Pitch](https://www.britannica.com/art/pitch-music), or musical tone, determined chiefly by the rate of vibration of the [vocal cords](https://www.britannica.com/science/vocal-cord), may be level, falling, rising, or falling–rising. In counting one, two, three, four, one naturally gives level [pitch](https://www.britannica.com/art/pitch-music) to each of these cardinal numerals. But if people say I want two, not one, they naturally give two a falling tone and one a falling–rising tone. In the question One? rising pitch is used. Word tone is called [accent](https://www.britannica.com/topic/accent-linguistics), and sentence tone is referred to as [intonation](https://www.britannica.com/topic/intonation). The end-of-sentence [cadence](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/cadence) is important for expressing differences in meaning. Several end-of-sentence [intonations](https://www.britannica.com/topic/intonation) are possible, but three are especially common: falling, rising, and falling–rising. Falling intonation is used in completed statements, direct commands, and sometimes in general questions unanswerable by yes or no (e.g., I have nothing to add; keep to the right; who told you that?). Rising intonation is frequently used in open-ended statements made with some reservation, in polite requests, and in particular questions answerable by yes or no (e.g., I have nothing more to say at the moment; let me know how you get on; are you sure?). The third type of end-of-sentence intonation, first falling and then rising pitch, is used in sentences that imply [concessions](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/concessions) or contrasts (e.g., some people do like them [but others do not]; don’t say I didn’t warn you [because that is just what I’m now doing]). Intonation is on the whole less singsong in American than in British English, and there is a narrower range of pitch. Everywhere English is spoken, regional accents display distinctive patterns of intonation.

## [Morphology](https://www.britannica.com/topic/morphology-linguistics)

## [Inflection](https://www.britannica.com/topic/inflection)

Modern English nouns, pronouns, adjectives, and verbs are inflected. Adverbs, prepositions, [conjunctions](https://www.britannica.com/topic/conjunction-logic), and interjections are invariable.

Most English nouns have plural [inflection](https://www.britannica.com/topic/inflection) in (-e)s, but that form shows variations in pronunciation in the words cats (with a final s sound), dogs (with a final z sound), and horses (with a final iz sound), as also in the 3rd person singular present-tense forms of verbs: cuts (s), jogs (z), and forces (iz). Seven nouns have mutated (umlauted) plurals: man, men; woman, women; tooth, teeth; foot, feet; goose, geese; mouse, mice; louse, lice. Three have plurals in -en: ox, oxen; child, children; brother, brethren. Some remain unchanged (e.g., deer, sheep, moose, grouse). Five of the seven personal pronouns have distinctive forms for subject and object (e.g., he/him, she/her). Adjectives have distinctive endings for comparison (e.g., comparative bigger, superlative biggest), with several irregular forms (e.g., good, better, best).

The forms of verbs are not complex. Only the [substantive](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/substantive) verb (to be) has eight forms: be, am, is, are, was, were, being, been. Strong verbs have five forms: ride, rides, rode, riding, ridden. Regular or weak verbs customarily have four: walk, walks, walked, walking. Some that end in t or d have three forms only: cut, cuts, cutting.

In addition to the above inflections, English employs two other main morphological (structural) processes—affixation and composition—and two subsidiary ones—back-formation and blend.

## [Affixation](https://www.britannica.com/topic/affix)

Affixes, word elements attached to words, may either precede, as prefixes (do, undo; way, subway), or follow, as suffixes (do, doer; way, wayward). They may be native (overdo, waywardness), Greek (hyperbole, thesis), or Latin (supersede, pediment). Modern technologists greatly favour the neo-Hellenic prefixes macro-“long, large,” micro- “small,” para- “alongside,” poly- “many,” and the Latin mini- “small,” with its antonym maxi-. The early [Internet](https://www.britannica.com/technology/Internet) era popularized cyber- “of computers or [computer](https://www.britannica.com/technology/computer) networks” and mega- “vast.” Greek and Latin affixes have become so fully acclimatized that they can occur together in one and the same word, as, indeed, in ac-climat-ize-d, just used, consisting of a Latin prefix plus a Greek stem plus a Greek suffix plus an English inflection. Suffixes are bound more closely than prefixes to the stems or root elements of words. Consider, for instance, the wide variety of agent suffixes in the nouns act***or***, artis***an***, dot***ard***, engin***eer***, financ***ier***, hire***ling***, magistr***ate***, merch***ant***, scient***ist***, secret***ary***, song***ster***, stud***ent***, and work***er***. Suffixes may come to be attached to stems quite fortuitously, but, once attached, they are likely to be permanent. At the same time, one suffix can perform many functions. The suffix -er denotes the doer of the action in the words worker, driver, and hunter; the instrument in chopper, harvester, and roller; and the dweller in Icelander, Londoner, and Trobriander. It refers to things or actions associated with the basic concept in the words breather, “pause to take breath”; diner, “dining car on a train”; and fiver, “five-pound note.” In the terms disclaimer, misnomer, and rejoinder (all from French), the suffix denotes one single instance of the action expressed by the verb. Usage may prove [capricious](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/capricious). Whereas a writer is a person, a typewriter is a machine. For some time a computer was both, but now the word is no longer used of persons.

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# [Composition](https://www.britannica.com/topic/compounding-grammar)

[Composition](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/Composition), or [compounding](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/compounding), is concerned with free forms. The primary [compounds](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/compounds) cloverleaf, gentleman, and (less obviously, because of the spelling) already show the collocation of two free forms. They differ from word groups or phrases in [stress](https://www.britannica.com/topic/stress-linguistics), juncture, or vowel quality or by a combination of these. Thus, already differs from all ready in stress and juncture, cloverleaf from clover leaf in stress, and gentleman from gentle man in [vowel](https://www.britannica.com/topic/vowel) quality, stress, and juncture. In describing the structure of [compound](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/compound) words it is necessary to take into account the relation of components to each other and the relation of the whole compound to its components. These relations diverge widely in, for example, the words cloverleaf, icebreaker, breakwater, blackbird, peace-loving, and paperback. In cloverleaf the first component noun is attributive and modifies the second, as also in the terms aircraft, beehive, landmark, lifeline, network, and vineyard. Icebreaker, however, is a compound made up of noun object plus agent noun, itself consisting of verb plus agent suffix, as also in the words bridgebuilder, landowner, metalworker, minelayer, and timekeeper. The next type consists of verb plus object. It is rare in English, Dutch, and German but frequent in [French](https://www.britannica.com/topic/French-language), [Spanish](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Spanish-language), and [Italian](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Italian-language). The English pastime may be compared, for example, with the French passe-temps, the Spanish pasatiempo, and the Italian passatempo. From French comes passport, meaning “pass (i.e., enter) harbour.” From Italian comes portfolio, meaning “carry leaf.” Other words of this type are daredevil, scapegrace, and scarecrow. As for the blackbird type, consisting of attributive adjective plus noun, it occurs frequently, as in the terms bluebell, grandson, shorthand, and wildfire. The next type, composed of object noun and a present participle, as in the terms fact-finding, heart-rending (German herzzerreissend), life-giving (German lebenspendend), painstaking, and time-consuming, occurs rarely. The last type is seen in barefoot, bluebeard, hunchback, leatherneck, redbreast, and scatterbrain.

## Back-formations, blends, and other types of word-formation

Back-formations and blends are widespread. Back-formation is the reverse of affixation, being the analogical creation of a new word from an existing word falsely assumed to be its derivative. For example, the verb to edit has been formed from the noun editor on the reverse [analogy](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/analogy) of the noun actor from to act, and similarly the verbs automate, bulldoze, commute, escalate, liaise, loaf, sightsee, and televise are backformed from the nouns automation, bulldozer, commuter, escalation, liaison, loafer, sightseer, and television. From the single noun procession are backformed two verbs with different stresses and meanings: procéss, “to walk in procession,” and prócess, “to subject food (and other material) to a special operation.”

Blends fall into two groups: (1) coalescences, such as bash from bang and smash; and (2) telescoped forms, called [portmanteau words](https://www.britannica.com/topic/portmanteau-word), such as motorcade from motor cavalcade. In the first group are the words clash, from clack and crash, and geep, offspring of goat and sheep. To the second group belong dormobiles, or dormitory automobiles, and slurbs, or slum suburbs. A travel [monologue](https://www.britannica.com/art/monologue) becomes a travelogue and a telegram sent by cable a cablegram. Aviation electronics becomes avionics; biology electronics, bionics; and nuclear electronics, nucleonics. In cablese a question mark is a quark; in computerese a binary unit is a bit. In [astrophysics](https://www.britannica.com/science/astrophysics) a quasistellar source of radio energy becomes a quasar, and a pulsating star becomes a pulsar.

Simple shortenings, such as ad for advertisement, that some time ago might have been sneered at by some are now in common use. They are listed in [dictionaries](https://www.britannica.com/topic/dictionary) side by side with their full forms. Among such abbreviations are exam, gym, lab, lib, op, spec, sub, tech, veg, and vet. Compound shortenings, after the pattern of Russian agitprop for agitatsiya propaganda, are also used. Initial syllables are joined as in the words linocut (linoleum cut) and FORTRAN (formula translation); these shortenings are not uncommon in, and often become, the names of corporations and other organizations (FedEx [Federal Express], Intelsat [International Telecommunications Satellite Organization]).

## [Syntax](https://www.britannica.com/topic/syntax)

Sentences can be classified as follows:

* (A) simple, containing one clause and predication: Jane knows this country
* (B) multiple or compound, containing two or more coordinate clauses: Jane has been here before, and she knows this country
* (C) complex, containing one or more main clauses and one or more subordinate clauses: Jane, who has been here before, knows this country or Because she has been here before, Jane knows this country

Simple, declarative, [affirmative](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/affirmative) sentences have two main patterns with five subsidiary patterns within each. Verb and complement together form the [predicate](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/predicate). “Complement” is used here to cover both the complement and the object of traditional grammarians.

The table listing sentences (1) through (5) provides examples of the first main pattern. The sentences of the first pattern consist of three parts: subject, verb, and complement. In Jane knows this country (1), the complement is the direct object of a transitive verb; in Science is organized knowledge (2), it is a predicative [nominal](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/nominal) group forming the second component of an equation linked to the first part by the meaningless copula is; in Elizabeth becomes queen (3), it is a predicative noun linked with the subject by the meaningful copula becomes; in The captain falls sick (4), it is a predicative adjective; and in Nothing passes unobserved (5), it is a predicative past participle.

| **Simple sentences—first pattern** | | |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **subject** | **verb** | **complement** |
| **1. Jane** | knows | this country |
| **2. Science** | is | organized knowledge |
| **3. Elizabeth** | becomes | queen |
| **4. The captain** | falls | sick |
| **5. Nothing** | passes | unobserved |

The table listing sentences (6) through (10) shows the second pattern. In the second main pattern, each sentence contains four components: subject, verb, and two complements, first and second or inner and outer. In John gives Mary a ring (6), inner and outer complements consist of indirect object (without preposition) followed by direct object; in The sailors make John captain (7), these complements are direct object and appositive noun; in You have kept your record clean (8), direct object and predicative adjective; in The driver finds the road flooded (9), direct object and predicative past participle; and in We want you to know (10), direct object and predicative infinitive.

| **Simple sentences—second pattern** | | | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **subject** | **verb** | **inner complement** | **outer complement** |
| **6. John** | gives | Mary | a ring |
| **7. The sailors** | make | John | captain |
| **8. You** | have kept | your record | clean |
| **9. The driver** | finds | the road | flooded |
| **10. We** | want | you | to know |

One can seldom change the [word order](https://www.britannica.com/topic/word-order) in these 10 sentences without doing something else—adding or subtracting a word, changing the meaning. There is no better way of appreciating the importance of word position than by scrutinizing the 10 frames illustrated. If, for instance, in (6) one reverses inner and outer complements, one adds to and says, John gives a ring to Mary; one does not say John gives a ring Mary. Some verbs, such as explain and say, never omit the preposition to before the indirect object: John’s mother explained the details to her son. If, in (10), the inner and outer complements are reversed (e.g., We want to know you), the meaning is changed as well as the structure.

