

About Middle English Grammar

Before the Norman Conquest, people were taught to write a form of Old English that was more archaic than the form they actually spoke. We're in the same position today. We're taught to write 'write', even though we no longer pronounce the *w* and the *e*, and our pronunciation of the *i* is no longer the original pronunciation, which was originally more like the *i* in 'machine'.

After the Norman Conquest, when French became the language of the elite, most of the literate class were no longer taught to read and write in English. Although there were some attempts to continue an English literary tradition, it is clear that few writers could reproduce or even completely understand Old English, especially as time wore on. Instead, they tended to represent their own spoken language—early Middle English—often in unsystematic ways.

Without schooling in written English, early Middle English writers wrote in their own local dialects, so that the modern reader who becomes familiar with one text must learn another system to read a text from a different part of the country. Although, by the fourteenth-century, the London dialect of Geoffrey Chaucer begins to resemble modern English, many of his contemporaries, such as the poet of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, continued to write in local dialects. This, combined with the archaic meanings of words and older grammatical forms, can make Middle English a challenge for today's student. For the most part, however, these problems are overcome through practice and memorisation of vocabulary. In general, most diligent students begin to read with good fluency within five to six weeks.

Here are some tips to remember:

- There is no set spelling system in Middle English; the same words are often spelt more than one way. Reading aloud can help you recognise the intended word.
- In Middle English the endings *-(e)s* and *-(e)n* had multiple functions: the plurals and possessives of nouns, and various forms of verbs. In order to determine the meanings of words with these endings, it may be necessary to consider all the possibilities before deciding which is appropriate.
- Middle English words that have survived in Modern English sometimes had different meanings in the earlier period (e.g. *silly* meant 'blessed' and *buxom* meant 'obedient'). You should always be aware of this possibility. Student editions often point out these differences in meaning, but you should also consult dictionaries. The *Oxford English Dictionary* records earlier meanings of words and is often accessible online through university libraries. The online *Middle English Dictionary* (<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/med/>) is also invaluable. It will frequently cite the exact quotation you are trying to understand.
- Many Middle English words did not survive in Modern English but occur very frequently in Middle English literature. Keeping a running list of these words is very helpful for learning them.

Finally, knowledge of traditional grammar (<http://www.soton.ac.uk/~wpwt/notes/grammar.htm>) and experience studying a foreign language can provide the student with helpful skills for learning Middle English. Unfortunately, our education system today rarely gives students skills of this sort. However, studying Middle English grammar can help you pick up the knowledge you may have missed out on.

Pronunciation

Since Middle English has no set spelling system, it is difficult to provide a pronunciation guide which will work for the large variety of texts the student may encounter. Most guides settle for the late fourteenth-century London dialect of Geoffrey Chaucer. This one is based on Chaucer's English but attempts to be a little more comprehensive. It also attempts to offer practical advice for getting your pronunciation right the majority of the time, even when the actual pronunciation rules are too complicated to present in a concise form here.

Vowels

The letters *a*, *e*, *i*, *o*, and *u* are generally pronounced as in Spanish. If you use the phrase *Jose's tacos and burritos*, you have the pronunciation for all these letters. These pronunciations are called "tense" (or sometimes "close") vowels.

Sometimes *e*, *i*, *o*, and *u* are pronounced in as in English **bet**, **bit**, **for**, and **put**, especially when followed by two consonants. These pronunciations are called "lax" (or sometimes "open") vowels.

The rules for whether you should use tense or lax vowels are pretty complicated. Try both pronunciations and go with what feels right to you. You'll be right the majority of the time.

The letter *e* is always pronounced, even at the ends of words. In unstressed syllables (generally that means in prefixes or after the first syllable of a word without a prefix), the pronunciation is something like the *e* in *happen*. In poetry, final *-e* may be silent if the next word begins with a vowel or *h*. In words of French origin, final *-e* is pronounced like the *-e* in *Jose* (e.g. *beauté*). Modern editors sometimes place an accent over this *-e* to help the student (though Middle English writers did not).

