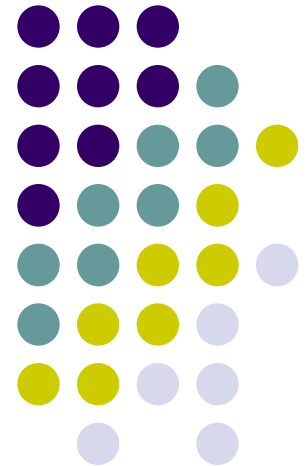

Historical Foundations of Modern English Spelling





List of Principal Questions

- **1. OE alphabetic way of writing based on a phonetic principle**
- **2. Spelling changes in Middle English.
Rules of Reading**
- **3. Modern English Spelling**

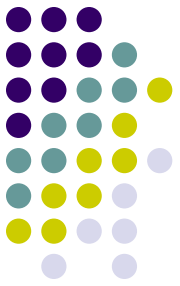
1. OE alphabetic way of writing based on a phonetic principle



The Ways of writing:

- Hieroglyphic
- Pictographic
- Syllabic
- Alphabetic - originally based on a phonetic principle: an accurate graphic representation of pronunciation by using letters to indicate sounds

OE spelling



- a separate letter for each distinct sound
- the sound values of the letters were for the most part the same as in Latin
- spellings, however, were not absolutely consistent:

OE Spelling and Reading Rules



Old English Alphabet

| | | | |
|---|--------------------------|------|------------------|
| a | | n | [n], [ŋ] |
| æ | | | |
| b | | o | |
| c | [k] or [k'] ¹ | p | |
| d | | r | |
| e | | s | [s] or [z] |
| f | [f] or [v] | t | |
| Ʒ | [g], [g'], [ɣ] or [j] | þ, ð | [ð] or [θ] |
| h | [x], [x'] or [h] | u | |
| i | | w | |
| l | | x | |
| m | | y | [y] ² |

OE Spelling and Reading Rules



| | | | | |
|------|---|-------------------------------|--|---------------------------------|
| f | OE <i>ofer</i> ['over] <i>selfa</i> ['selva] | NE <i>over</i> <i>self</i> | OE <i>feohtan</i> ['feoxtan] <i>oft</i> [oft] | NE <i>fight</i> <i>often</i> |
| s | <i>rīsan</i> ['ri:zan] | <i>rise</i> | <i>rās</i> [ra:s] <i>gāst</i> [ga:st] | <i>rose</i> <i>ghost</i> |
| þ, ð | <i>ōðer</i> ['o:ðer] <i>wyrþe</i> ['wyrðe] | <i>other</i> <i>worthy</i> | <i>ðæt</i> [θæt] <i>lēoþ</i> [leo:θ] | <i>that</i> <i>'song'</i> |



OE Spelling and Reading Rules

- OE **Ʒān** [g], **Ʒēar** [j], **dæƷ** [j], **daƷas** [ɣ], **secƷan** [gg] (NE **go**, **year**, **day**, **days**, **say**)

- The letter **h** stands for [x] between a back vowel and a consonant and also initially before consonants and for [x'] next to front vowels; the distribution of [h] is uncertain:

OE **hlǣne** [x], **tāhte** [x], **niht** [x'], **hē** [x] or [h] (NE **lean**, **taught**, **night**, **he**).

- The letter **n** stands for [n] in all positions except when followed by [k] or [g]; in this case it indicates [ŋ]: OE **sinƷan** (NE **sing**).

2. Spelling changes in Middle English. Rules of Reading



- In Middle English the former Anglo-Saxon spelling tradition was replaced by that of the Norman scribes reflecting the influence of French and often mixing purely phonetic spelling with French spelling habits and traditions inherited from Old English.