Apart from these fundamental rules of word order, the principles governing the positions of [adjectives](https://www.britannica.com/topic/adjective), adverbs, and prepositions call for brief comment. For attributive adjectives the rule is simple: single words regularly precede the noun, and word groups follow—e.g., an unforgettable experience but an experience never to be forgotten. It is also possible, however, to abandon this principle and switch groups to front position: a never to be forgotten experience. In the ordering of multiple epithets, on the other hand, some tendencies can be seen. Attributes denoting permanent qualities stand nearest their head nouns: long, white beard; six-lane elevated freeway. The order in multiple [attribution](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/attribution) tends to be as follows: determiner; quantifier; adjective of quality; adjective of size, shape, or texture; adjective of colour or material; noun adjunct (if any); head noun. Examples include: that one solid, round, oak dining table; these many fine, large, black racehorses; those countless memorable, long, bright summer evenings.

[Adverbs](https://www.britannica.com/topic/adverb) are more mobile than adjectives. Nevertheless, some principles seem to be at work. Adverbs of frequency tend to come immediately after the [substantive](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/substantive) verb (You are often late), before other verbs (You never know), and between [auxiliaries](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/auxiliaries) and full verbs (You can never tell). In this last instance, however, American differs from British usage. Most Americans would place the adverb before the [auxiliary](https://www.britannica.com/topic/auxiliary) and say You never can tell. (In the title of his play of that name, first performed in 1899, [George Bernard Shaw](https://www.britannica.com/biography/George-Bernard-Shaw) avowedly followed American usage.) Adverbs of time usually occur at the beginning or end of a sentence, seldom in the middle. Particular expressions normally precede more general ones: The bridge opened at 9 o’clock in the morning on October 23 of last year. An adverb of place or direction follows a verb with which it is semantically bound: We arrived home after dark. Other adverbs normally take end positions in the order of manner, place, and time: The bird flew suddenly [manner] from the tree [place] a few minutes ago [time].

In spite of its [etymology](https://www.britannica.com/topic/etymology) (Latin prae-positio “before placing”), a preposition may sometimes follow the noun it governs, as in all the world over, slept the clock round, and the whole place through. This seems a good place to live in seems more natural to most speakers than This seems a good place in which to live. Have you anything to open this can with? is more common than Have you anything with which to open this can?

The above are principles rather than rules, and such structural flexibility makes it easy to find [ambiguity](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ambiguity) in isolated sentences. When walking snipe always approach up wind, a shooting manual directs. The writer intends the reader to understand, “When you are walking to flush snipe, always approach them up against the wind.” John kept the car in the garage can mean either (1) “John retained that car you see in the garage, and sold his other one” or (2) “John housed the car in the garage, and not elsewhere.” Flying planes can be dangerous is [ambiguous](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ambiguous) because it may mean either (1) “Planes that fly can be dangerous” or (2) “It is dangerous to fly planes.” On the other hand, such “ambiguities” almost always disappear when the sentences are seen in [context](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/context).

Two ways in which John gives Mary a ring can be stated in the passive are: (1) A ring is given to Mary by John and (2) Mary is given a ring by John. Concerning this same action, four types of questions can be formulated: (1) Who gives Mary a ring? The information sought is the identity of the giver. (2) Does John give Mary a ring? The question may be answered by yes or no. (3) John gives Mary a ring, doesn’t he? Confirmation is sought of the questioner’s belief that John does in fact give Mary a ring. (4) John gives Mary a ring? This form, differing from the declarative statement only by the question mark in writing, or by rising intonation in speech, calls, like sentences (2) and (3), for a yes or no answer but suggests doubt on the part of the questioner that the action is taking place.

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# [Vocabulary](https://www.britannica.com/topic/vocabulary)

The vocabulary of Modern English is approximately a quarter [Germanic](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Germanic-languages) (Old English, Scandinavian, Dutch, German) and two-thirds Italic or [Romance](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Romance-languages) (especially Latin, French, Spanish, Italian), with [copious](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/copious) and increasing importations from Greek in science and technology and with considerable borrowings from more than 300 other languages. Names of many basic concepts and things come from Old English or Anglo-Saxon: heaven and earth, love and hate, life and death, beginning and end, day and night, month and year, heat and cold, way and path, meadow and stream. Cardinal numerals come from Old English, as do all the ordinal numerals except second (Old English other, which still retains its older meaning in “every other day”). Second comes from Latin secundus “following,” through French second, related to Latin sequi “to follow,” as in English sequence. From Old English come all the personal pronouns (except they, their, and them, which are from Scandinavian), the [auxiliary](https://www.britannica.com/topic/auxiliary) verbs (except the marginal used, which is from French), most simple prepositions, and all conjunctions.

Numerous nouns would be identical whether they came from Old English or [Scandinavian](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Scandinavian-languages): father, mother, brother (but not sister); man, wife; ground, land, tree, grass; summer, winter; cliff, dale. Many verbs would also be identical, especially monosyllabic verbs—bring, come, get, hear, meet, see, set, sit, spin, stand, think. The same is true of the adjectives full and wise; the colour names gray (grey), green, and white; the possessives mine and thine (but not ours and yours); the terms north and west (but not south and east); and the prepositions over and under. Just a few English and Scandinavian doublets coexist in current speech: no and nay, yea and ay, from and fro, rear (i.e., “to bring up”) and raise, shirt and skirt (both related to the adjective short), less and loose. From Scandinavian, law was borrowed early, whence bylaw, meaning village law, and outlaw, meaning “man outside the law.” Husband (hus-bondi) meant “householder,” whether single or married, whereas fellow (fe-lagi) meant one who “lays fee” or shares property with another, and so “partner, shareholder.” From Scandinavian come the common nouns axle (tree), band, birth, bloom, crook, dirt, egg, gait, gap, girth, knife, loan, race, rift, root, score, seat, skill, sky, snare, thrift, and window; the adjectives awkward, flat, happy, ill, loose, rotten, rugged, sly, tight, ugly, weak, and wrong; and many verbs, including call, cast, clasp, clip, crave, die, droop, drown, flit, gape, gasp, glitter, life, rake, rid, scare, scowl, skulk, snub, sprint, thrive, thrust, and want.

The debt of the English language to [French](https://www.britannica.com/topic/French-language) is large. The terms president, representative, legislature, congress, constitution, and parliament are all French. So, too, are duke, marquis, viscount, and baron; but king, queen, lord, lady, earl, and knight are English. City, village, court, palace, manor, mansion, residence, and domicile are French; but town, borough, hall, house, bower, room, and home are English. Comparison between the many pairs of English and French synonyms shows that the former are more human and concrete, the latter more [intellectual](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/intellectual) and abstract; e.g., the terms freedom and liberty, friendship and amity, hatred and enmity, love and affection, likelihood and probability, truth and veracity, lying and mendacity. The superiority of French cooking is duly recognized by the adoption of such culinary terms as boil, broil, fry, grill, roast, souse, and toast. Breakfast is English, but dinner and supper are French. Hunt is English, but chase, quarry, scent, and track are French. Craftsmen bear names of English origin: baker, builder, fisher (man), hedger, miller, shepherd, shoemaker, wainwright, and weaver, or webber. Names of skilled artisans, however, are French: carpenter, draper, haberdasher, joiner, mason, painter, plumber, and tailor. Many terms relating to [dress](https://www.britannica.com/topic/dress-clothing) and [fashion](https://www.britannica.com/topic/fashion-society), [cuisine](https://www.britannica.com/topic/cuisine) and viniculture, politics and [diplomacy](https://www.britannica.com/topic/diplomacy), drama and [literature](https://www.britannica.com/art/literature), [art](https://www.britannica.com/art/visual-arts) and [ballet](https://www.britannica.com/art/ballet) come from French.

In the spheres of [science](https://www.britannica.com/science/science) and [technology](https://www.britannica.com/technology/technology) many terms come from Classical Greek through French or directly from [Greek](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Greek-language). Pioneers in [research and development](https://www.britannica.com/topic/research-and-development) now regard Greek as a kind of inexhaustible quarry from which they can draw linguistic material at will. By prefixing the Greek adverb *tēle* “far away, distant” to the existing [compound](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/compound) *photography,* “light writing,” they create the precise (though today rarely used) term *telephotography* to denote the photographing of distant objects by means of a special lens, known as a *telephoto lens*. By inserting the prefix *micro-* “small” into this same compound, they make the new term *photomicrography,* denoting the electronic photographing of [bacteria](https://www.britannica.com/science/bacteria) and [viruses](https://www.britannica.com/science/virus). Such neo-Hellenic derivatives would probably have been unintelligible to [Plato](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Plato) and [Aristotle](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Aristotle). Many Greek [compounds](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/compounds) and derivatives have [Latin](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Latin-language) equivalents with slight or considerable differentiations in meaning (*see* table).

| **Equivalent compounds and derivatives\*** | |
| --- | --- |
| **nouns from the Greek** | **nouns from the Latin** |
| \*The italicized suffixes -al, -escent, and -ous, attached to some of the Greek adjectives, are of Latin origin. | |
| **dys-troph-y** | mal-nutr-it-ion |
| **hypo-sta-sis** | sub-stan-ce |
| **hypo-the-sis** | sup-pos-it-ion |
| **meta-morph-o-sis** | trans-form-at-ion |
| **meta-phor** | trans-fer |
| **meta-the-sis** | trans-pos-it-ion |
| **peri-pher-y** | circum-fer-en-ce |
| **peri-phra-sis** | circum-loc-ut-ion |
| **sym-path-y** | com-pass-ion |
| **syn-drom-e** | con-curr-en-ce |
| **syn-op-sis** | con-spect-us |
| **syn-the-sis** | com-pos-it-ion |
| **sy-zyg-y** | con-junc-t-ion |
| **adjectives from the Greek** | **adjectives from the Latin** |
| **dia-phan-ous** | trans-par-ent |
| **hyper-aesth-et-ic** | super-sens-it-ive |
| **hyper-phys-ic-al** | super-nat-ur-al |
| **hypo-derm-ic** | sub-cut-an-eous |
| **hypo-ge-al** | sub-terr-an-ean |
| **melan-chol-ic** | atra-bil-ious |
| **mono-morph-ic** | uni-form |
| **oxy-phyll-ous** | acut-i-fol-i-ate |
| **peri-pat-et-ic** | circum-amb-ul-at-ory |
| **phos-phor-escent** | lumin-i-fer-ous |
| **poly-glott-al** | multi-lingu-al |
| **sphen-oid** | cunei-form |
| **syn-chron-ic** | con-temp-or-ary |

At first sight it might appear that some of these equivalents, such as *metamorphosis* (from the Greek) and *transformation* (from the Latin), are sufficiently synonymous to make one or the other [redundant](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/redundant). In fact, however, *metamorphosis* is more technical and therefore more restricted than *transformation*. In mythology, *metamorphosis* signifies a magical shape changing; in nature it denotes a postembryonic development such as that of a [tadpole](https://www.britannica.com/science/tadpole) into a [frog](https://www.britannica.com/animal/frog), a [cocoon](https://www.britannica.com/science/cocoon-biology) into a silkworm, or a chrysalis into a [butterfly](https://www.britannica.com/animal/butterfly-insect). *Transformation*, on the other hand, means any kind of change from one state to another.