The vowel *i* may also be spelt *y* or *j*. The pronunciation is the same. The letter *i* can be used to represent the consonant *j*, as in *ioi* (or *ioy*) for *joy*.

The vowel *u* can sometimes be represented *v* or *w*. The pronunciation is the same. The letter *u* can sometimes represent the sound of *v*, as in *wiues* for *wives*.

Middle English scribes employ various combinations of vowels. As a general rule, *oi/oy* are pronounced as in Modern English *boy*. *Au/aw* are pronounced as in Modern English *house*.

Ou/ow are pronounced as in Modern English *boot*. *Ai/ay/ei/ey* are pronounced like the vowel in *find*. Double vowels like *aa* are pronounced just like single vowels.

Consonants

f is pronounced like in Modern English. However, in southern England this sound was pronounced *v* and is often spelt *v* or *u* (*voxe/uoxe* = 'fox').

g is pronounced as in *goat* before the vowels *a*, *o*, and *u*. Before *i* and *e* it may be pronounced like *j*.

The combination *gg* sometimes represents the *g* sound (e.g. *pigge*) and sometimes represents the *j* sound (e.g. *egge*, *segge*). Generally, you can use the consonant in Modern English as a guide to the Middle English pronunciation (e.g. *pig*, *edge*); however, the *j* sound sometimes appears in Modern English as *y* (e.g. Middle English *seggen* ‘to say’).

ȝ is the Middle English letter ‘yogh’. Between vowels such as *a*, *o*, and *u* it was pronounced like the *ch* in Scottish *loch*, but with more vibration of the vocal cords. Next to *e* and *i*, it is pronounced like *y*. In some later texts, such as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the yogh is used to represent an *s* sound. In other, especially later, texts the sound may be spelt with *i/y* or *gh*, depending upon the pronunciation.

h is pronounced like in Modern English. However, because many medieval scribes were used to writing French, in which *h* is silent, the letter *h* occasionally occurs at the beginning of words that in English begin with a vowel sound.

k is pronounced like in Modern English. It is always pronounced before *n*, as in *knife*, *knight*.

l is pronounced like in Modern English. It is always pronounced in words like *folk* and *talk*.

þ is the Middle English letter ‘thorn’. It is pronounced like Modern English ‘th’ in *then* or *thigh* (choose which one sounds right). In early Middle English texts the Old English *ð* is sometimes used interchangeably with *þ*.

v is pronounced like in Modern English. It may be spelt *u* in medieval texts, although these spellings are often replaced by ‘v’ in modern editions.

w is pronounced like in Modern English. It is always pronounced before *r*, as in *write*. In early Middle English texts the Old English letter ‘wynn’ (*ƿ*) is sometimes used for *w*.

Grammar

Nouns

The plurals of nouns generally end in *-s* or *-es*. However, some nouns end in *-n* or *-en* (like Modern English *ox*, *oxen*), especially in earlier texts.

Possessive forms end in *-s* or *-es*. There is no apostrophe; possessives are distinguished from plurals by context.

Verbs

The infinitive form (e.g. ‘to go’, ‘to sleep’, ‘to sing’) ends in *-n* or *-en*: e.g. *goon*, *slepen*, *singen*. In later texts, the *-n* may disappear.

The *-n* or *-en* ending can also indicate a plural form of the verb: e.g. *they goon*, *they slepen*, *they singen*. In the past tense, the ending may be *-n*, *-en*, or *-ed*.

The *-n* or *-en* can also be a past participle (like Modern English *eaten*). In this case, the word will generally be preceded by a form of *have* or *be*, or else it will function as an adjective describing a noun.

The ending *-þ* or *-ep* (*-eth* in modern spelling) indicates the present tense. It can also indicate an imperative (command) addressed to more than one person.

The past tense is generally indicated, as in modern English, with an ending containing *-t*, *-d*, or *-ed*. Verbs of this type have similar past participle forms (see point 3 above). The past tense and past participle may also be indicated by a change in the root vowel of the word, as in Modern English *sing*, *sang*, *sung*. Middle English possessed more verbs of this ‘irregular’ type than Modern English does, and some Modern English verbs of the ‘regular’ type were ‘irregular’ in Middle English, e.g. *holp* ‘helped’.

