

## Reading Medieval French A One-Page Guide to Dictionaries

Dictionaries are a key resource in understanding and appreciating texts written in medieval French. There are several major dictionaries available, and all of those listed below are free. Take the time to explore these dictionaries, and to learn their interfaces and quirks!

**Anglo-Norman Dictionary** ([anglo-norman.net](http://anglo-norman.net)). As its name suggests, the *AND* is first and foremost a dictionary of the French used in medieval England. Nevertheless, it can be used (with care) as a dictionary of medieval French more broadly, particularly if you're already armed with an awareness of some of the major distinctions between continental French and AN. The *AND* has the distinct advantage (for non-French speakers) of having entries in English, rather than French or German. The website also features a handy 'Textbase' of over 70 Anglo-Norman texts, searchable via concordance, mostly taken from Anglo-Norman Text Society publications. Note: as of September 2020, the 'search' function of the *AND* is broken, and will not be fixed prior to the launch of a new interface in a couple of months' time. A workaround is to use the 'jump to entry' function, although this is far from ideal given the number of variant entries and spellings.

**Dictionnaire du moyen français** ([atilf.fr/dmf](http://atilf.fr/dmf)). Covers texts and terms from the MidFr period (1330 — 1500). Definitions are given in ModFr, with a wider range of contextual information than is available in the *AND*. This should probably be your 'core' dictionary if you are confident with ModFr, and are working on non-AN material.

**Dictionnaire étymologique de l'ancien français** ([deaf-page.de/fr/index.php](http://deaf-page.de/fr/index.php)). The DEAF (currently in the process of being migrated online) is an excellent resource for the more philologically-inclined, with a focus (as the name suggests) on variant forms and their respective derivations.

**Dictionnaire de l'ancienne langue française**, de Frédéric Godefroy ([lexilogos.com/francais\\_ancien.htm](http://lexilogos.com/francais_ancien.htm)). Frequently superseded by more recent dictionaries, but still a useful resource for harder-to-find terms; available online through the 'Lexilogos' site.

Other dictionary resources are available, most notably the monumental German **Altfranzösisches Wörterbuch**, which has the unusual distinction of being ordered by etymon rather than by alphabetical order in Old French. For most queries, though, these dictionaries should stand you in good stead!



## Reading Medieval French

# A Bluffer's Guide to Reading Medieval French

### If in doubt, sound it out

MedFr is far more similar to ModFr than even Middle English is to modern English, and in most cases, difficulties in reading MedFr would therefore also appear in an equivalent ModFr version of the text. Perhaps the single biggest difference, certainly at a first glance, is spelling: MedFr spelling is variable, meaning that the best solution is simply to 'sound out' any words that you may not recognise, using a modern French accent. This can help with even the most foreign-looking phrases:

Puis que ma dame de Chanpaigne	Puisque ma dame de Champagne
Vialt que romans a feire anpraigue,	Veut que j'entreprenne de faire un roman,
Je l'anprandrai molt volentiers	Je l'entreprendrai très volontiers ...

*Since my lady of Champagne wishes me to undertake a work, I will do so most willingly ...*  
(Charrette, ll. 1-3)

Certain characters are often interchangeable in MedFr, including 'm' and 'n' (*non* for ModFr 'nom'), 'g' and 'w' (*werre* for ModFr 'guerre', especially in AN), and 'j' and 'g'.

### Cases, word order, and juxtaposed obliques (oh, my!)

Ofr preserved a two genders for nouns (masculine and feminine), as well as a simplified version of the Latin case system, with only two cases still in use: the nominative or *cas sujet* (used for the subject of a sentence) and the oblique or *cas régime* (used for everything else). Typically, the oblique forms are the ones that have survived into ModFr. Most feminine nouns vary only in number (singular or plural), in a manner similar to ModFr, whereas masculine nouns follow a similar pattern to the one shown below, for *chevalier*.

<b>chevalier 'knight' &lt; CABALLARIUS</b>		
	singular	plural
<b>nom.</b>	li chevaliers	li chevalier
<b>obl.</b>	le chevalier	les chevaliers

*So-called 'Class I' masculine nouns form the most common paradigm in OFr, and the most distinctive from modern French. Of particular note here are the unusual (to modern eyes) nominative definite article form, 'li', and the presence of the so-called 'flexional -s' in the nominative singular (and its absence in the nominative plural).*

The additional information provided by the case system means that word order is often more flexible in medieval French than in modern French, which can lead to confusion for the unaware:

Granz	curs	unt	fait	li	pelerin
Great	route	have	done	the.NOM.PL	pilgrims.NOM.PL

*The pilgrims have already travelled a great distance [not 'a great routes has done the pilgrims'] (Brendan, l. 1097)*

Quand	le	oit	Brandans	issi	plandre
When	him	heard	Brendan.NOM.SG	so	crying

*When Brendan heard him crying out in such a fashion [not 'when he heard Brendan ...'] (Brendan, l. 1249)*

Ses	barons	fist	li	rois	venir.
His	barons.OBL(.PL)	made.3SG	the.NOM.SG	king.NOM(.SG)	come

*The king made his barons come [not 'his barons made the king come'] (Renard, l. 1807)*