Ever since the 12th century, when merchants from the [Netherlands](https://www.britannica.com/place/Netherlands) made homes in [East Anglia](https://www.britannica.com/place/East-Anglia), [Dutch](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Dutch-language) words have infiltrated into Midland speech. For centuries a form of [Low German](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Low-German-language) was used by seafaring men in [North Sea](https://www.britannica.com/place/North-Sea) ports. Old nautical terms still in use include *buoy, deck, dock, freebooter, hoist, leak, pump, skipper,* and *yacht*. The Dutch in [New Amsterdam](https://www.britannica.com/place/New-Amsterdam) (later New York) and [adjacent](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/adjacent) settlements gave the words *boss, cookie, dope, snoop,* and *waffle* to American speech. The Dutch in [Cape Province](https://www.britannica.com/place/Cape-Province) gave the terms *apartheid, commandeer, commando, spoor,* and *trek* to South African speech.

The contribution of [High German](https://www.britannica.com/topic/High-German-language) has been on a different level. In the 18th and 19th centuries it lay in technicalities of [geology](https://www.britannica.com/science/geology) and [mineralogy](https://www.britannica.com/science/mineralogy) and in abstractions relating to [literature](https://www.britannica.com/art/literature), [philosophy](https://www.britannica.com/topic/philosophy), and [psychology](https://www.britannica.com/science/psychology). In the 20th century this contribution was sometimes indirect. *Unclear* and *meaningful* echoed German *unklar* and *bedeutungsvoll*, or *sinnvoll*. *Ring road* (a British term applied to roads encircling cities or parts of cities) translated *Ringstrasse*; *round trip* came from *Rundfahrt*; and *the turn of the century* from *die Jahrhundertwende*. The terms *classless society, inferiority complex,* and *wishful thinking* echoed *die klassenlose Gesellschaft, der Minderwertigkeitskomplex*, and *das Wunschdenken*.

Along with the rest of the Western world, English has accepted [Italian](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Italian-language) as the language of [music](https://www.britannica.com/art/music). The names of voices, parts, performers, instruments, forms of [composition](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/composition), and technical directions are all Italian. Many of the latter—*allegro, andante, cantabile, crescendo, diminuendo, legato, maestoso, obbligato, pizzicato, staccato,* and *vibrato*—are also used metaphorically. In [architecture](https://www.britannica.com/topic/architecture), the terms *belvedere, corridor, cupola, grotto, pedestal, pergola, piazza, pilaster,* and *rotunda* are accepted; in [literature](https://www.britannica.com/art/literature), *burlesque, canto, extravaganza, stanza,* and many more are used.

From [Spanish](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Spanish-language), English has acquired the words *armada, cannibal, cigar, galleon, guerrilla, matador, mosquito, quadroon, tornado,* and *vanilla*, some of these loanwords going back to the 16th century, when sea dogs encountered hidalgos on the [high seas](https://www.britannica.com/topic/high-seas). Many names of animals and plants have entered English from [indigenous](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/indigenous) languages through Spanish: *potato* through Spanish *patata* from [Taino](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Taino) *batata*, and *tomato* through Spanish *tomate* from [Nahuatl](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Nahuatl-language) *tomatl*. Other words have entered from [Latin America](https://www.britannica.com/place/Latin-America) by way of [Texas](https://www.britannica.com/place/Texas-state), [New Mexico](https://www.britannica.com/place/New-Mexico), [Arizona](https://www.britannica.com/place/Arizona-state), and [California](https://www.britannica.com/place/California-state); e.g., such words as *canyon, cigar, estancia, lasso, mustang, pueblo,* and *rodeo*. Some have gathered new connotations: *bonanza*, originally denoting “goodness,” came through miners’ slang to mean “spectacular windfall, prosperity”; *mañana*, “tomorrow,” acquired an undertone of mysterious unpredictability.

From [Arabic](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Arabic-language) through European Spanish, through French from Spanish, through [Latin](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Latin-language), or occasionally through Greek, English has obtained the terms *alchemy, alcohol, alembic, algebra, alkali, almanac, arsenal, assassin, attar, azimuth, cipher, elixir, mosque, nadir, naphtha, sugar, syrup, zenith,* and *zero*. From Egyptian Arabic, English has borrowed the term *loofah* (also spelled *luffa*). From [Hebrew](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Hebrew-language), directly or by way of [Vulgate](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Vulgate) Latin, come the terms *amen, cherub, hallelujah, manna, messiah, pharisee, rabbi, sabbath,* and *seraph*; *jubilee, leviathan,* and *shibboleth*; and, more recently, *kosher* and *kibbutz*.

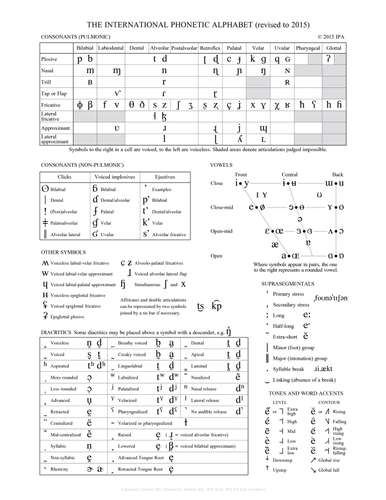
English has freely adopted and adapted words from many other languages, acquiring them sometimes directly and sometimes by [devious](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/devious) routes. Each word has its own history. The following lists indicate the origins of a number of English words:

* [Hindi](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Hindi-language)—*nabob, guru, sahib, maharajah, mahatma, pundit, punch* (drink), *juggernaut, cushy, jungle, thug, cheetah, shampoo, chit, dungaree, pucka, gymkhana, mantra, loot, pajamas, dinghy, polo*
* [Tamil](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Tamil-language)—*pariah, curry, catamaran, mulligatawny*
* [Welsh](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Welsh-language)—*flannel, coracle, cromlech, penguin, eisteddfod*
* [Cornish](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Cornish-language)—*gull, brill, dolmen*
* Gaelic and [Irish](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Irish-language)—*shamrock, brogue, leprechaun, ogham, Tory, galore, blarney, hooligan, clan, claymore, bog, plaid, slogan, sporran, cairn, whisky, pibroch*
* [Persian](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Persian-language)—*paradise, divan, purdah, lilac, bazaar, shah, caravan, chess, salamander, taffeta, shawl, khaki*
* [Breton](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Breton-language)—*menhir*
* [Norwegian](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Norwegian-language)—*ski, ombudsman*
* [Finnish](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Finnish-language)—*sauna*
* [Russian](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Russian-language)—*kvass, ruble, tsar, verst, mammoth, ukase, astrakhan, vodka, samovar, tundra* (from [Sami](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Sami-language)), *troika, pogrom, duma, soviet, bolshevik, intelligentsia* (from [Latin](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Latin-language) through [Polish](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Polish-language)), *borscht, balalaika, sputnik, soyuz, salyut, lunokhod*
* Polish—*mazurka*
* [Czech](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Czech-language)—*robot*
* [Hungarian](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Hungarian-language)—*goulash, paprika*
* [Turkish](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Turkish-language)—*janissary, turban, coffee, kiosk, caviar, pasha, odalisque, fez, bosh*
* [Chinese](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Chinese-languages)—*tea* (Amoy), *sampan*, *ketchup*
* [Japanese](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Japanese-language)—*shogun, kimono, mikado, tycoon, hara-kiri, gobang, judo, jujitsu, bushido, samurai, banzai, tsunami, satsuma, Noh* (the dance drama), *karate, Kabuki*
* Malay—*ketchup, sago, bamboo, junk, amuck, orangutan, compound* (fenced area), *raffia*
* languages of the Aboriginal peoples and [Torres Strait Islander peoples](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Torres-Strait-Islander-people) of Australia—*kangaroo* (Guugu Yimidhirr), *corroboree, wallaby, wombat, boomerang, koala* (Dharuk), *budgerigar* (Yuwaalaraay)
* [Polynesian](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Polynesian-languages)—*taboo* (Tongan), *tattoo* (Tahitian)
* Hawaiian—*ukulele*
* Kongo—*chimpanzee*
* Bantu—*gumbo*
* Zulu—*impala, mamba*
* [Inuit](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Inuit-language)—*kayak, igloo, anorak*
* [Yupik](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Yupik-language)—*mukluk*
* [Algonquian](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Algonquian-languages)—*totem*
* [Nahuatl](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Nahuatl-language)—*mescal*
* Taino—*hammock, hurricane, tobacco, maize*
* Arawak and Carib—*iguana*
* [Portuguese](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Portuguese-language)—*marmalade, flamingo, molasses, veranda, port* (wine), *dodo*
* [Basque](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Basque-language)—*bizarre*

[**Orthography**](https://www.britannica.com/topic/orthography)

The [Latin alphabet](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Latin-alphabet) originally had 20 letters, the present English [alphabet](https://www.britannica.com/topic/alphabet-writing) minus [J](https://www.britannica.com/topic/J-letter), [K](https://www.britannica.com/topic/K-letter), V, W, Y, and Z. The Romans themselves added K for use in [abbreviations](https://www.britannica.com/topic/abbreviation) and Y and Z in words transcribed from [Greek](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Greek-alphabet). After its adoption by the English, this 23-letter [alphabet](https://www.britannica.com/topic/alphabet-writing) developed W as a ligatured doubling of U and later J and V as consonantal variants of [I](https://www.britannica.com/topic/I-letter) and U. The resultant alphabet of 26 letters has both uppercase, or capital, and lowercase, or small, letters.

English spelling is based for the most part on that of the 15th century, but pronunciation has changed considerably since then, especially that of long [vowels](https://www.britannica.com/topic/vowel) and [diphthongs](https://www.britannica.com/topic/diphthong). The extensive change in the pronunciation of vowels, known as the [Great Vowel Shift](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Great-Vowel-Shift), affected all of [Geoffrey Chaucer](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Geoffrey-Chaucer)’s seven long vowels, and for centuries spelling remained untidy. If the meaning of the message was clear, the spelling of individual words seemed unimportant. In the 17th century compositors began to adopt fixed spellings for practical reasons, and in the order-loving 18th century uniformity became more and more fashionable. Since [Samuel Johnson](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Samuel-Johnson)’s [*Dictionary of the English Language*](https://www.britannica.com/topic/A-Dictionary-of-the-English-Language-by-Johnson) (1755), orthography has remained fairly stable. Numerous changes, such as *music* for *musick* (*c.* 1880) and *fantasy* for *phantasy* (*c.* 1920), have been accepted, but spelling has nevertheless continued to be in part unphonetic. Attempts have been made at reform. Indeed, every century has had its reformers since the 13th, when an Augustinian canon named [Orm](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Orm) devised his own method of [differentiating](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/differentiating) short vowels from long by doubling the succeeding consonants or, when this was not [feasible](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/feasible), by marking short vowels with a superimposed breve mark (˘). [William Caxton](https://www.britannica.com/biography/William-Caxton), who set up his wooden [printing press](https://www.britannica.com/technology/printing-press) at [Westminster](https://www.britannica.com/place/Westminster-Colorado) in 1476, was much concerned with spelling problems throughout his working life. [Noah Webster](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Noah-Webster-American-lexicographer) produced his *Spelling Book*, in 1783, as a [precursor](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/precursor) to the first edition (1828) of his [*American Dictionary of the English Language*](https://www.britannica.com/topic/An-American-Dictionary-of-the-English-Language). The 20th century produced many [zealous](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/zealous) reformers. Three systems, supplementary to traditional spelling, were proposed for different purposes: (1) the [Initial Teaching (Augmented Roman) Alphabet](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Initial-Teaching-Alphabet) ([ITA](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Initial-Teaching-Alphabet)) of 44 letters used by some educationists in the 1970s and ’80s in the teaching of children under age seven; (2) the Shaw alphabet of 48 letters, designed in the implementation of the will of [George Bernard Shaw](https://www.britannica.com/biography/George-Bernard-Shaw); and (3) the [International Phonetic Alphabet](https://www.britannica.com/topic/International-Phonetic-Alphabet) (IPA), constructed on the basis of one symbol for one individual sound and used by many trained linguists. Countless other systems have been worked out from time to time, such as R.E. Zachrisson’s “Anglic” (1930) and Axel Wijk’s *Regularized English* (1959).