Modern English expressions like ‘if he be’, ‘let him be’, or ‘may he be’, which suggest hypothetical or desirable situations, are indicated by the subjunctive form of the verb, which ends in *-e*, or *-en* in the plural. Examples: *God yelde yow* ‘may God reward you’, *if God yelde yow* ‘if God rewards you’. Verbs are made negative by the use of the words *ne* and *nat* on either side of the verb. Either one or both words may be present to indicate the negative.

Pronouns

Middle English pronouns are most easily understood by means of a broad historical overview. The tables below give only some common spellings, the actual number of spellings to be found in Middle English texts is much larger. In using the tables below, keep in mind that there is considerable overlap between the different periods.

For the subject of a sentence:

Old English	Early Middle English	Late Middle English	Early Modern English
ic	ich	I	I
þu	þou	thou	thou
he	he	he	he
heo	he, heo, ha	she	she
hit	hit	hit	it
we	we	we	we
ge	ye, you	ye, you	you, ye
hi	hi, heo, ha	they	they

Notes:

- The ‘thou’ form is used to refer to one person, whereas the ‘ye/you’ form refers to more than one person. However, Middle English adopted to some extent the French *tu/vous* distinction, in which the singular *tu* is used by those of lower social status, and the plural *vous* is used in formal address or by those of lower social status to address those of higher social status. This convention appears irregularly in Middle English texts, most frequently in the fifteenth century. You will have to decide if it is present and has some implications for the interpretation of the text.

- It can be very difficult to distinguish the words for ‘he’, ‘she’, and ‘they’ in early Middle English, since they all look pretty much the same. You need to judge by context. The forms for ‘she’ and ‘they’ given above are not a complete list of all the possible variant spellings.

For the object of a verb or preposition:

Old English	Early Middle English	Late Middle English	Early Modern English
me	me	me	me
þe	þe	thee	thee
hine, him	him	him	him
hire	hir(e)	hir(e)	her
hit, him	hit	hit	it
us	us	us	us
eow	you	you	you
hi, him	hem	them	them

- In early texts ‘thee’ pronoun is spelt *þe*, which can look like the definite article ‘the’ or the relative pronoun meaning ‘that’, ‘which’, or ‘who’. Make sure that you judge from context which word you have.
- The word for ‘her’ can look like the word for ‘their’ (see below).

For possessive pronouns:

Old English	Early Middle English	Late Middle English	Early Modern English
min	min(e)	my, mine	my, mine
þin	þin(e)	thy, thine	thy, thine
his	his	his	his
hire	hir(e)	hir(e)	her
his	his	his	his, its
ure	ure, oure	oure	our
eower	your(e)	your(e)	your
hira	hire	hire	their

- Over time, the words for ‘my’ and ‘thy’ increasingly lose the *-n* when the following word begins with a consonant.
- The possessive of *it* (present-day *its*) is *his*, right up to the time of Shakespeare.
- In early texts the word for ‘their’, *hir(e)*, can look like the word for ‘her’ (see above).

A Note on Editions

In modern editions of Middle English texts, especially those intended for use by undergraduates, the spellings are often modernised and/or made more consistent. Sometimes this leads to substantial differences between the spellings of the text you are reading and those of the original manuscripts from which the texts are derived. Typically, the letter *þ* (and the early letters *ð* and *ƿ*) are replaced by *th* and *w*. The letter *ȝ* is frequently replaced by *gh*, *y*, or *z*, depending on its pronunciation. The letter *i*

is also frequently replaced by *j* when it has the sound of Modern English *j*, and the letter *u* is replaced by *v* where it represents the *v* sound. In addition, modern editors may reduce a variety of different spellings of the same word to a single consistent spelling, often one that looks most like Modern English. While you may be dazzled at first by the complexity of the Middle English spelling system, it is important to remember that the text are using is likely to be giving you a reading experience very different from the one experienced by the texts medieval readers.