Spelling changes in Middle English



| | | | |
|------------|-------------|------------|------------------------------|
| ð, þ [ð/θ] | replaced by | th: | þat — that |
| ȝ [g, j] | | g | ȝod — god |
| | or | y | ȝear — year |
| æ [ɛ] | | e | lætan — leten (<i>let</i>) |
| ƿ [w] | | w | |

Spelling changes in Middle English



| | |
|-------------------|--|
| g for [g] | <i>in god and [dʒ] in singe</i> |
| j for [dʒ] | <i>in words of French origin: joy, judge</i> |
| k for [k] | <i>instead of c before front vowels and n: drincan — drinken, cnawan — knowen.</i> |
| v for [v] | <i>instead of f as a separate phoneme: lufu — love [luva]</i> |
| q for [k] | <i>(followed by u) in quay</i> |
| <i>or [kw]</i> | <i>in cwen—queen to replace OE cw</i> |
| z for [z] | <i>as a separate phoneme: zel (zeal)²</i> |

Until the 17th century reform **v** was an allograph of **u**, the two letters often being interchangeable: **over** - **ouer**, **love** - **loue**.

Although sometimes [z] is still rendered by **s**: **losen** (lose), **chesen** (choose).

Spelling changes in Middle English



consonant digraphs:

ch *for the sound* [tʃ] cild — child

dg [dʒ] brycʒ — bridge

gh [χ] riʒt — right,

th [ð, θ] þencan — thinken,
moðor — mother

sh [ʃ] scip — ship

ph [f] *in words borrowed from Latin:*
phonetics

ch [k] *in words borrowed from Latin:*
chemistry

Spelling changes in Middle English



vowel digraphs — to show the length of the vowel:

ea [e] mete — meat

ee [e] fet — feet

oa [o] bat — boat

oo [o] fot — foot

ie [e:] feld — field

ou/ow [u:] hus — hous, tun — town



Spelling changes in Middle English

Some changes were made for ease of reading and for a better visual image of the word:

| | | |
|------------------------------|-----------------|--|
| k instead of c | boc — book | <i>in the final position for better visual separation of words</i> |
| y | i by, my | |
| w | u now | |

Besides, **y** and **w** were considered more ornamental than **i** and **u** at the end of the word, allowing to finish it with an elegant curve.

Spelling changes in Middle English



o instead of **u** cumen — come
on3unnen — bigonne
sunu — sone
lufu — love
munuc — monk

*close to letters
consisting only
of vertical
strokes, such as
u/v, n, m*

Peculiarities of Middle English Spelling



| Letters indicating vowels | Letters indicating consonants |
|------------------------------------|---|
| Single letters | |
| <i>a</i> [a] | <i>c</i> [s] or [k] |
| <i>y</i> , as well as <i>i</i> [i] | <i>f</i> [f] |
| <i>o</i> [o] or [u] | <i>g</i> [dʒ] or [g] |
| | <i>j</i> [dʒ] |
| | <i>k</i> [k] |
| | <i>s</i> [s] or [z] |
| | <i>v</i> (often spelt as <i>u</i>) [v] |
| | <i>y</i> [j] |
| Digraphs | |
| <i>ee</i> [e:] or [ɛ:] | <i>ch</i> , <i>tch</i> [tʃ] |
| <i>ie</i> [e:] | <i>dg</i> [dʒ] |
| <i>oo</i> [o:] or [ɔ:] | <i>gh</i> [x] or [xʰ] |
| <i>ou</i> [u:] or [ou] | <i>qu</i> [kw] |
| <i>ow</i> [u:] or [ou] | <i>th</i> [θ] or [ð] |
| | <i>sh</i> , <i>sch</i> , <i>ssh</i> [ʃ] |
| | <i>wh</i> [hw] |



Peculiarities of Middle English Spelling

- **G** and **c**: [dʒ] and [s] before front vowels; [g] and [k] before back vowels respectively
- **Y**: [j] at the beginning of words, otherwise = letter **i**, as in NE: ME **yet** [jet], **knyght** [knix't], also **veyne** or **veine** ['veinə] (NE **yet**, **knight**, **vein**).
- **th** and **s**: voiced sounds between vowels; voiceless sounds - initially, finally and next to other voiceless consonants: ME **worthy** ['wurði], **esy** ['ɛ:zi], **thyng** [θiŋ], **sorwe** ['sorwə] (NE **worthy**, **easy**, **thing**, **sorrow**).
- But in ME - unlike OE - this rule does not apply to the letter **f** = voiceless [f] while the voiced [v] is shown by **v** or **u**; cf. ME **feet** [fe:t] and **vayn** [vein] (NE **feet**, **vain**).

