

Field Guide to the History of the English Language¹

This timeline highlights significant moments on the meandering path that gave us the English language as we know it today.

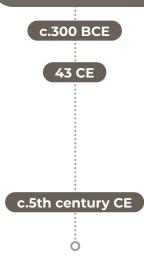
he history of English is a sprawling story of migration, invasion, and cultural contact that spans continents and millennia. It is also the story of colonialism and the rise and fall of an empire. The English language was endangered at different periods in its history, but it survived by borrowing and adapting from other languages. This gave English its exceptionally blended "mutt" character.

Although English has a rich prehistory rooted in the ancient Indo-European family tree of languages, this field guide begins at the dawn of the Common Era (CE), with the period leading up to the first recognizably English dialect: Anglo-Saxon or "Old English."

6th century BCE-5th century CE

Waves of historical invasions carry new languages to England, beginning as early as the sixth century Before Common Era (BCE).

The ancient Celts bring the proto-Celtic languages that would later evolve into Welsh, Cornish, and Breton. But apart from leaving their mark on place-names (such as the rivers Thames and Avon), the Celtic languages have limited impact on the development of English.



Celtic migration to Britain peaks.

The Romans expand their empire to England and establish the province of Britannia, conquering the Celts (now known as Britons) and colonizing their territory. Some Britons assimilate with the Romans. Others migrate to the margins of Roman territory—Cornwall, Wales, and Scotland.

Latin, the language of the Roman conquerors, has a significant influence on the development of English (second only to the Germanic languages) over many centuries.

The Roman Empire collapses, and the Romans withdraw from England. Germanic tribes from northern Europe (mainly Angles, Saxons, Jutes, and Frisians) migrate to the former Roman territory, bringing their dialects to the island.

¹Main sources: Richard Barker, <u>The History of English</u>; Melvyn Bragg, *The Adventures of English: The Biography of a Language* (New York: Arcade Publishing, 2011); Folger Shakespeare Library; Kevin Stroud, "<u>The History of English Podcast</u>."





The Anglo-Saxon period ends with the Norman invasion of England. Old English evolves into Middle English under the influence of Norman French.

century-

14th

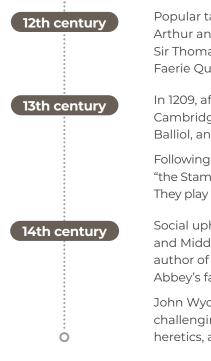
century

1066

William the Conqueror defeats Harold II, the last Anglo-Saxon king. The ruling Normans impose French as the language of authority and power in England.

English survives as "the language of the people," but adopts as many as 10,000 French loanwords in the three centuries following conquest. Old English evolves into Middle English during this period. New vocabulary includes words of war (*army*, *soldier*, and *guard*), social order (*crown*, *court*, *peasant*), and authority (*govern*, *obedience*, and *traitor*).





Popular tales of chivalry and romance flourish. Welsh, French, and Latin stories about King Arthur and his court influence literary works in English for centuries to follow, including Sir Thomas Malory's "Le Morte d'Arthur" (c.1470) and Edmund Spenser's epic poem "The Faerie Queene" (1590).

In 1209, after violent clashes with local townsfolk, a group of Oxford scholars flees to Cambridge and establishes a new university there. The first of Oxford's colleges—Merton, Balliol, and University College—are founded between 1249 and 1264.

Following a 14th-century prohibition on lecturing outside of these two universities (known as "the Stamford Oath"), Oxford and Cambridge remain England's only universities until 1827. They play an important role in standardizing written English in the centuries that follow.

Social upheaval in the aftermath of the Black Death restores English to prominence, and Middle English literature thrives. This is the age of Geoffrey Chaucer—celebrated author of *The Canterbury Tales* and the first poet to be laid to rest in Westminster Abbey's famed Poets' Corner.

John Wycliffe and his followers are the first to translate the Latin Bible into English, challenging the authority of the Roman Catholic Church. The Church condemns them as heretics, and Parliament bans English-language Bibles.

A series of changes to the pronunciation of long vowels in Middle English, known as the Great Vowel Shift, begins in the Midlands and southern England, peaking in the period between Chaucer and Shakespeare.

English spelling and pronunciation become out of sync because the advent of printing fixes spelling while pronunciation is still in flux. For example, *clean* in Shakespeare's works rhymes with modern English *lane*, rather than *lean*.

Anchoress Julian of Norwich's works about her religious visions distinguish her as the first known woman writer in English literature.

Henry V is the first king since 1066 to use English for official state business. Clerks in the chancery, the government's main administrative office, begin to standardize written English to better communicate laws throughout the kingdom.