[](https://cdn.britannica.com/74/124774-050-EE01F0A9/International-Phonetic-Alphabet-chart.jpg)

**International Phonetic Alphabet**The International Phonetic Alphabet chart.International Phonetic Association, Department of Linguistics, University of Victoria, Victoria, British Columbia, Canada

Drastic reform remains impracticable, undesirable, and unlikely. This is because there is no longer one [criterion](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/criterion) of correct pronunciation but several standards throughout the world; regional standards are themselves not static, but changing with each new generation; and, if spelling were changed drastically, all the [books](https://www.britannica.com/topic/book-publication) in English in the world’s public and private [libraries](https://www.britannica.com/topic/library) would become inaccessible to readers without special study. In the days when one country “owned” the English language, reform was feasible—and [Noah Webster](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Noah-Webster-American-lexicographer)’s proposals for American English did indeed have some success—but today, when English is so widespread that no country can be said to own it, agreement on simplification is inconceivable.

[](https://subscription.britannica.com/subscribe?partnerCode=BP_House_USD_D)

# Historical Background

Among highlights in the history of the English [language](https://www.britannica.com/topic/language), the following stand out most clearly: the settlement in [Britain](https://www.britannica.com/place/United-Kingdom) of [Jutes](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Jute-people), [Saxons](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Saxon-people), and [Angles](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Angle-people) in the 5th and 6th centuries; the arrival of [St. Augustine](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Saint-Augustine) in 597 and the subsequent conversion of England to Latin Christianity; the [Viking](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Viking-people) invasions of the 9th century; the [Norman Conquest](https://www.britannica.com/event/Norman-Conquest) of 1066; the Statute of Pleading in 1362 (this required that court proceedings be conducted in English); the setting up of [William Caxton](https://www.britannica.com/biography/William-Caxton)’s [printing press](https://www.britannica.com/technology/printing-press) at Westminster in 1476; the full flowering of the [Renaissance](https://www.britannica.com/event/Renaissance) in the 16th century; the publishing of the [King James Bible](https://www.britannica.com/topic/King-James-Version) in 1611; the completion of [Samuel Johnson](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Samuel-Johnson)’s [Dictionary](https://www.britannica.com/topic/A-Dictionary-of-the-English-Language-by-Johnson) of 1755; and the expansion to [North America](https://www.britannica.com/place/North-America) and [South Africa](https://www.britannica.com/place/South-Africa) in the 17th century and to [India](https://www.britannica.com/place/India), [Australia](https://www.britannica.com/place/Australia), and [New Zealand](https://www.britannica.com/place/New-Zealand) in the 18th.

[**Old English**](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Old-English-language)

The [Jutes](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Jute-people), [Angles](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Angle-people), and [Saxons](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Saxon-people) lived in [Jutland](https://www.britannica.com/place/Jutland), [Schleswig](https://www.britannica.com/place/Schleswig-historical-region-and-duchy-Europe), and [Holstein](https://www.britannica.com/place/Holstein), respectively, before settling in Britain. According to the [Venerable Bede](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Saint-Bede-the-Venerable), the first historian of the English people, the first Jutes, [Hengist and Horsa](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Hengist), landed at Ebbsfleet in the [Isle of Thanet](https://www.britannica.com/place/Isle-of-Thanet) in 449; and the Jutes later settled in [Kent](https://www.britannica.com/place/Kent-historical-kingdom-England), southern Hampshire, and the [Isle of Wight](https://www.britannica.com/place/Isle-of-Wight). The Saxons occupied the rest of England south of the Thames, as well as modern [Middlesex](https://www.britannica.com/place/Middlesex-historical-county) and [Essex](https://www.britannica.com/place/Essex-Anglo-Saxon-kingdom-England). The Angles eventually took the remainder of England as far north as the Firth of Forth, including the future Edinburgh and the [Scottish Lowlands](https://www.britannica.com/place/Lowlands-region-Scotland). In both Latin and Common Germanic the Angles’ name was *Angli*, later mutated in Old English to *Engle* (nominative) and *Engla* (genitive). *Engla land* designated the home of all three tribes collectively, and both King [Alfred](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Alfred-king-of-Wessex) (known as Alfred the Great) and Abbot [Aelfric](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Aelfric-Anglo-Saxon-scholar), author and grammarian, subsequently referred to their speech as Englisc. Nevertheless, all the evidence indicates that Jutes, Angles, and Saxons retained their distinctive [dialects](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/dialects).

The River [Humber](https://www.britannica.com/place/River-Humber) was an important boundary, and the Anglian-speaking region developed two speech groups: to the north of the river, [Northumbrian](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Northumbrian), and, to the south, Southumbrian, usually referred to as Mercian. There were thus four dialects: Northumbrian, Mercian, [West Saxon](https://www.britannica.com/topic/West-Saxon-language), and Kentish. In the 8th century, the Northumbrian speech group led in literature and [culture](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/culture), but that leadership was destroyed by the Viking invaders, who sacked [Lindisfarne](https://www.britannica.com/place/Holy-Island-England), an island near the Northumbrian mainland, in 793. They landed in strength in 865. The first raiders were Danes, but they were later joined by Norwegians from [Ireland](https://www.britannica.com/place/Ireland) and the [Western Isles](https://www.britannica.com/place/Western-Isles) who settled in modern [Cumberland](https://www.britannica.com/place/Cumberland-historical-county-England), [Westmorland](https://www.britannica.com/place/Westmorland), northwest [Yorkshire](https://www.britannica.com/place/Yorkshire-former-county-England), [Lancashire](https://www.britannica.com/place/Lancashire-county-England), north [Cheshire](https://www.britannica.com/place/Cheshire-county-England), and the [Isle of Man](https://www.britannica.com/place/Isle-of-Man). In the 9th century, as a result of the Norwegian invasions, cultural leadership passed from Northumbria to Wessex. During King Alfred’s reign, in the last three decades of the 9th century, [Winchester](https://www.britannica.com/place/Winchester-England) became the chief centre of learning. There the Parker Chronicle (a manuscript of the [Anglo-Saxon Chronicle](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Anglo-Saxon-Chronicle)) was written; there the Latin works of the priest and historian [Paulus Orosius](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Paulus-Orosius), [St. Augustine](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Saint-Augustine), St. Gregory, and the Venerable Bede were translated; and there the native poetry of Northumbria and Mercia was transcribed into the West Saxon [dialect](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/dialect). This resulted in West Saxon’s becoming “standard Old English.” About a century later, when [Aelfric](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Aelfric-Anglo-Saxon-scholar) wrote his lucid and mature prose at Winchester, Cerne Abbas, and Eynsham, the [hegemony](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/hegemony) of Wessex was strengthened.

[](https://cdn.britannica.com/15/50215-050-51C2A696/distribution-Old-English-dialects.jpg)

**Old English dialects: distribution**The distribution of Old English dialects.*Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.*

In standard Old English, [adjectives](https://www.britannica.com/topic/adjective), nouns, pronouns, and verbs were fully inflected. Nouns were inflected for four cases (nominative, genitive, dative, and accusative) in singular and plural. Five nouns of first kinship—*faeder, mōdor, brōthor, sweostor*, and *dohtor* (“father,” “mother,” “brother,” “sister,” and “daughter,” respectively)—had their own set of inflections. There were 25 nouns such as *mon, men* (“man,” “men”) with mutated, or umlauted, stems. Adjectives had strong and weak declensions, the strong showing a mixture of noun and pronoun endings and the weak following the pattern of weak nouns. Personal, possessive, demonstrative, interrogative, indefinite, and relative pronouns had full inflections. The pronouns of the 1st and 2nd persons still had distinctive dual forms:

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| *iċ* | “I” | *wit* | “we two” | *wē* | “we” |
| *thū (þū)* | “thou” | *ġit* | “you two” | *ġē* | “you” |

There were two demonstratives: *sē, sēo, thaet*, meaning “that,” and *thes, thēos, this*, meaning “this,” but no articles, the definite article being expressed by use of the demonstrative for “that” or not expressed at all. Thus, “the good man” was *sē gōda mon* or plain *gōd mon*. The function of the indefinite article was performed by the numeral *ān* “one” in *ān mon* “a man,” by the adjective-pronoun *sum* in *sum mon* “a (certain) man,” or not expressed, as in *thū eart gōd mon* “you are a good man.”

Verbs had two tenses only (present-future and past), three moods (indicative, subjunctive, and imperative), two numbers (singular and plural), and three persons (1st, 2nd, and 3rd). There were two classes of verb stems. (A verb stem is that part of a verb to which inflectional changes—changes indicating [tense](https://www.britannica.com/topic/tense), mood, number, etc.—are added.) One type of verb stem, called vocalic because an internal vowel shows variations, is exemplified by the verb for “sing”: singan, singth, sang, sungon, gesungen. The word for “deem” is an example of the other, called consonantal: dēman, dēmth, dēmde, dēmdon, gedēmed. Such verbs are called strong and weak, respectively.

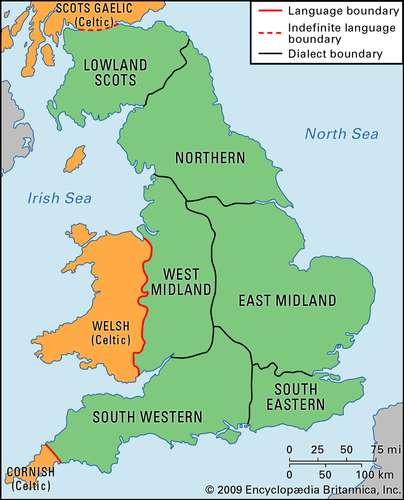
All new verbs, whether derived from existing verbs or from nouns, belonged to the consonantal type. Some verbs of great frequency (antecedents of the modern words be, shall, will, do, go, can, may, and so on) had their own peculiar patterns of inflections.

Grammatical gender persisted throughout the Old English period. Just as Germans now say der Fuss, die Hand, and das Auge (masculine, feminine, and neuter terms for “the foot,” “the hand,” and “the eye”), so, for these same structures, Aelfric said sē fōt, sēo hond, and thaet ēaġe, also masculine, feminine, and neuter. The three words for “woman,” wīfmon, cwene, and wīf, were masculine, feminine, and neuter, respectively. Hors “horse,” sċēap “sheep,” and maeġden “maiden” were all neuter. Eorthe “earth” was feminine, but lond “land” was neuter. Sunne “sun” was feminine, but mōna “moon” was masculine. This simplification of grammatical gender resulted from the fact that the gender of Old English [substantives](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/substantives) was not always indicated by the ending but rather by the terminations of the adjectives and demonstrative pronouns used with the substantives. When these endings were lost, all outward marks of gender disappeared with them. Thus, the weakening of inflections and loss of gender occurred together. In the North, where inflections weakened earlier, the marks of gender likewise disappeared first. They survived in the South as late as the 14th century.

Because of the greater use of inflections in Old English, word order was freer than today. The sequence of subject, verb, and complement was normal, but when there were outer and inner complements the second was put in the dative case after to: Sē biscop hālgode Ēadrēd tō cyninge “The bishop [consecrated](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/consecrated) Edred king.” After an introductory adverb or adverbial phrase the verb generally took second place as in modern German: Nū bydde iċ ān thing “Now I ask [literally, “ask I”] one thing”; Thȳ ilcan gēare gesette Aelfrēd cyning Lundenburg “In that same year Alfred the king occupied London.” Impersonal verbs had no subject expressed. Infinitives constructed with [auxiliary](https://www.britannica.com/topic/auxiliary) verbs were placed at the ends of clauses or sentences: Hīe ne dorston forth bī thære ēa siglan “They dared not sail beyond that river” (siglan is the infinitive); Iċ wolde thās lytlan bōc āwendan “I wanted to translate this little book” (āwendan is the infinitive). The verb usually came last in a dependent clause—e.g., āwrītan wile in gif hwā thās bōc āwrītan wile (gerihte hē hīe be thære bysene) “If anyone wants to copy this book (let him correct his copy by the original).” Prepositions (or postpositions) frequently followed their objects. Negation was often repeated for [emphasis](https://www.britannica.com/topic/stress-linguistics).