Peculiarities of Middle English Spelling



- **O** = usually [u] next to letters whose shape resembles the shape of the letter **u** (ME **some** ['sumə])
but in the same environment it can indicate [o] (**mone** ['mo:nə])

To determine the sound value of **o** one can look up the origin of the sound in OE or the pronunciation of the word in NE:

the sound [**u**] did not change in the transition from OE to ME (the OE for **some** was **sum**); in NE it changed to [ʌ].

the letter **o** stood for [u] in those ME words which contain [ʌ] today,

otherwise it indicates [o]. Cf., e.g. ME **some** ['sumə], **not** [nɔt] (NE **some**, **not**).

Peculiarities of Middle English Spelling



- The digraphs **ou** and **ow** – interchangeable:
 - [u:] in the words which contained [u:] in OE (OE [u:] had not changed) and [au] in NE, e.g. OE *hūs* > ME *hous* [hu:s] > NE *house*
 - if the modern word has [ou] = ME word with [ou], e.g. ME *snow* [snou], NE *snow* (ME [ou] has not altered)
 - Long sounds in ME texts are often shown by double letters or digraphs.
 - Open syllables often contain long vowels, while closed syllables may contain both short and long vowels.
 - Vowels are long before a sonorant plus a plosive consonant and short before other consonant sequences
- e.g. ME *maken* ['ma:kən], *lok* [lɔk], *bihynden* [bi'hi:ndən], *bisetten* [bi'setən] (NE *make*, *lock*, *behind*, *beset*)

CANTERBURY TALES by G. Chaucer

(late 14th c.)



- (1) **Whan that Aprille with his shoures soote**
[xwan 'θat ap'rile 'wiθ his 'ʃu:rəs 'so:tə]
- (2) **the droghte of March hath perced to the roote,**
[θə 'druxt of 'mɑrtʃ hɑθ 'persəd 'to: θə 'ro:tə]
- (3) **And bathed every veyne in swich licour,**
[and 'ba:ðəd 'evri 'vein in 'switʃ li'ku:r]
- (4) **Of which vertu engendred is the flour;**
[of 'xwitʃ ver'tju: en'ɔʒendrəd 'is θə 'flu:r]

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(3) **And bathed every veyne in swich licour,**

[and 'bɑ:ðəd 'evri 'veɪn in 'swɪtʃ li'ku:r]

(4) **Of which vertu engendred is the flour;**

[of 'xwiʃ ver'tju: en'dʒendrəd 'is θə 'flu:r]

When April with his sweet showers

The draught of March has pierced to the root,

And bathed every vein in such liquor,

Of which (whose) virtue (power) engendered is the flower;

CANTERBURY TALES by G. Chaucer (late 14th c.)



- (5) **Whan Zephirus eek with his swete breeth**
[xwan 'zefi'rus ε:k 'wiθ his 'swe:tə 'brɛ:θ]
- (6) **Inspired hath in every holt and heeth**
[in'spirəd 'haθ in 'evri 'hɔ:lt and 'hɛ:θ]
- (7) **The tendre croppes, and the younge sonne**
[θə 'tendrə 'kroppəs 'and θə 'juŋgə 'sunnə]
- (8) **Hath in the Ram his halve cours y-ronne,**
[haθ 'in θə ram his 'halvə 'kurs i-'runnə]

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(7) **The tendre croppes, and the younge sonne**

[θə 'tendrə 'kroppəs 'and θə 'juŋgə 'sunnə]

(8) **Hath in the Ram his halve cours y-ronne,**

[haθ 'in θə ram his 'halvə 'kurs i-'runnə]

When Zephyr also with his sweet breath

Inspired has into every holt and heath

The tender crops, and the young sun

Has in the Ram half his course run (has passed half
of its way in the constellation of Ram).

CANTERBURY TALES by G. Chaucer (late 14th c.)



- (9) **And smale foweles maken melodye,**
[and 'smalə 'fu:ləs 'ma:kən 'melo'diə]
- (10) **That slepen al the nyght with open ye -**
[θat 'slɛ:pən 'al θə 'nix't wiθ 'ɔ:pən 'i:e]
- (11) **So priketh hem nature in here corages –**
[sɔ: 'prikəθ 'hem nə'tju:r in 'her ku'radʒəs]
- (12) **Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages,**
[θan 'lɒŋgən 'folk to: 'go:n on 'pilgri'madʒəs]

CANTERBURY TALES by G. Chaucer (late 14th c.)



