



Tips and tools
FOR CONTENT & DESIGN

Field Guide to the History of the English Language¹

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

The 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.

c.300 BCE

Celtic migration to Britain peaks.

43 CE

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.

c.5th century CE

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, [The History of English](#); Melvyn Bragg, *The Adventures of English: The Biography of a Language* (New York: Arcade Publishing, 2011); [Folger Shakespeare Library](#); Kevin Stroud, “[The History of English Podcast](#).”



6th century– 10th century

The Germanic tribes establish thriving kingdoms that persist until the Norman Conquest. Anglo-Saxon (Old English) emerges from Wessex, the territory of the West Saxons, as the dominant dialect.

The Frisian languages, spoken in regions of the Netherlands and northern Germany, remain the closest cousins to English in the family tree of Germanic languages today.

6th century

Christian missionaries bring Latin and Greek loanwords (primarily religious terms) to Old English. Latin brings *angel*, *altar*, and *verse*, for example, and Greek sneaks in via Latin with *psalm*, *apostle*, *pope*, and *school*.

c.7th century

The earliest surviving Old English poem, *Cædmon's Hymn*, is composed. The poem appears in Bede's Latin *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum* (Ecclesiastical History of the English People).

635

Irish missionary Aidan founds the monastery of Lindisfarne in Northumbria, bringing his library of manuscripts written in the Roman alphabet with him. The Anglo-Saxon kingdoms develop an Old English alphabet based on these manuscripts, which replaces their native runic alphabet, the futhorc.

9th century

King Alfred the Great is credited with "saving" the English language by defending his kingdom of Wessex from Danish (Viking) invaders. The Danes respect the boundaries defined in their treaties with Alfred and leave the kingdoms of Wessex and Mercia alone.

Instead, they defeat and permanently settle kingdoms in the north and east of England. English grammar develops under the influence of Old Norse in the Danish-ruled territories, which become known as the Danelaw.

c.900

The epic poem *Beowulf* is composed, widely considered to be the most significant work of literature written in Old English. The heroic saga provides historical insights into Anglo-Saxon society and culture.

11th century– 14th century

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

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*).



12th century

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).

13th century

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.

14th century

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.

c.15th century

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*.

c.1413

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

1413–1422

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.

1476

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

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.



16th century

Henry VIII embraces Protestantism and the first legal English Bibles are published.

The age of exploration and humanism brings an influx of loanwords into English from French, Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, Dutch, Latin, and Greek.

The Inkhorn Controversy erupts, pitting advocates of the new vocabulary against defenders of “true” English in vigorous public debates.

Sir Thomas Wyatt brings the sonnet from French and Italian courts to England, paving the way for a distinctive brand of Elizabethan courtier-poets, such as Sir Philip Sidney.

Class differences emerge in spoken English; popular plays blend the poetry of courtiers with the speech of commoners.

1564

William Shakespeare is born in Stratford-upon-Avon. Scholars estimate that his plays and sonnets introduce around 1,700 new words into English, including *gloomy*, *gnarled*, *obscene*, and *puppy dog*.

1565

The Spanish establish the city of St. Augustine, the first permanent settlement in what would later become the United States. Spanish colonization sets up centuries of rivalry between the Spanish and English for dominance in the Americas.

1576

The Theatre, London's first open-air theater, opens in Shoreditch in the East End of London.

1599

The Globe theater is built in Southwark. William Shakespeare's acting company, the Lord Chamberlain's Men, performs his best-known plays here.

The theater burns to the ground in 1613 during a performance of Shakespeare's *Henry VIII*. The rebuilt Globe opens one year later on the same site.

Late 16th century

British trade with East Africa ushers in another wave of colonization, peaking in the 19th century.

17th century

English spreads to Canada with the establishment of seasonal fishing communities along the Atlantic coast and trading posts around the Hudson Bay.

1604

Robert Cawdrey publishes the first English dictionary, *The Table Alphabeticall*.

1607

Jamestown, the first permanent English settlement in North America, is established.

1611

The King James Bible becomes the standard English translation, changing the course of the Protestant faith in the English-speaking world.

1612

The British East India Company establishes a trading station in India, followed by schools and Christian missions. British officials impose English on local populations, beginning a long period of linguistic colonization.



1623

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.

1640

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.

18th century

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.

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.

1719

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

1755

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

1763

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

1783–84

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.

1788

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.

1790s

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).



18th and 19th centuries

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.

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).

19th century

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*.

1818

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

1822

English replaces Dutch as the official language of South Africa.

1828

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

1848

The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo ends the Mexican-American War and cedes Spanish-speaking 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.

1884–1928

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.



1885

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

1898

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

20th century

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.

1947

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

1960s

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.

1987

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

1989

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

2000

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 century-present

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.