# [Middle English](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Middle-English-language)

One result of the [Norman Conquest](https://www.britannica.com/event/Norman-Conquest) of 1066 was to place all four Old English [dialects](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/dialects) more or less on a level. West [Saxon](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Saxon-people) lost its supremacy, and the centre of [culture](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/culture) and learning gradually shifted from Winchester to [London](https://www.britannica.com/place/London). The old Northumbrian [dialect](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/dialect) became divided into Scottish and Northern, although little is known of either of these divisions before the end of the 13th century. The old Mercian dialect was split into East and West Midland. West Saxon became slightly diminished in area and was more appropriately named the [South Western](https://www.britannica.com/topic/South-Western) dialect. The Kentish dialect was considerably extended and was called [South Eastern](https://www.britannica.com/topic/South-Eastern) accordingly. All five Middle English dialects (Northern, West Midland, East Midland, South Western, and South Eastern) went their own ways and developed their own characteristics. The so-called [Katherine Group](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Katherine-Group) of writings (c. 1180–1210), associated with [Hereford](https://www.britannica.com/place/Hereford-England), a town not far from the Welsh border, adhered most closely to native traditions, and there is something to be said for regarding this West Midland dialect, least disturbed by French and Scandinavian intrusions, as a kind of Standard English in the High Middle Ages.

[](https://cdn.britannica.com/13/50213-050-DADDA731/distribution-Middle-English-dialects.jpg)

**Middle English dialects**The distribution of Middle English dialects.Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.

Another outcome of the Norman Conquest was to change the writing of English from the clear and easily readable insular hand of Irish origin to the delicate [Carolingian script](https://www.britannica.com/art/Carolingian-minuscule) then in use on the Continent. With the change in appearance came a change in spelling. Norman scribes wrote Old English y as u, ȳ as ui, ū as ou (ow when final). Thus, mycel (“much”) appeared as muchel, fȳr (“fire”) as fuir, hūs (“house”) as hous, and hū (“how”) as how. For the sake of clarity (i.e., legibility) u was often written o before and after m, n, u, v, and w; and i was sometimes written y before and after m and n. So sunu (“son”) appeared as sone and him (“him”) as hym. Old English cw was changed to qu; hw to wh, qu, or quh; ċ to ch or tch; sċ to sh; -ċġ- to -gg-; and -ht to ght. So Old English cwēn appeared as queen; hwaet as what, quat, or quhat; dīċ as ditch; sċip as ship; secge as segge; and miht as might.

For the first century after the Conquest, most loanwords came from [Normandy](https://www.britannica.com/place/Normandy) and [Picardy](https://www.britannica.com/place/Picardy), but with the extension south to the Pyrenees of the [Angevin empire](https://www.britannica.com/place/Angevin-empire) of [Henry II](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Henry-II-king-of-England) (reigned 1154–89), other dialects, especially Central [French](https://www.britannica.com/topic/French-language), or [Francien](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Francien-dialect), contributed to the speech of the [aristocracy](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/aristocracy). As a result, Modern English acquired the forms canal, catch, leal, real, reward, wage, warden, and warrant from Norman French side by side with the corresponding forms channel, chase, loyal, royal, regard, gage, guardian, and guarantee, from Francien. King [John](https://www.britannica.com/biography/John-king-of-England) lost Normandy in 1204. With the increasing power of the Capetian kings of Paris, Francien gradually predominated. Meanwhile, Latin stood intact as the [language](https://www.britannica.com/topic/language) of learning. For three centuries, therefore, the literature of England was trilingual. Ancrene Riwle, for instance, a guide or rule (riwle) of rare quality for recluses or anchorites (ancren), was [disseminated](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/disseminated) in all three languages.

The sounds of the native speech changed slowly. Even in late Old English short vowels had been lengthened before ld, rd, mb, and nd, and long vowels had been shortened before all other consonant groups and before double consonants. In early Middle English short vowels of whatever origin were lengthened in the open stressed syllables of disyllabic words. An open [syllable](https://www.britannica.com/topic/syllable) is one ending in a vowel. Both syllables in Old English nama “name,” mete “meat, food,” nosu “nose,” wicu “week,” and duru “door” were short, and the first syllables, being stressed, were lengthened to nāme, mēte, nōse, wēke, and dōre in the 13th and 14th centuries. A similar change occurred in 4th-century Latin, in 13th-century German, and at different times in other languages. The popular notion has arisen that final mute -e in English makes a preceding vowel long; in fact, it is the lengthening of the vowel that has caused e to be lost in pronunciation. On the other hand, Old English long vowels were shortened in the first syllables of trisyllabic words, even when those syllables were open; e.g., hāligdaeg “holy day,” ærende “message, errand,” crīstendōm “Christianity,” and sūtherne “southern” became hǒliday (Northern hăliday), ěrrende, chrǐstendom, and sǔtherne. This principle still operates in current English. Compare, for example, trisyllabic derivatives such as the words chastity, criminal, fabulous, gradual, gravity, linear, national, ominous, sanity, and tabulate with the simple nouns and adjectives chaste, crime, fable, grade, grave, line, nation, omen, sane, and table.

There were significant variations in verb inflections in the Northern, Midland, and Southern dialects, as shown in the table comparing the word sing across these dialects. The Northern infinitive was already one syllable (sing rather than the Old English singan), whereas the past participle -en [inflection](https://www.britannica.com/topic/inflection) of Old English was strictly kept. These apparently contradictory features can be attributed entirely to Scandinavian, in which the final -n of the infinitive was lost early in singa, and the final -n of the past participle was doubled in sunginn. The Northern unmutated present participle in -and was also of Scandinavian origin. Old English mutated -ende (German -end) in the present participle had already become -inde in late West Saxon, and it was this Southern -inde that blended with the -ing suffix (German -ung) of nouns of action that had already become near-gerunds in such [compound](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/compound) nouns as athswering “oath swearing” and writingfether “writing feather, pen.” This blending of present participle and gerund was further helped by the fact that Anglo-Norman and French -ant was itself a coalescence of Latin present participles in -antem, -entem, and Latin gerunds in -andum, -endum. The Northern second person singular singis was inherited unchanged from Common Germanic. The final t sound in Midland -est and Southern -st was excrescent (added without any etymological reason), comparable with the final t in modern amidst and amongst from older amiddes and amonges. The Northern third-person singular singis had a quite different origin. Like the singis of the plural, it resulted almost casually from an inadvertent retraction of the tongue in enunciation from an interdental -th sound to postdental -s. In Modern English the form singeth survives as a poetic archaism. [Shakespeare](https://www.britannica.com/biography/William-Shakespeare) used both -eth and -s endings (“It [mercy] blesseth him that gives and him that takes,” The Merchant of Venice). The Midland present plural inflection -en was taken from the subjunctive. The past participle prefix y- developed from the Old English perfective prefix ge-.

| **Variations in verb inflections** | | | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Northern** | **Midland** | **Southern** |
| **infinitive** | sing | singe(n) | singen |
| **present participle** | singand | singende | singinde |
| **present singular** |  |  |  |
| **1st person** | singe | singe | singe |
| **2nd person** | singis | singes(t) | singst |
| **3rd person** | singis | singeth-es | singeth |
| **present plural** | singis | singen | singeth |
| **past participle** | sungen | (y)sunge(n) | ysunge |

[Chaucer](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Geoffrey-Chaucer), who was born and died in London, spoke a dialect that was basically East Midland. Compared with his contemporaries, he was remarkably modern in his use of language. He was in his early 20s when the Statute of Pleading (1362) was passed, by the terms of which all court proceedings were henceforth to be conducted in English, though “enrolled in Latin.” Chaucer himself used four languages; he read Latin (Classical and Medieval) and spoke French and Italian on his travels. For his own literary work he deliberately chose English.

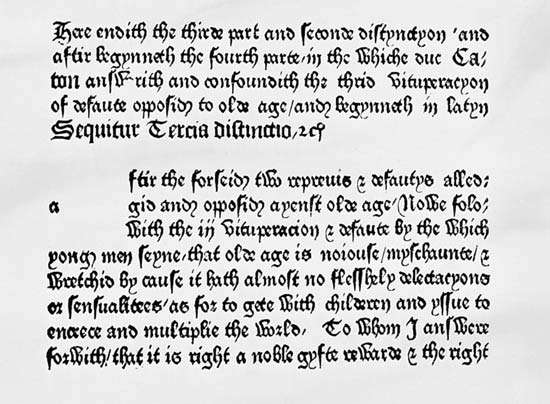
## Transition from Middle English to Early Modern English

The death of Chaucer at the close of the century (1400) marked the beginning of the period of transition from Middle English to the Early Modern English stage. The Early Modern English period is regarded by many scholars as beginning about 1500 and terminating with the return of the monarchy (celebrated in [John Dryden](https://www.britannica.com/biography/John-Dryden)’s poem Astraea Redux) in 1660. The three outstanding developments of the 15th century were the rise of London English, the invention of [printing](https://www.britannica.com/topic/printing-publishing), and the spread of the new learning associated with the [Renaissance](https://www.britannica.com/event/Renaissance).

Although the population of London in 1400 was only about 40,000, it was by far the largest city in [England](https://www.britannica.com/place/England). [York](https://www.britannica.com/place/York-England) came second, followed by [Bristol](https://www.britannica.com/place/Bristol-England), [Coventry](https://www.britannica.com/place/Coventry-England), [Plymouth](https://www.britannica.com/place/Plymouth-England), and [Norwich](https://www.britannica.com/place/Norwich-England). The [Midlands](https://www.britannica.com/place/Midlands) and [East Anglia](https://www.britannica.com/place/East-Anglia), the most densely peopled parts of England, supplied London with streams of young immigrants. The speech of the capital was mixed, and it was changing. The seven long vowels of Chaucer’s speech had already begun to shift. [Incipient](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/Incipient) [diphthongization](https://www.britannica.com/topic/diphthong) of high front /i:/ (the ee sound in meet) and high back /u:/ (as in fool) led to instability in the other five long vowels. (Symbols within slash marks are taken from the [International Phonetic Alphabet](https://www.britannica.com/topic/International-Phonetic-Alphabet).) This remarkable event, known as the [Great Vowel Shift](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Great-Vowel-Shift), changed the whole vowel system of London English. As /i:/ and /u:/ became diphthongized to /ai/ (as in bide) and /au/ (as in house) respectively, so the next highest vowels, /e:/ (this sound can be heard in the first part of the [diphthong](https://www.britannica.com/topic/diphthong) in name) and /o:/ (a sound that can be heard in the first part of the diphthong in home), moved up to take their places, and so on. The table shows the vowel shift in London English; every one of the sounds appearing in this table can still be heard somewhere in living English accents.

| **Vowel shifts in London English** | | | | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| \*Expressed in the International Phonetic Alphabet. \*\*Two syllables. | | | | |
| **Chaucer’s spelling** | **Chaucer’s pronunciation\*** | **Shakespeare’s pronunciation\*** | **present pronunciation\*** | **present spelling** |
| **lyf** | li:f | leif | laif | life |
| **deed** | de:d | di:d | di:d | deed |
| **deel** | dɛ:l | de:l | di:l | deal |
| **name** | na:mə\*\* | nɛ:m | neim | name |
| **hoom** | hɔ:m | ho:m | houm | home |
| **mone** | mo:nə\*\* | mu:n | mu:n | moon |
| **hous** | hu:s | hous | haus | house |

When [William Caxton](https://www.britannica.com/biography/William-Caxton) started printing at Westminster in the late summer of 1476, he was painfully aware of the uncertain state of the English language. In his prologues and epilogues to his translations, he made some revealing observations on the problems that he had encountered as translator and editor. At this time, sentence structures were being gradually modified, but many remained untidy. For the first time, nonprofessional scribes, including women, were writing at length.