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(11) **So priketh hem nature in here corages –**

[sɔ: 'prikəθ 'hem na'tju:r in 'her ku'radʒəs]

(12) **Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages,**

[θan 'lɒŋgən 'folk to: 'go:n on 'pilgri'madʒəs]

And small birds sing (lit. fowls make melody)

That sleep all the night with open eyes (i. e. do not sleep) –

So raises nature their spirit (lit. pricks their courage) –

Then folks long to go on pilgrimages,

CANTERBURY TALES by G. Chaucer (late 14th c.)



(13) **And palmeres for to seken straunge strondes,**

[and 'palmrəs 'for to: 'se:kən 'straundʒe 'strɒndəs]

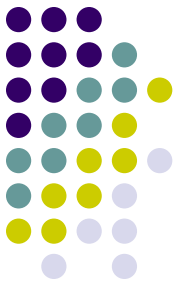
(14) **To ferne halwes, couthe in sondry londes...**

[to: 'fernə 'hɑ:lwəs 'ku:ð in 'sundri 'lɔ:ndəs]

And palmers - to seek strange strands,

To ancient saints known in different lands ...

ME Conventional principle of Spelling



- one-to-one correspondence of letter and sound had been lost
- **o** = [ɔ], [u], [ɔ:], [o:]
- **c** = [s], [k]
- **g** = [g], [dʒ]
- **u** = [u] and [y], [v]
- [dʒ] = **g**, **j** or **dg**
- [k] = **k**, **c** and **q**
- **ou** and **ow** = [u:] and [ou];
- **oo** = [ɔ:] and [o:] alongside **o**
- [e:] and [ɛ:] = **ie**, **ee**, **e**.
- **th** or **dg** did not indicate sequences of sounds, but were used as symbols of single sounds, [θ, ð] and [dʒ])

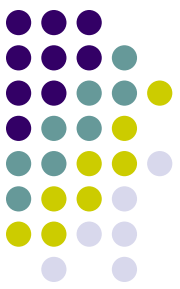
The use of digraphs was a digression from the phonetic principle, for it was based on conventional association between sounds and their graphic representation.

ME Conventional principle of Spelling



- The conventional principle of spelling was later reinforced by the fixation of the written form of the word in printing.
- The phoneticians and spelling reformers of the 16th c. strove to restrict the freedom of variation and to improve English orthography by a more consistent use of letters and digraphs, and by the introduction of new symbols.

ME Conventional principle of Spelling (16th c.)



- a strict distinction between **u** and **v** when used to indicate a vowel and a consonant: [u] and [v], e.g. Early NE **loue**, **selues**, **vnripe**, **vnshaken** later spelt as **love**, **selves**, **unripe**, **unshaken**
- the regular use of the final mute **e** to show the length of the vowel in the preceding syllable, e.g., **rode**, **rose**, and even **beene**, **moone** (though in the two latter words length was shown by double letters).

The phoneticians and spelling reformers of the 16th c. introduced



- new digraphs: **ea** = [ɛ:]
- **e, ee, ie** = [e:]
- **oa** alongside **o** = in open syllables for [ɔ:]
- **oo** = a long closed [o:].

Cf. ME **eech**, **seke** with [ɛ:] and [e:] and Early NE **each**, **seek**; ME **hooly**, **boot** [ɔ:, o] and Early NE **holy**, **boat**, **boot**

- use of double consonants became less frequent, except in traditional spellings like **kiss**, **sell**
- double letters were sometimes employed to show that the preceding vowel was short: Early NE **sitten**, **shott**, **dipped** (later **sit**, **shot**, **dipped**).

The activities of the scholars in the period of normalisation - late 17th and the 18th c.



