

English Spelling: past, present and future



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English spelling began life as a comparatively straightforward means of encoding the spoken language using letters, so that spelling reflected pronunciation quite closely. However, because Anglo-Saxon scribes were employing the Roman alphabet – developed for the writing of Latin, and before that Greek - there were some obvious problems. For instance, Latin had no “th” sound and so the Anglo-Saxons had to turn to the Germanic runic alphabet in order to borrow the letter thorn – so-called because it resembles a thorn on a stalk. The letter thorn continued to be used in English up to the fifteenth century, when it developed a y-shaped appearance; it now survives in the archaism *ye*, which should properly be pronounced “the” rather than “ye”.

Throughout the Middle Ages there was no single standard way of spelling, enabling people to spell words in ways that reflected their own pronunciations. People who dropped their h’s at the beginnings of words like *house* and *how* could drop them in their spelling. But as literacy became more widespread literally hundreds of spellings of common words were in use, making communication difficult. Alternative spellings like *thorow* and *thorough* are relatively straightforward variant forms of the word *through*; but how would you fare with more unusual ones, such as *drowgh*, *yhurght*, *trghug*, *trowffe*?

These communicative problems led to the emergence of a single standard system in the fifteenth century, promoted by the new technology of printing which replaced the copying of books by hand (hence 'manuscripts'). But, while standardisation removed the problems caused by spelling variation, it introduced a new problem. Where medieval spelling could reflect regional pronunciations, the establishment of a single system for all speakers led to greater mismatches between speech and writing. The fixing of the spelling system also meant that it could no longer keep in step with changes in pronunciation. As consonant clusters began to be simplified in speech in words like *knight*, *gnat*, *write*, *lamb*, *folk*, these changes could not be reflected in their spellings. Because vowels tend to be much less stable than consonants, there have been considerable changes in English vowel sounds since the fifteenth century. The most dramatic such change, known today as the Great Vowel Shift, took place in the sixteenth century, shortly after the emergence of a standard spelling system, resulting in a major change in the distribution of the long vowels. We can get a sense of the effects of such changes by considering words spelled with "oo" today. In Middle English such words were pronounced with a long "o" sound, just as the spelling implies. But a sequence of sound changes has left us with a great variety of pronunciations: compare *good*, *food* and *blood* for instance. Sound changes affecting words spelled with "ea" have resulted in them being pronounced identically with "ee" words (compare *meet* and *meat*), although for Shakespeare *meat* would have rhymed with *state*. So, one reason why English spelling is comparatively unphonetic today is because it was standardised in the fifteenth century. By contrast a language like Finnish, which

was only standardised in the nineteenth century, has a much shallower orthography: one with a closer relationship between spelling and pronunciation.

Another difficulty associated with English spelling is the large number of words that have been introduced, or “borrowed”, from other languages. This was less of a problem during the Anglo-Saxon period, when fewer words were borrowed, and when the tendency was to respell them according to native practices. So a Greek loanword like *phoenix* was spelled with an “f” rather than a “ph”. But in later periods words were adopted from a range of different languages with their spellings kept in tact. So, for instance, French words like *centre* mean that “c” can sometimes be pronounced “s”, while Italian loans like *ciabatta* mean that in some cases it is “tsch”. French loanwords with “ch” are pronounced “sh”, while English words have a “tch” sound; compare *cheese* and *chef*; Latin (ultimately Greek loans) with “ch”, like *chaos*, are pronounced “k”. Words borrowed from the Scandinavian languages with “sk” are spelled “sk”, as in *sky* and *skin*, French words have “sc” as in *scout*, while Latin and Greek loans with this sound have “sch” as in *school*. In some cases, like *sceptic/skeptic*, there are two options, which vary according to UK or US usage.

Because of these complications, calls to reform English spelling stretch back to the sixteenth century, although the proposers have often had conflicting agendas. Where some reformers wished to restore a closer link between spelling and pronunciation, proposing phonetic spellings like *niit* “knight,” others sought to restore the link between spelling and etymology, introducing silent letters and thereby driving speech and writing further apart. For these reformers spelling should be a guide to meaning rather than pronunciation; since many of the loanwords were derived ultimately from Latin, a language which all educated

people were familiar with, they concluded that English spelling should be altered to reflect its Latin origins more closely. So where words like *doubt* and *debt* were borrowed from French *doute* and *dette*, silent b's were added to reflect their Latin etymons *dubitare* and *debitum*. This may seem unhelpful to us, especially now that Latin is not widely studied, but it does have some advantages, such as maintaining links with related words borrowed directly from Latin, such as *indubitable* and *debit*. This reform has left us with unphonetic spellings like *receipt*, *salmon*, and *scissors*, although in some cases, such as *adventure*, *perfect*, *fault* and *hotel*, the respelling has triggered a change in pronunciation.

Reforming spelling to make it reflect pronunciation more closely gives rise to a sociolinguistic problem: whose pronunciation should it reflect? For the sixteenth-century reformers this was easy: their own. But to attempt to select one pronunciation as the basis of a reformed spelling for a global language like English would be both impossible and pointless. For if we were to select the reference accent known as Received Pronunciation as the basis, a decision which would be hugely contentious in the first place, it would only make spelling more phonetic for those who use this accent. Let's take an example. RP is a non-rhotic accent, which means that RP speakers don't pronounce "r" in words like *car* and *card*. So a reformed orthography based upon RP would drop the letter "r" from these words, removing a silent letter and thereby bringing spelling and sound into closer alignment. But Scots, Irish and most North American accents continue to sound "r" in these words, so that, for these speakers, this change would have the opposite effect.

Despite numerous ingenious propositions for reforming spelling, the effect of such proposals has been negligible. The only successful reformer was the American linguist Noah Webster (1758-1843), whose simplified spellings, such as *color*, *center*, *judgment*, were adopted on nationalistic, rather than linguistic, or educational grounds. Webster's reforms succeeded because they helped to give American English a distinct identity, setting it apart from its colonial ancestor. However, even with this incentive, spellings such as *ake* 'ache', *tung* 'tongue' and *iland* 'island' failed to win widespread acceptance.

As English continues to spread across the globe and to be used in a variety of new media, its spelling system continues to adapt and to evolve. Its increasing use by non-native speakers and in new modes of electronic communication mean that the standard spelling system is increasingly coming under pressure. The printed word has served as the guardian of the standard since the fifteenth century; as more text is published on the Internet and in eBooks, will the same standards of editing and proofreading be observed? Might the future for English spelling be a return to the Middle Ages, where spelling variation rather than standardisation becomes the norm?