William Caxton sets up England's first printing press in Westminster. The first dated book in English to be printed in England is *Dictes or Sayengis of the Philosophres* (1477).

: Late 15th century

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c.15th

centurv

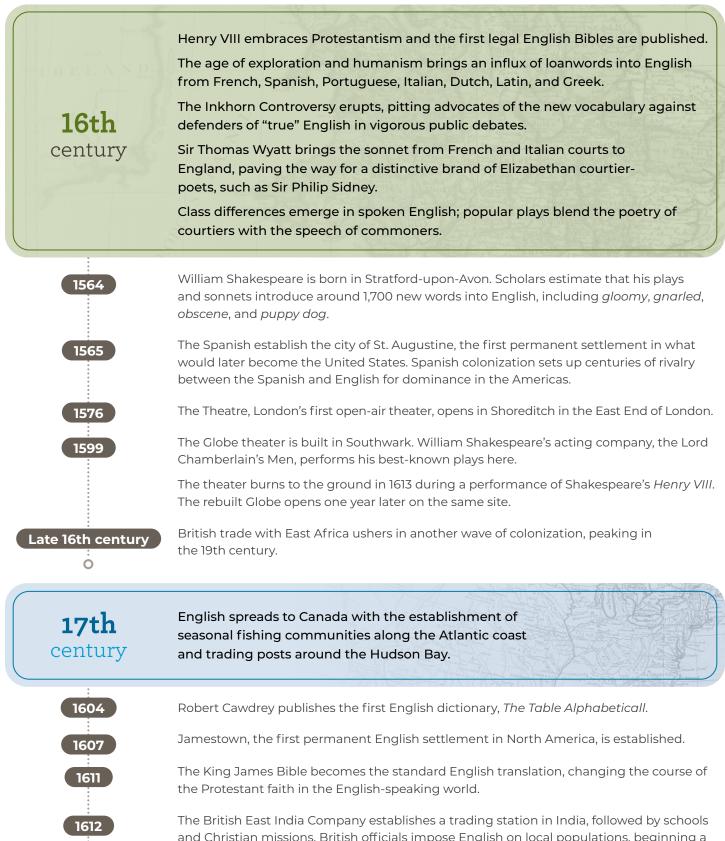
c.1413

1413-1422

1476

British trade with West Africa inaugurates a long period of settlement and colonization. English-based pidgin and creole languages begin to develop, many of which still exist today.





and Christian missions. British officials impose English on local populations, beginning a long period of linguistic colonization.





The first collection of Shakespeare's plays, known as the *First Folio*, is published seven years after the playwright's death. Eighteen of the 36 plays in the *First Folio* had never been published before. Only 235 copies are known to exist today, including two discovered in 2016.

The settlers of Massachusetts Bay translate 150 Hebrew psalms into English for their church services. They publish the *Bay Psalm Book*, the first book published in English in America, on a printing press imported from England. Around 1,700 copies are printed, and they sell for twenty pence each.

English colonists bring the English language to North America. Regional English dialects disappear and new American dialects develop. Pronunciation and vocabulary that disappear in England persist in American English.

18th century American English forges its own path as settlers coin words for unfamiliar features of their new landscape, including *foothill*, *bluff*, and *rattlesnake*. They adopt some Native American terms (such as *raccoon*, *wigwam*, and *moccasin*), but the settlers generally prefer to coin new words and native languages have a limited influence on English.

Western African languages influence the development of new dialects spoken by enslaved Africans in America—the roots of Black American English.

English absorbs loanwords from Dutch, French, and Spanish colonies and from Indigenous cultures in the West Indies and the Americas. Pidgin and creole languages develop out of the slave trade in the West Indies.



Daniel Defoe publishes Robinson Crusoe, widely considered to be the first English novel.

Samuel Johnson publishes A Dictionary of the English Language, which inspires a flood of English grammars.

The Treaty of Paris (1763) ends the Seven Years' War. Britain's victory over France drives English settlement in Eastern Canada.

British loyalists flee the American colonies during and immediately after the American Revolution. They seek refuge in Canada, forming English-speaking communities from Ontario to Nova Scotia. Their arrival creates an English-speaking majority in the formerly French territories except for French-speaking Quebec.

Britain establishes a penal colony in Australia. Emerging dialects blend regional English dialects, criminal slang, and Aboriginal languages. *Boomerang, koala*, and *wombat* come from native languages; *dinkum* (work) travels from the English Midlands; and *chum, grub* (food), *swag*, and *seedy* come from the transplanted criminal populations.