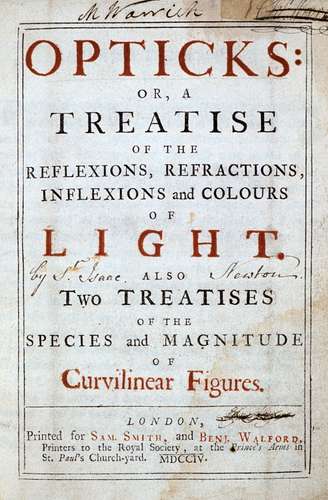
[](https://cdn.britannica.com/48/47248-004-5476C097/Portion-page-edition-Cicero-William-Caxton-Desenectute.jpg)

**William Caxton's Cicero Desenectute**Portion of a page from William Caxton's edition of Cicero's Desenectute, printed at Westminster, England, in 1481.Courtesy of the Newberry Library, Chicago

The revival of classical learning was one aspect of that [Renaissance](https://www.britannica.com/event/Renaissance), or spiritual rebirth, that arose in Italy and spread to France and England. It evoked a new interest in Greek on the part of learned men such as [William Grocyn](https://www.britannica.com/biography/William-Grocyn) and [Thomas Linacre](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Thomas-Linacre), [Sir Thomas More](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Thomas-More-English-humanist-and-statesman), and [Desiderius Erasmus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Erasmus-Dutch-humanist). [John Colet](https://www.britannica.com/biography/John-Colet), dean of St. Paul’s in the first quarter of the 16th century, startled his congregation by expounding the Pauline Epistles of the Christian New Testament as living letters. The deans who had preceded him had known no Greek, because they had found in Latin all that they required. Only a few [medieval](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/medieval) churchmen, such as [Robert Grosseteste](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Robert-Grosseteste), bishop of Lincoln, and the Franciscan [Roger Bacon](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Roger-Bacon), could read Greek with ease. The names of the seven [liberal arts](https://www.britannica.com/topic/liberal-arts) of the medieval curricula (the trivium and the quadrivium), it is true, were all Greek—[grammar](https://www.britannica.com/topic/grammar), [logic](https://www.britannica.com/topic/logic), and [rhetoric](https://www.britannica.com/topic/rhetoric); [arithmetic](https://www.britannica.com/science/arithmetic), [geometry](https://www.britannica.com/science/geometry), [astronomy](https://www.britannica.com/science/astronomy), and [music](https://www.britannica.com/art/music)—but they had come into English by way of French.

Renaissance scholars adopted a liberal attitude to language. They borrowed [Latin](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Latin-language) words through French, or Latin words direct; Greek words through Latin, or Greek words direct. Latin was no longer limited to Church Latin: it embraced all Classical Latin. For a time the whole Latin lexicon became potentially English. Some words, such as consolation and infidel, could have come from either French or Latin. Others, such as the terms abacus, arbitrator, explicit, finis, gratis, imprimis, item, memento, memorandum, neuter, simile, and videlicet, were taken straight from Latin. Words that had already entered the language through French were now borrowed again, so that doublets arose: benison and benediction; blame and blaspheme; chance and cadence; count and compute; dainty and dignity; frail and fragile; poor and pauper; purvey and provide; ray and radius; sever and separate; strait and strict; sure and secure. The Latin equivalents for kingly and lawful have even given rise to triplets; in the forms real, royal, and regal and leal, loyal, and legal, they were imported first from Anglo-Norman, then from Old French, and last from Latin direct.

After the dawn of the 16th century, English prose moved swiftly toward modernity. In 1525 [Lord Berners](https://www.britannica.com/biography/John-Bourchier-2nd-Baron-Berners) completed his translation of [Jean Froissart](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Jean-Froissart)’s Chronicle, and [William Tyndale](https://www.britannica.com/biography/William-Tyndale) translated the New Testament. One-third of the [King James Bible](https://www.britannica.com/topic/King-James-Version) (1611), it has been computed, is worded exactly as Tyndale left it, and between 1525 and 1611 lay the Tudor Golden Age, with its culmination in [William Shakespeare](https://www.britannica.com/biography/William-Shakespeare). Too many writers, to be sure, used “inkhorn terms,” newly coined [ephemeral](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ephemeral) words, and too many vacillated between Latin and English. [Sir Thomas More](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Thomas-More-English-humanist-and-statesman) actually wrote his Utopia in Latin. It was translated into French during his lifetime but not into English until 1551, some years after his death. [Francis Bacon](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Francis-Bacon-Viscount-Saint-Alban) published De dignitate et augmentis scientiarum (On the Dignity and Advancement of Learning, an expansion of his earlier Advancement of Learning) in Latin in 1623. [William Harvey](https://www.britannica.com/biography/William-Harvey) announced his epoch-making discovery of the circulation of the blood in his Latin De Motu Cordis et Sanguinis in Animalibus (1628; On the Motion of the Heart and Blood in Animals). [John Milton](https://www.britannica.com/biography/John-Milton) composed polemical [treatises](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/treatises) in the language of [Cicero](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Cicero). As [Oliver Cromwell](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Oliver-Cromwell)’s secretary, he corresponded in Latin with foreign states. His younger contemporary [Sir Isaac Newton](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Isaac-Newton) lived long enough to bridge the gap. He wrote his Principia (1687) in Latin but his Opticks (1704) in English.

[](https://cdn.britannica.com/99/136299-050-8E43617A/Title-page-Isaac-Newton-edition-Opticks.jpg)

Title page from an edition of Sir Isaac Newton's Opticks.© Photos.com/Jupiterimages

[](https://subscription.britannica.com/subscribe?partnerCode=BP_House_USD_D)

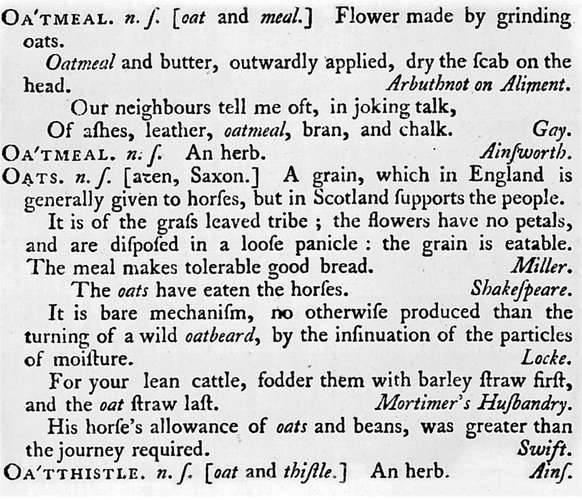
# Restoration period

With the restoration of the monarchy in 1660, writers again looked to France. [John Dryden](https://www.britannica.com/biography/John-Dryden) admired the [Académie Française](https://www.britannica.com/topic/French-Academy) and greatly deplored that the English had “not so much as a tolerable dictionary, or a grammar; so that our language is in a manner barbarous” as compared with elegant French. After the passionate controversies of the [Civil Wars](https://www.britannica.com/event/English-Civil-Wars), this was an age of cool scientific [nationalism](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/nationalism). In 1662 the [Royal Society of London for the Promotion of Natural Knowledge](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Royal-Society) received its charter. Its first members, much concerned with language, appointed a committee of 22 “to improve the English tongue particularly for philosophic purposes.” It included Dryden, the diarist [John Evelyn](https://www.britannica.com/biography/John-Evelyn), Bishop [Thomas Sprat](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Thomas-Sprat), and the poet [Edmund Waller](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Edmund-Waller). Sprat pleaded for “a close, naked, natural way of speaking; positive expressions; clear senses, a native easiness; bringing all things as near the mathematical plainness” as possible. The committee, however, achieved no [tangible](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/tangible) result, and failed in its attempt to found an [authoritative](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/authoritative) arbiter over the English tongue. A second attempt was made in 1712, when [Jonathan Swift](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Jonathan-Swift) addressed an open letter to [Robert Harley, earl of Oxford](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Robert-Harley-1st-earl-of-Oxford), then Lord Treasurer, making “A Proposal for Correcting, Improving, and [Ascertaining](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/Ascertaining) [fixing] the English Tongue.” This letter received some popular support, but its aims were frustrated by a turn in political fortunes. Queen [Anne](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Anne-queen-of-Great-Britain-and-Ireland) died in 1714. Oxford and his fellow Tories, including Swift, lost power. No organized attempt to found a language academy on French lines has ever been made since.

With Dryden and Swift the English language reached its full maturity. Their failure to found an academy was partly counterbalanced by [Samuel Johnson](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Samuel-Johnson) in his Dictionary (published in 1755) and by [Robert Lowth](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Robert-Lowth) in his Grammar (published in 1761).

## Age of Johnson

In the making of his [*Dictionary of the English Language*](https://www.britannica.com/topic/A-Dictionary-of-the-English-Language-by-Johnson), [Samuel Johnson](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Samuel-Johnson) took the best conversation of contemporary London and the normal usage of reputable writers after [Sir Philip Sidney](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Philip-Sidney) (1554–86) as his [criteria](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/criteria). He exemplified the meanings of words by illustrative quotations. Johnson admitted that “he had flattered himself for a while” with “the prospect of fixing our language” but that thereby “he had indulged expectation which neither reason nor experience could justify.” The two-folio work of 1755 was followed in 1756 by a shortened, one-volume version that was widely used for centuries afterward. Revised and enlarged editions of the unabbreviated version were made by Archdeacon Henry John Todd in 1818 and by Robert Gordon Latham in 1866.

[](https://cdn.britannica.com/68/44368-050-B3F85261/detail-Samuel-Johnson-Dictionary-of-the-English.jpg)

It was unfortunate that [Joseph Priestley](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Joseph-Priestley), [Robert Lowth](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Robert-Lowth), James Buchanan, and other 18th-century grammarians (Priestley was perhaps better known as a scientist and theologian) took a narrower view than Johnson on linguistic growth and development. They spent too much time condemning such current “improprieties” as “I had rather not,” “you better go,” “between you and I,” “it is me,” “who is this for?”, “between four walls,” “a third alternative,” “the largest of the two,” “more perfect,” and “quite unique.” Without explanatory comment they banned “you was” outright, although it was in widespread use among educated people (on that ground it was later defended by [Noah Webster](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Noah-Webster-American-lexicographer)). “You was” had, in fact, taken the place of both “thou wast” and “thou wert” as a useful singular equivalent of the accepted plural “you were.”

As the century wore on, grammarians became more numerous and aggressive. They set themselves up as arbiters of correct usage. They compiled manuals that were not only descriptive (stating what people do say) and [prescriptive](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/prescriptive) (stating what they should say) but also proscriptive (stating what they should not say). They regarded Latin as a language superior to English and claimed that Latin embodied universally valid canons of logic. This view was well maintained by Lindley Murray, a native of Pennsylvania who settled in England in the very year (1784) of Johnson’s death. Murray’s English Grammar appeared in 1795, became immensely popular, and went into numerous editions. It was followed by an English Reader (1799) and an English Spelling Book (1804), long favourite textbooks in both Old and [New England](https://www.britannica.com/place/New-England).