- a stabilising effect on the development of English spelling
- dictionaries and grammars fixed the written forms of the words as obligatory standards
- a few new digraphs were adopted with borrowed words:

ph, ps - NE **photograph, psychology,**

ch - NE **chemistry, scheme and machine,**

g - **genre**

Modern English Spelling



- modern spelling is largely conventional and conservative, but seldom phonetic
- 16th c.: a new principle of spelling was introduced – etymological: **whatever the pronunciation, the spelling should represent *to the eye* the form from which the word was derived (especially in words of Latin or Greek origin)**
- **dett** (borrowed from French **dette**) was respelled as **debt** (traced to Latin **debitum**)
- **dout** (borrowed from French **douter**) - as **doubt** (from Latin **dubitare**)



The so-called etymological spellings

- ME **ake** (from OE **acan**) respelt as **ache** from a wrongfully supposed connection with Greek **achos**;
- ME **tonge** (from OE **tunge**) respelt as **tongue** on analogy with French **langue**, Latin **lingua**;
- ME **iland** (from OE **igland**) respelt as **island** from a wrongfully supposed connection with French **isle**, Latin **insula**;
- ME **scool** borrowed in OE from Latin and always written with **sc-** (OE **scool**) respelt as **school**, because in Latin the sound [k] in words of Greek origin was rendered as **ch**;
- ME **delit** borrowed from French **delit** came to be spelt with a mute digraph **-gh-** on analogy with **light - delight**, etc.

Modern English Spelling



In the present-day system ***one sound can be denoted in several ways:***

- [ʒ] - ***turn***, ***colonel***, ***herd***, ***heard***, ***bird***, ***blurred***, ***erred***, ***stirred***, ***word***;
- [ou] - ***note***, ***noble***, ***both***, ***toad***, ***toe***, ***soul***, ***dough***, ***mow***, ***brooch***, ***oh***, ***mauve***, ***beau***, ***depot***, ***yeoman***, ***sew***;

One symbol can stand for different sounds:

- **ch** - ***chaos***, ***chaise***, ***such***, ***choir***; ***drachm*** (mute)
- **o** - ***hot***, ***cold***, ***wolf***, ***women***, ***whom***, ***son***, ***button***, ***lost***, ***hero***

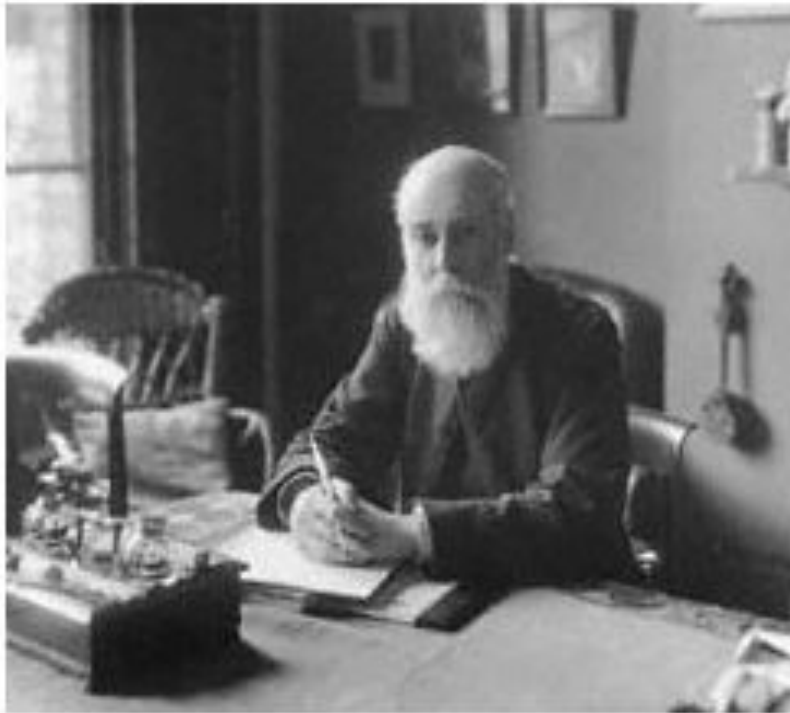
Many so-called “silent letters” can be explained only historically:



e (*mute e*) at the end of words: **house, take**

- **b** after **m**: **lamb, limb, comb**
- **b** before **t**: **debt, doubt**
- **ch** - **yacht**
- **g** before **n** and **m**: **gnaw, phlegm**
- **h** - **heir, hour, exhibitor**
- **k** before **n**: **knife, knee**
- **l** - **could, yolk, palm**
- **n** after **m**: **autumn, column**
- **s** - **island, aisle**
- **t** after **s** and **f** and before **l** or **n** - **listen, often, wrestle, soften**
- **w** - **wrap, sword, answer**