European whalers and missionaries begin to settle New Zealand, and Britain establishes a new colony in 1840 with the Treaty of Waitangi. A new dialect emerges, influenced by the native Māori language and sharing vocabulary with Australian English. New words include *kiwi* and *kia ora* (hello, goodbye, thank you) from the Māori and the uniquely New Zealand slang *bach* (vacation home, pronounced *batch*), *tramping* (hiking), and *togs* (swimsuit).



The British expel French-speaking Acadians from Nova Scotia. The Acadians settle in Louisiana and speak Cajun English. A modern Cajun English speaker might say *allons* (let's go), *mo chagren* (I'm sorry), or *cocodril* (alligator).

Louisiana Creole also develops from contact among enslaved Africans, Native Americans, and French and Spanish colonizers. *Jambalaya*, *bayou* (originally Choctaw), and *gumbo* (originally West African) come to Louisiana by way of French.

18th and 19th centuries

In England, a movement to define "correct" and "proper" speech increasingly marginalizes provincial dialects, but writers like William Wordsworth and Charles Dickens celebrate the "plain" English of commoners.

Popular novels emerge as the benchmark for written English. This is the golden age of the Romantic writers and poets, who emphasize human emotion and the beauty of the natural world.

Scientific advances and the Industrial Revolution bring an influx of new vocabulary to the English language, including *electron*, *caffeine*, *lorry*, and *spinning jenny*. Existing words take on new meanings, such as *locomotive*, *industry*, and *class* (in the sense of social hierarchy).

The British Empire peaks. The English language continues its rise to dominance in the British colonies of West Africa.

Colonizers begin to anglicize the Afrikaans and Black populations of South Africa, and a distinctive dialect emerges over time, drawing from the country's many linguistic influences.

The expansion and settlement of the American West brings Spanish loanwords into English, including *ranch*, *mustang*, *lasso*, and *stampede*.



19th

century

Mary Shelley anonymously publishes *Frankenstein*, or the Modern Prometheus, an early ancestor of both the horror and science-fiction genres.

English replaces Dutch as the official language of South Africa.

Schoolteacher Noah Webster publishes *An American Dictionary of the English Language*, which sets the standard for American English spelling.

The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo ends the Mexican-American War and cedes Spanishspeaking territories to the United States, covering present-day California, Nevada, Utah, New Mexico, most of Arizona and Colorado, and parts of Oklahoma, Kansas, and Wyoming.

Spanish influence on the English language moves from limited use in the Southwestern states to common usage across the country, enduring to the present day.

The London-based Philological Society publishes the first edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the authoritative source for modern English, in 10 volumes containing more than 250,000 entries.





20th

century

1947

1960s

1987

1989

2000

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Completion of the Canadian Pacific Railway and a subsequent land boom fuel the migration of English-speaking settlers to Western Canada.

The Spanish-American War ends and Spain cedes control over the Philippines, bringing American influences to the country's language and culture.

By the end of the 19th century, the United States overtakes the United Kingdom to become the fastest-growing economy in the world. American pop culture, Wall Street, and U.S. GIs in Europe during and after World War II influence the growth of American English as a dominant global language.

In England, radio (from the 1920s) and television (from the 1930s) enhance the prestige of Received Pronunciation (also known as the Queen's English or BBC English), the accent spoken by England's educated middle and upper classes. Regional dialects are further marginalized.

In the United States, the learned "Mid-Atlantic accent" becomes the standard for radio and television. It is an intentionally cultivated accent that blends American and British pronunciation and is meant to reflect the speech of educated elites. You can hear this accent in the speech of 1930s-era movie stars like Cary Grant, Grace Kelly, and Katharine Hepburn.

India achieves independence from Britain, but English remains the *lingua franca* for law, government, military, business, media, and tourism.

Five former British colonies in East Africa (the modern nations of Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Malawi, and Zambia) achieve independence and adopt English as an official language. Zimbabwe follows suit in 1980.

The first edition of the Oxford English Dictionary is published as a CD-ROM.

The second edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary* is published, comprising 22,000 pages in 20 volumes. A CD-ROM edition appears in 1992.

The OED Online launches, boosting universal access to the Oxford English Dictionary. Quarterly updates to the online dictionary will appear in the dictionary's future third edition.

Late 20th centurypresent Technological advances transform English vocabulary on a global scale, fueled by the rapid growth of personal computers, mobile devices, internet culture, and social media. These developments propel *chatbot*, *influencer*, *selfie*, and *google* (as a verb) into common usage.

The movement to promote inclusive and culturally sensitive language continues to influence the evolution of popular English usage.