## 19th and 20th centuries

In 1857 Richard Chenevix Trench, dean of St. Paul’s, lectured to the Philological Society on the theme, “On some Deficiencies in our English Dictionaries.” His proposals for a new dictionary were [implemented](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/implemented) in 1859, when [Samuel Taylor Coleridge](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Samuel-Taylor-Coleridge)’s grandnephew, Herbert Coleridge, set to work as first editor. He was succeeded by a lawyer named [Frederick James Furnivall](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Frederick-James-Furnivall), who in 1864 founded the Early English Text Society with a view to making all the earlier literature available to historical lexicographers in competent editions. Furnivall was subsequently succeeded as editor by [James A.H. Murray](https://www.britannica.com/biography/James-Murray), who published the first fascicle of A New English Dictionary on Historical Principles in 1884. Later Murray was joined successively by three editors: Henry Bradley, [William Alexander Craigie](https://www.britannica.com/biography/William-Alexander-Craigie), and Charles Talbut Onions. Aside from its Supplements, the completed dictionary itself filled 12 volumes, had over 15,000 pages, contained 414,825 words, and was illustrated by 1,827,306 citations. It sought to represent English in the British Commonwealth and the United States—a fact symbolized by the presentation of first copies in the spring of 1928 to King [George V](https://www.britannica.com/biography/George-V-king-of-United-Kingdom) and President [Calvin Coolidge](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Calvin-Coolidge)—and to record the histories and meanings of all words known to have been in use since 1150. From 1150 to 1500 all five Middle English [dialects](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/dialects), as has been seen, were of equal status. They were therefore all included. After 1500, however, dialectal expressions were not admitted, nor were scientific and technical terms considered not to be in general use. Otherwise, the written vocabulary is well represented. A revised edition of this dictionary, known as [*The Oxford English Dictionary*](https://www.britannica.com/topic/The-Oxford-English-Dictionary), was published in 1933, and a second edition was published in 1989. Online publication of the dictionary’s corpus enabled ongoing revision and expansion.

# Varieties Of English

## British English

The abbreviation RP ([Received Pronunciation](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Received-Pronunciation)) denotes what is traditionally considered the standard accent of people living in London and the southeast of England and of other people elsewhere who speak in this way. RP is the only British accent that has no specific geographical correlate: it is not possible, on hearing someone speak RP, to know which part of the United Kingdom he or she comes from. Though it is traditionally considered a “prestige” accent, RP is not intrinsically superior to other varieties of English; it is itself only one particular accent that has, through the accidents of history, achieved a higher status than others. Although acquiring its unique standing without the aid of any established authority, it was fostered by the public schools (Winchester, Eton, Harrow, Rugby, and so on) and the ancient universities (Oxford and Cambridge). Other varieties of English are well preserved in spite of the leveling influences of film, television, and radio. In several Northern accents, RP /a:/ (the first vowel sound in father) is still pronounced /æ/ (a sound like the a in fat) in words such as laugh, fast, and path; this pronunciation has been carried across the Atlantic into American English.

In the words run, rung, and tongue, the RP pronunciation of the vowel is like the u in but; in some Northern accents it is pronounced like the oo in book. In the words bind, find, and grind, the RP pronunciation of the vowel sound is /ai/, like that in “bide”; in some Northern accents, it is /i/, like the sound in feet. The vowel sound in the words go, home, and know in some Northern accents is /ɔ:/, approximately the sound in law in some American English accents. In parts of [Northumberland](https://www.britannica.com/place/Northumberland-county-England), RP it is still pronounced “hit,” as in Old English. In various Northern accents the definite article the is heard as t, th, or d. In those accents in which it becomes both t and th, t is used before consonants and th before vowels. Thus, one hears t’book but th’apple. When, however, the definite article is reduced to t and the following word begins with t or d, as in t’tail or t’dog, it is replaced by a slight pause as in the RP articulation of the first t in hat trick. The RP /t∫/, the sound of the ch in church, can become k, as in thack (“thatch, roof”) and kirk (“church”). In some Northern [dialects](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/dialects) strong verbs retain the old past-tense singular forms band, brak, fand, spak for standard English forms bound, broke, found, and spoke. Strong verbs also retain the past participle [inflection](https://www.britannica.com/topic/inflection) -en as in comen, shutten, sitten, and getten or gotten for standard English come, shut, sat, and got.

In some Midland accents the diphthongs in throat and stone have been kept apart, whereas in RP they have fallen together. In [Cheshire](https://www.britannica.com/place/Cheshire-county-England), [Derby](https://www.britannica.com/place/Derby-city-and-unitary-authority-England), [Stafford](https://www.britannica.com/place/Stafford-England), and [Warwick](https://www.britannica.com/place/Warwick-England), RP singing is pronounced with a g sounded after the velar nasal sound (as in RP finger). In [Norfolk](https://www.britannica.com/place/Norfolk-county-England) one hears skellington and solintary for skeleton and solitary, showing an intrusive n just as does messenger in RP from French messager, passenger from French passager, and nightingale from Old English nihtegala. Other [East Anglian](https://www.britannica.com/place/East-Anglia) words show consonantal metathesis (switch position), as in singify for signify, and substitution of one liquid or nasal for another, as in chimbly for chimney and synnable for syllable. Hantle for handful shows syncope (disappearance) of an unstressed vowel, partial assimilation of d to t before voiceless f, and subsequent loss of f in a triple consonant group.

In some South Western accents, initial *f* and *s* are often voiced, becoming *v* and *z*. Two words with initial *v* have found their way into RP: *vat* from *fat* and *vixen* from *fixen* (female fox). Another South Western feature is the development of a *d* between *l* or *n* and *r*, as in *parlder* for *parlour* and *carnder* for *corner*. The bilabial [semivowel](https://www.britannica.com/topic/approximant) *w* has developed before *o* in *wold* for *old*, and in *wom* for *home*, illustrating a similar development in RP by which Old English *ān* has become *one*, and Old English *hāl* has come to be spelled *whole*, as compared with Northern *hale*. In some South Western accents *yat* comes from the old singular *geat*, whereas RP *gate* comes from the plural *gatu*. Likewise, *clee* comes from the old nominative *clea*, whereas RP *claw* comes from the oblique cases. The verbs *keel* and *kemb* have developed regularly from Old English *cēlan* “to make cool” and *kemban* “to use a comb,” whereas the corresponding RP verbs *cool* and *comb* come from the adjective and the noun, respectively.

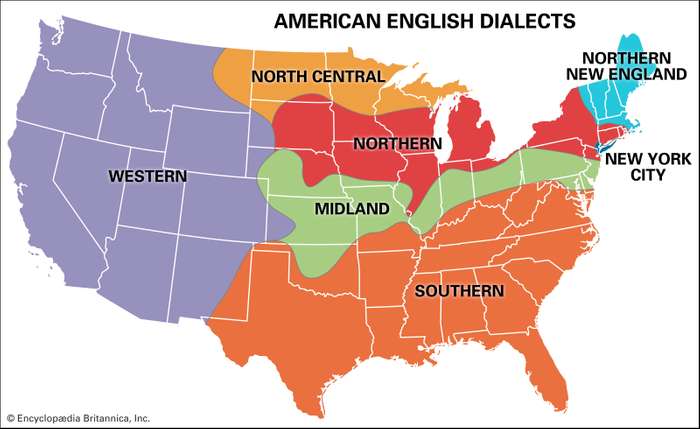
In Wales, people often speak a clear and measured form of English with rising intonations inherited from ancestral [Celtic](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Celtic-languages). They tend to aspirate both plosives (stops) and [fricative](https://www.britannica.com/topic/fricative) consonants very forcibly; thus, *two* is pronounced with an audible puff of breath after the initial *t*, and *while* may be heard with a voiceless /w/.

[Scots](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Scots-language), or [Lowland Scottish](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Scots-language), was once a part of Northern English, but the two dialects began to diverge in the 14th century. Today speakers of Scots trill their *r*’s, shorten vowels, and simplify diphthongs. A few Scots words, such as *bairn, brae, canny, dour,* and *pawky*, have made their way into RP. Scots is not to be confused with [Scottish Gaelic](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Scots-Gaelic-language), a Celtic language still spoken by about 60,000 people (almost all bilingual) mostly in the [Highlands](https://www.britannica.com/place/Highlands-region-Scotland) and the [Western Isles](https://www.britannica.com/place/Western-Isles). Thanks to such writers as [Robert Burns](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Robert-Burns) and [Sir Walter Scott](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Walter-Scott), many Scottish Gaelic words have been preserved in [English literature](https://www.britannica.com/art/English-literature).

[Northern Ireland](https://www.britannica.com/place/Northern-Ireland) has dialects related in part to Scots and in part to the southern Irish [dialect](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/dialect) of English. The influence of the [Irish language](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Irish-language) on the speech of [Dublin](https://www.britannica.com/place/Dublin) is most evident in the [syntax](https://www.britannica.com/topic/syntax) of drama and in the survival of such picturesque expressions as *We are after finishing*, *It’s sorry you will be*, and *James do be cutting corn every day*.

**American and Canadian English**

The dialect regions of the [United States](https://www.britannica.com/place/United-States) are most clearly marked along the Atlantic littoral, where the earlier settlements were made. Three dialects can be defined: Northern, Midland, and Southern. Each has its subdialects.

[](https://cdn.britannica.com/15/195815-050-EAEA59DA/Map-dialect-regions.jpg)

The Northern dialect is spoken in [New England](https://www.britannica.com/place/New-England). Its six chief subdialects [comprise](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/comprise) northeastern New England ([Maine](https://www.britannica.com/place/Maine-state), [New Hampshire](https://www.britannica.com/place/New-Hampshire-state), and eastern [Vermont](https://www.britannica.com/place/Vermont)), southeastern New England (eastern [Massachusetts](https://www.britannica.com/place/Massachusetts), eastern [Connecticut](https://www.britannica.com/place/Connecticut), and [Rhode Island](https://www.britannica.com/place/Rhode-Island-state)), southwestern New England (western Massachusetts and western Connecticut), the inland north (western Vermont and upstate [New York](https://www.britannica.com/place/New-York-state)), the Hudson Valley, and metropolitan New York.

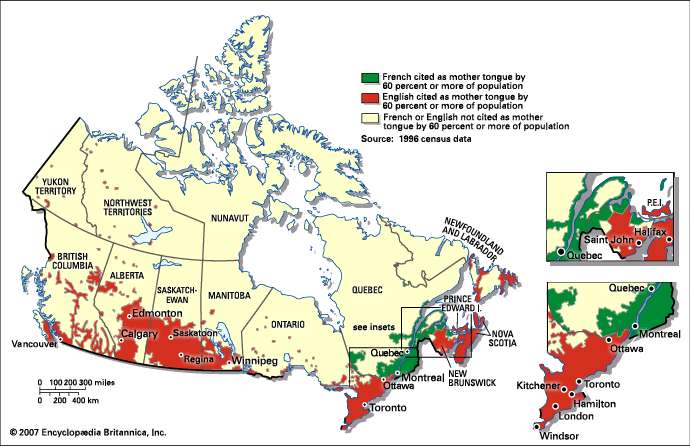
The Midland dialect is spoken in the coastal region from Point Pleasant, in [New Jersey](https://www.britannica.com/place/New-Jersey), to [Dover](https://www.britannica.com/place/Dover-Delaware), in [Delaware](https://www.britannica.com/place/Delaware-state). Its seven major subdialects comprise the Delaware Valley, the Susquehanna Valley, the Upper Ohio Valley, northern [West Virginia](https://www.britannica.com/place/West-Virginia), the Upper Potomac and Shenandoah, southern West Virginia and eastern [Kentucky](https://www.britannica.com/place/Kentucky), western [North Carolina](https://www.britannica.com/place/North-Carolina-state) and [South Carolina](https://www.britannica.com/place/South-Carolina), and eastern [Tennessee](https://www.britannica.com/place/Tennessee).

