

## Reading Old English

Old English Language Training with Hannah Bailey

Learning Old English can be like learning a whole new language—there are many words and grammatical rules that are no longer used in Present-Day English (PDE). However, if you understand the spelling conventions of Old English it can help you spot words that will be familiar to you already in a slightly different form.

### UNFAMILAR LETTERS

Þ, þ (thorn) = th Ð, ð (eth) = th	In Old English (unlike Old Norse) these were used interchangeably for voiced (as in <i>that</i> ) and unvoiced (as in <i>thin</i> ) th.
Æ, æ (ash) = a as in <i>cat</i>	This letter was named <i>æsc</i> ('ash tree') after a runic letter.
ƿ, ƿ (wynn) = w	This is how 'w' was written in Old English. Most editions use a modern 'w' instead, but you will occasionally see a wynn in print.
7 (Tironian et) = and	The Tironian shorthand for Latin 'et' is also used for Old English 'and', just as we often use an ampersand (&) in Modern English.

### VOWELS

Since Old English was spoken prior to the Great Vowel Shift, the vowels were pronounced (approximately) as follows:

a	as in <u>f</u> ather
e	as in <u>a</u> te
i	as in <u>s</u> een
o	as in <u>s</u> o
u	as in <u>c</u> ool
æ	as in <u>c</u> at
y	pronounced like 'i' but with lips in a whistling position—like German ü

### Long and Short Vowels

Some modern editions will mark long vowels with a macron. Editors of verse texts are the most likely to do this, since vowel length matters to Old English metre. There are conflicting views on exactly what distinguishes long and short vowels. Mitchell and Robinson consider it a difference of quality and compare short *i* and long *ī* to the vowels in *this* vs *these*. Peter Baker considers it to be a difference of length and compares short *i* and long *ī* to the vowels in beat vs bead.

Long and short vowels can make a difference to the meaning of a word:

E.g: OE *is* means 'is'  
OE *īs* means 'ice'

## CONSONANTS

In Old English, most consonants are pronounced as they are in PDE, except that no letter is silent. You do sound out all the consonants in *cniht* (boy, young man, soldier), though most of them are silent in PDE *knight*.

A double consonant, as in *biddan* (to ask), lasts longer than a single consonant—think of the difference between the 'd' sounds in 'body' and 'bad day'.

sc 'sh' as in ship.

cg 'dge' as in edge.

h At the beginning of a word: 'h' as in 'hound'.  
Elsewhere: 'ch' as in German 'ich' or Scots 'loch'

c Before a, o, u, and y: 'k' as in 'kick'.  
Before e and i: 'ch' as in 'child'.  
(Some editions put a dot over c when it is pronounced 'ch'.)

g Before a, o, u, and y: 'g' as in 'good'.  
Before e and i: 'y' as in 'yet'.  
(Some editions put a dot over g when it is pronounced 'y'.)

f,s,þ/ð Normally unvoiced, like PDE fish, sit, thin.  
Between voiced sounds, f, s, and þ/ð become voiced, like PDE lover, brazen,  
leather. C.f. PDE house vs. houses

## APPROACHING OLD ENGLISH TEXTS

You can get a long way even before you turn to a dictionary/glossary.

### 1) SPELLING/SOUNDS

You might recognize words by sounding them out. Remember key spelling differences like these:

þ and ð = th as in thin or that  
sc = sh as in ship  
cg = dg as in edge

### 2) ENDINGS

The endings of some words can change—think of walks, walked, walking, or dog, dog's, dogs. There are even more of these changing endings in Old English than there are in PDE. Try ignoring the endings (especially -an) and see if that helps you recognize the root word. (There might be prefixes you can ignore too.)

### 3) MOAR PLZ!

Vowels are the part of words that are most likely to change over time. Try sounding out the word with different vowel sounds. Metathesis (swapping places) of vowels and the letter 'r' is very common.

### 4) WORD ORDER

Old English doesn't have the same restrictions on word order that modern English has. You might need to swap the words around and add particles like 'and' or 'the' to make it make sense in modern English (especially in poetry).

Try applying these ideas to this text:

Forst sceal freosan,    fyr wudu meltan  
eorþe growan,    is brycgian,  
wæter helm wegan,    wundrum lucan  
eorþan cīpas.    An sceal inbindan  
forstes fetre        fela-meahtig God;  
winter sceal geweorpan;    weder eft cuman  
sumor swegle hat,    sund unstillē.        (*Maxims I*, ll. 71–76)

wegan – wear  
wundram lucan – wondrously lock away  
cīpas – seeds  
fela – very (or many, much). Cf. German *viele*.  
geweorpan – depart, turn away  
swegle – brightly  
sund – sea, water

## DICTIONARIES AND GLOSSARIES

### Common Conventions

There are many verbs that sometimes appear with the prefix ‘ge-’ and sometimes appear without it. Most dictionaries will ignore the ‘ge-’ for purposes of alphabetization.

Most dictionaries treat ‘æ’ as a single letter that falls between ‘a’ and ‘b’.

Most dictionaries treat ‘þ’ and ‘ð’ as interchangeable and so will only use ‘þ’ in their headwords. It is usually treated as a single letter that falls between ‘t’ and ‘u’.

### Glossaries in Introductory Anthologies, e.g.:

Peter Baker, *Introduction to Old English*  
Mitchell and Robinson, *A Guide to Old English*  
Richard Marsden, *The Cambridge Old English Reader*  
Sweet’s *Anglo-Saxon Reader*  
Bright, *An Anglo-Saxon Reader*

Glossaries in anthologies like these will typically have useful notation identifying the text/line where different forms of the word are used, explaining the grammatical meaning of different forms of a word, redirecting you from irregular spellings to the main entry, etc.

### Glossaries in Critical Editions

Many critical editions of Old English texts include a glossary. These are easier to use than a general dictionary because they only include information relevant to that particular text.

### General Dictionaries

The Toronto *Dictionary of Old English* is the OED of Old English. It is a subscription service—your library may have access. It’s also only complete up through the letter ‘i’, but for the first third of the alphabet this is the best dictionary.

*Bosworth and Toller* is not as up-to-date as the DOE, but it is the most complete Old English Dictionary that is freely available online. Find it at: <https://bosworthtoller.com/>

*A Concise Anglo-Saxon Dictionary* by J. R. Clark Hall focusses on vocabulary found in poetry and is small enough to take to the pub, when in-person reading groups are possible.

### Magic Sheet!

Peter Baker’s Old English Magic Sheet is your friend! Bookmark it, or print it out and hang it on the wall: [http://www.oldenglishaerobics.net/resources/magic\\_letter.pdf](http://www.oldenglishaerobics.net/resources/magic_letter.pdf)