Modern English Spelling

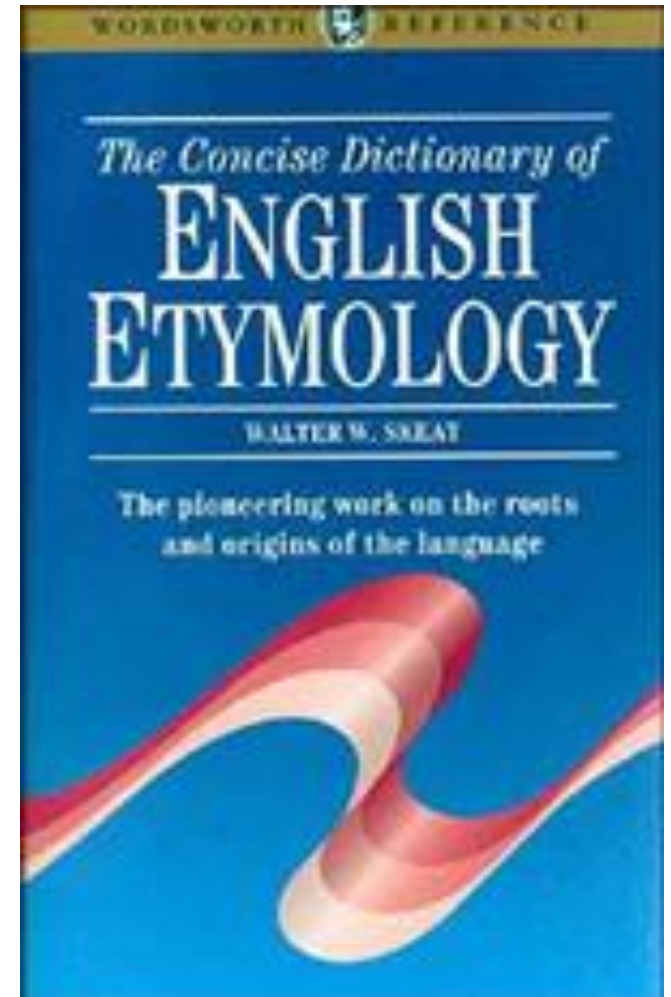
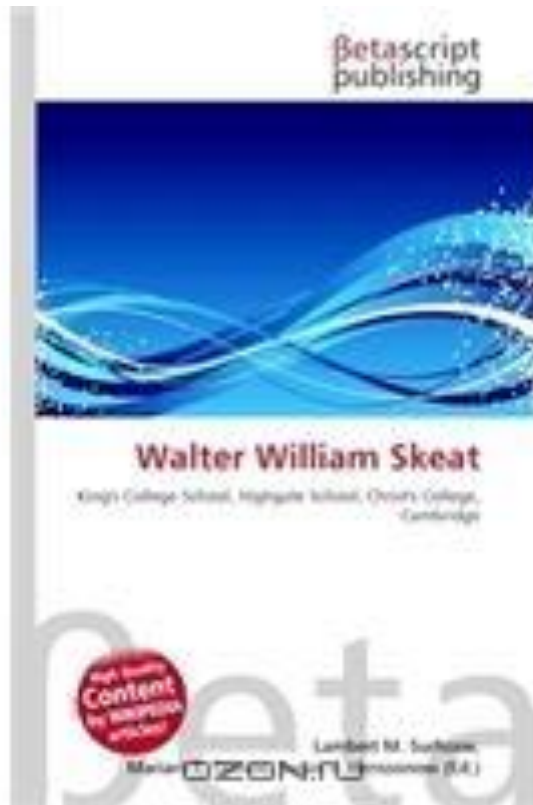


Walter William Skeat (1835–1912), by James Russell & Sons, 1899

Walter Skeat, the famous specialist in the History of English:

“We retain a Tudor system of symbols with a Victorian pronunciation”.