The Southern dialect area covers the coastal region from Delaware to South Carolina. Its five chief subdialects comprise the [Delmarva Peninsula](https://www.britannica.com/place/Delmarva-Peninsula), the Virginia Piedmont, northeastern North Carolina (Albemarle Sound and Neuse Valley), Cape Fear and Pee Dee valleys, and the South Carolina Low Country, around [Charleston](https://www.britannica.com/place/Charleston-South-Carolina).

These boundaries, based on those of the *Linguistic Atlas of the United States and Canada*, are highly tentative. To some extent these regions preserve the traditional speech of southeastern and southern England, where most of the early colonists were born. The first settlers to arrive in Virginia (1607) and Massachusetts (1620) soon learned to adapt old words to new uses, but they were content to borrow names from the local Indian languages for unknown trees, such as *hickory* and *persimmon* and for unfamiliar animals, such as *raccoon* and *woodchuck*. Later they took words from foreign settlers: *chowder* and *prairie* from the French, *scow* and *sleigh* from the Dutch. They made new [compounds](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/compounds), such as *backwoods* and *bullfrog*, and gave new meanings to such words as *lumber* (which in British English denotes disused furniture, or junk) and *corn* (which in British English signifies any grain, especially wheat) to mean “maize.”

Before the [Declaration of Independence](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Declaration-of-Independence) (1776), two-thirds of the immigrants had come from England, but after that date they arrived in large numbers from Ireland. The [Great Famine](https://www.britannica.com/event/Great-Famine-Irish-history) of 1845–49 drove 1.5 million Irish to seek homes in the New World, and the European [revolutions of 1848](https://www.britannica.com/event/Revolutions-of-1848) drove as many Germans to settle in Pennsylvania and the Midwest. After the close of the [American Civil War](https://www.britannica.com/event/American-Civil-War), millions of Scandinavians, Slavs, and Italians crossed the ocean and eventually settled mostly in the North Central and Upper Midwest states. In some areas of South Carolina and [Georgia](https://www.britannica.com/place/Georgia-state), enslaved Africans working on rice and cotton plantations developed a contact language called [Gullah](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Gullah-language), or Geechee, that made use of many structural and lexical features of their native languages. This variety of English is comparable to such contact languages as [Sranan](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Sranan) (Taki-taki) of Suriname and [Melanesian Pidgins](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Melanesian-pidgins). The speech of the [Atlantic Seaboard](https://www.britannica.com/place/Eastern-Seaboard) shows far greater differences in pronunciation, [grammar](https://www.britannica.com/topic/grammar), and vocabulary than that of any area in the North Central states, the Upper Midwest, the [Rocky Mountains](https://www.britannica.com/place/Rocky-Mountains), or the Pacific Coast. Today, urbanization, quick transport, and television have tended to level out some dialectal differences in the United States. On the other hand, immigrant groups have introduced new varieties in which the influence of ethnic origins is evident, and some immigrant languages are widely spoken (notably Spanish, in the southeastern and southwestern states).

The boundary with [Canada](https://www.britannica.com/place/Canada) nowhere corresponds to any boundary between dialects, and the influence of United States English is strong, being felt least in the [Maritime Provinces](https://www.britannica.com/place/Maritime-Provinces) and [Newfoundland and Labrador](https://www.britannica.com/place/Newfoundland-and-Labrador). Nevertheless, in spite of the effect of this proximity to the United States, British influences are still potent in some of the larger cities; Scottish influences are well sustained in [Ontario](https://www.britannica.com/place/Ontario-province). Canada remains bilingual. Less than one-fourth of its people, living mostly in the province of [Quebec](https://www.britannica.com/place/Quebec-province), have French as their mother tongue.

[](https://cdn.britannica.com/19/96919-004-E48C9EA6/Anglophone-Distribution-Francophone-Canada-populations-census-map-1996.jpg)

Distribution of majority Anglophone and Francophone populations in Canada. The 1996 census of Canada, from which this map is derived, defined a person's mother tongue as that language learned at home during childhood and still understood at the time of the census.Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.

# [Australian](https://www.britannica.com/place/Australia) and New Zealand English

Unlike [Canada](https://www.britannica.com/place/Canada), [Australia](https://www.britannica.com/place/Australia) has no concentration of a European [language](https://www.britannica.com/topic/language) other than English within its borders. There are still many [Aboriginal languages](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Australian-Aboriginal-languages), though they each are spoken by small numbers and their continued existence is threatened. More than 80 percent of the population is of British descent, but significant growth in the numbers of immigrants, especially from Europe and the Pacific Rim countries, took place in the last quarter of the 20th century. During colonial times the new settlers had to find names for fauna and flora (e.g., banksia, iron bark, whee whee) different from anything previously known to them: trees that shed bark instead of leaves and cherries with external stones. The words brush, bush, creek, paddock, and scrub acquired wider senses, whereas the terms brook, dale, field, forest, and meadow were seldom used. A creek leading out of a river and entering it again downstream was called an anastomizing branch (a term from anatomy), or an anabranch, whereas a creek coming to a dead end was called by its native name, a billabong. The giant kingfisher with its raucous bray was long referred to as a laughing jackass, later as a bushman’s clock, but now it is a kookaburra. Cattle so intractable that only roping could control them were said to be ropable, a term now used as a synonym for “angry” or “extremely annoyed.”

A deadbeat was a penniless “sundowner” at the very end of his tether, and a no-hoper was an incompetent fellow, hopeless and helpless. An offsider (strictly, the offside driver of a bullock team) was any assistant or partner. A rouseabout was first an odd-job man on a sheep station and then any kind of handyman. He was, in fact, the “down-under” counterpart of the wharf labourer, or roustabout, on the [Mississippi River](https://www.britannica.com/place/Mississippi-River). Both words originated in Cornwall, and many other terms, now exclusively Australian, came ultimately from British [dialects](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/dialects). Dinkum, for instance, meaning “true, authentic, genuine,” echoed the fair dinkum, or fair deal, of Lincolnshire [dialect](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/dialect). Fossicking about for surface gold, and then rummaging about in general, perpetuated the term fossick (“to elicit information, ferret out the facts”) from the Cornish dialect of English. To barrack, or “jeer noisily,” recalled Irish barrack (“to brag, boast”), whereas skerrick in the phrase not a skerrick left was obviously identical with the skerrick meaning “small fragment, particle,” still heard in English dialects from Westmorland to Hampshire.

Some Australian English terms came from [Aboriginal peoples](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Australian-Aboriginal) and [Torres Strait Islander peoples](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Torres-Strait-Islander-people): the words boomerang, corroboree (warlike dance and then any large and noisy gathering), dingo (reddish brown wild dog), galah (cockatoo), gunyah (bush hut), kangaroo, karri (dark red eucalyptus tree), nonda (rosaceous tree yielding edible fruit), wallaby (small marsupial), and wallaroo (large rock kangaroo). Although there is remarkably little regional variation in pronunciation throughout the entire continent, there is significant social variation. The neutral vowel /ə/ (as the a in sofa) is frequently used, as in London [Cockney](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Cockney): arches and archers are both pronounced [a:t∫əz], and the pronunciations of the diphthongs in RP day and go are more like (RP) die and now.

Although [New Zealand](https://www.britannica.com/place/New-Zealand) lies over 1,000 miles away, much of the English spoken there is similar to that of Australia. The blanket term Austral English is sometimes used to cover the language of the whole of Australasia, but this term is far from popular with New Zealanders because it makes no reference to New Zealand and gives all the prominence, so they feel, to Australia. Between North and South Islands there are observable differences. In particular, [Maori](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Maori-language), which remains a living language (related to Tahitian, Hawaiian, and the other [Austronesian [Malayo-Polynesian] languages](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Austronesian-languages)), has a greater number of speakers and more influence in [North Island](https://www.britannica.com/place/North-Island).

## South Asian English

In 1950 [India](https://www.britannica.com/place/India) became a federal republic within the [Commonwealth of Nations](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Commonwealth-association-of-states), and [Hindi](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Hindi-language) was declared the first national language. English, it was stated, would “continue to be used for all official purposes until 1965.” In 1967, however, by the terms of the English Language [Amendment](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/Amendment) Bill, English was proclaimed “an [alternative](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/alternative) official or associate language with Hindi until such time as all non-Hindi states had agreed to its being dropped.” English is therefore acknowledged to be indispensable. It is the only practicable means of day-to-day [communication](https://www.britannica.com/topic/communication) between the central government at [New Delhi](https://www.britannica.com/place/New-Delhi) and states with non-Hindi speaking populations, especially with the [Deccan](https://www.britannica.com/place/Deccan), or “South,” where millions speak [Dravidian (non-Indo-European) languages](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Dravidian-languages)—[Telugu](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Telugu-language), [Tamil](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Tamil-language), [Kannada](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Kannada-language), and [Malayalam](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Malayalam-language). English is widely used in business, in [higher education](https://www.britannica.com/topic/higher-education), and in scientific research.

In 1956 [Pakistan](https://www.britannica.com/place/Pakistan) became an [autonomous](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/autonomous) republic [comprising](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/comprising) two states, East and West. Bengali and Urdu were made the national languages of East and West Pakistan, respectively, but English was adopted as a third official language and functioned as the medium of interstate communication. (In 1971 East Pakistan broke away from its western partner and became the independent state of [Bangladesh](https://www.britannica.com/place/Bangladesh).) English is also widely used in [Sri Lanka](https://www.britannica.com/place/Sri-Lanka) and [Nepal](https://www.britannica.com/place/Nepal).

## African English

Africa is one of the world’s most multilingual areas, if people are measured against languages. Upon a large number of [indigenous](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/indigenous) languages rests a slowly changing superstructure of world languages (Arabic, English, French, and Portuguese). The problems of language are everywhere linked with political, social, economic, and educational factors.

The Republic of [South Africa](https://www.britannica.com/place/South-Africa), the oldest British settlement in the continent, resembles Canada in having two recognized European languages within its borders: English and [Afrikaans](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Afrikaans-language), or Cape Dutch. Both British and Dutch traders followed in the wake of 15th-century Portuguese explorers and have lived in widely varying war-and-peace relationships ever since. Although the Union of South Africa, comprising [Cape Province](https://www.britannica.com/place/Cape-Province), [Transvaal](https://www.britannica.com/place/Transvaal), [Natal](https://www.britannica.com/place/Natal-historical-province-South-Africa), and [Orange Free State](https://www.britannica.com/place/Orange-Free-State), was for more than a half century (1910–61) a member of the [British Empire and Commonwealth](https://www.britannica.com/place/British-Empire), its four prime ministers ([Louis Botha](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Louis-Botha), [Jan Smuts](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Jan-Smuts), [J.B.M. Hertzog](https://www.britannica.com/biography/J-B-M-Hertzog), and [Daniel F. Malan](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Daniel-Malan)) were all Dutchmen. The [Afrikaans language](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Afrikaans-language) began to diverge seriously from European Dutch in the late 18th century and gradually came to be recognized as a separate language. Although the English spoken in South Africa differs in some respects from standard British English, its speakers do not regard the language as a separate one. They have naturally come to use many Afrikanerisms, such as kloof, kopje, krans, veld, and vlei, to denote features of the landscape and employ African names to designate local animals, plants, and social and political concepts. South Africa’s 1996 constitution identified 11 official languages, English among them. The words trek and commando, [notorious](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/notorious) in South African history, are among several that have entered world standard English.

Elsewhere in Africa, English helps to answer the needs of wider communication. It functions as an official language of administration in, and is an official language of, numerous countries, all of them multilingual. [Liberia](https://www.britannica.com/place/Liberia) is among the African countries with the deepest historical ties to English—the population most associated with the country’s founding migrated from the [United States](https://www.britannica.com/place/United-States) during the 19th century—but English is just one of more than two dozen languages spoken there by multiple ethnic groups. English’s place within that linguistic [diversity](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/diversity) is representative of English in Africa as a whole.