Walter W. Skeat



Main Historical Sources of Modern spellings (Short Monophthongs)



| Sound | Spelling | Examples | Sound changes accounting for the spelling |
|--|-----------------|-----------------------|---|
| Vowels <i>Monophthongs</i> Short | | | ME NE |
| æ | a | cat, man | a > æ |
| ɔ | a after w | was, want | wa > wɔ |
| e | ea before d, th | head, death | ɛ: > e: > e |
| u | oo before t, k | foot, book | o: > u: > u |
| ʌ | o, u | come, nut | u > ʌ |
| | oo before d | flood | o: > u: > |
| ə | -er, -re, -or | reader, centre, tutor | u > ʌ r } > ə er } |

Main Historical Sources of Modern spellings (Long Monophthongs)



| Sound | Spelling | Examples | Sound changes accounting for the spelling |
|---------|--|---|---|
| Long i: | <i>ee, ie, e, ea</i> | <i>meet, field, he, meat</i> | <i>e: > i:</i> <i>ɛ: > i:</i> |
| a: | <i>ar</i> <i>a</i> before <i>st, nt, ft</i> | <i>arm</i> <i>blast, plant, after</i> | <i>ar > a:</i> <i>a > a:</i> |
| ɔ: | <i>or, oar, ar</i> after <i>w</i> <i>au, æw</i> | <i>for, board, warm</i> <i>cause, draw</i> | <i>or > ɔ:</i> <i>war > wɔ:</i> <i>au > ɔ:</i> |
| ə: | <i>er, ir, ur</i> | <i>her, bird, turn</i> | <i>ir</i> <i>ur</i> <i>er</i> } <i>> ə:</i> |
| u: | <i>oo</i> | <i>moon</i> | <i>o: > u:</i> |

Main Historical Sources of Modern spellings (Diphthongs)



| <i>Diphthongs</i> | | | |
|-------------------|-------------------------|-------------------|------------------------|
| eɪ | ai, ei, ay | rain, rein, day | ai } > eɪ ei } > eɪ |
| | a in open syllables | make, late | a: > eɪ |
| aɪ | ī, y in open syllables | time, my | i: > aɪ |
| | i before ld, nd, mb | mild, kind, climb | i: > aɪ |
| | i before gh, ght | sigh, night | ix' > i: > aɪ |
| au | ou, oʊ | sound, now | u: > au |
| ou | o in open syllables, oa | rode, no, oak | ɔ: > ou |
| | ou, oʊ, o before ld | soul, row, old | ou — ou ɔ: > ou |
| ɪə | ere, eer, ear | here, beer, ear | e:r > ɪə ɛ:r > ɪə |
| ɛə | ear, ere, are | bear, there, hare | ɛ:r > ɛə a:r > ɛə |
| ɔə, ɔ: | ore | more | ɔ:r > ɔə |
| uə | oor | poor | o:r > uə |

Main Historical Sources of Modern spellings (Triphthongs)



*Triph-
thongs*

aɪə

auə

ire

our, ower

shire

our, power

i:r > aɪə

u:r > auə

Main Historical Sources of Modern spellings (Consonants)



| Sound | Spelling | Examples | Sound changes, accounting for the spelling |
|-------------------|--|---|--|
| Consonants | | | |
| ð | <i>th</i> between vowels | <i>bathe</i> | ð — ð |
| | <i>th</i> initially in form-words | <i>the</i> | θ > ð |
| z | <i>s</i> between vowels | <i>choose, easy</i> | z — z |
| | <i>s</i> finally (unless preceded by voiceless consonants) | <i>is, days</i> | s > z |
| ʃ | <i>sh</i> | <i>ship, flesh</i> | ʃ — ʃ |
| tʃ | <i>ssi, ti</i> <i>ch, tch</i> <i>ture</i> | <i>passion, action</i> <i>chin, watch</i> <i>nature</i> | sj — ʃ tʃ — tʃ tj > tʃ |
| ʒ | <i>g</i> <i>si, se</i> | <i>bourgeois</i> <i>pleasure</i> | ʒ — ʒ zj > ʒ |
| dʒ | <i>g</i> | <i>gender</i> | dʒ — dʒ |
| s | <i>c</i> | <i>certain</i> | s — s |