

**APSU Writing Center**  
Middle English

### **Middle English**

- English has never been just one single language. Even today:
  - Americans write **color**, while others write **colour**.
  - Some people say **tomayto**; others say **tomahto**.
  - In some regions, people say **y'all**; in others, **yous**.

### **What Makes Middle English Different?**

- There was no standard spelling.
- Writers often used their local dialect.
- Pronunciation varied widely.
- Words had more endings (inflections) than today.

Because of this, reading Middle English is different from reading Modern English. You're not just learning unfamiliar vocabulary, you're also learning different spelling patterns, pronunciations, and grammar rules.

### **Spelling and Pronunciation**

- Because Middle English spelling and pronunciation varied by dialect, the following guidelines are approximate.

#### **Vowel (a)**

- Pronounced like the a in father, never like the a in cat or modern name.
  - **Examples:** alle, tale, maken

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**Vowel (ai, ay, ey, ei)**

- Pronounced like the vowel in kite.
  - **Examples:** sayle, day, wey

**Vowel (e)**

- Before one consonant and another syllable: similar to the vowel in hey, but shorter.
  - **Examples:** here, swere
- Before two consonants: like the vowel in bet.
  - **Example:** herkneth
- In unstressed syllables (especially final –e): like the second syllable in horses.
  - **Examples:** gode, here

**Vowel (i / y)**

- Pronounced like the vowel in machine.
  - **Examples:** wives, rym, knyght, yvel

**Vowel (o)**

- Pronounced like the vowel in note, not like hot.
  - **Examples:** gode, holden, holy

**Vowel (ou / ow)**

- Often pronounced like the vowel in boot.
  - **Examples:** brouth, mouthe

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**Vowel (u)**

- Often like the vowel in boot.
  - **Examples:** ful, cuppe

**Vowel (oi / oy)**

- Pronounced like the vowel in boy.
  - **Example:** coy

**Important Notes About -e**

- Final -e is sometimes silent, especially at the end of a line of verse or before a vowel.
- Final -e may indicate a long vowel in Modern English.
  - **Example:** gode → good
  - **Example:** yhere → hear
  - **Example:** bord → board

**Consonant (h)**

- Pronounced as in heaven, though sometimes silent.

**Consonant (k)**

- Pronounced in words like knight and know (unlike today).

**Consonant (w / wh / hw)**

- May be pronounced distinctly (as in hw).

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**Consonant (ch)**

- Often pronounced like the sound in Scots loch or German Bach.
  - **Example:** knight

**Consonant (gn)**

- Pronounced like ny.
  - **Example:** signe

**Nouns**

- Middle English used more word endings (inflections) than Modern English.
- Most plurals end in –es or –s.
- Some use –(e)n:
  - brethren, children, (e)yen (“eyes”), and oxen
- Possessives end in –es or –s (no apostrophe).

**Infinitives**

- Often end in –en or –n.
  - Examples: riden (ride), drinken (drink)

**Present Tense Examples**

- I wile
- thou knowest
- he/she yeveth
- we wolden
- ye knowen

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**Strong Verbs**

- Form the past tense by changing the vowel (like sing/sang).
  - **Example:** help → holp
  - **Sample Forms:** I sang, thou songe, he/she sang, and we/ye/they songen

**Past Participles**

- Often ended in –en and sometimes had prefixes i- or y-: dronken, y-dronke=

**Weak Verbs**

- Form the past tense with –d(e) or –t(e).
- Example endings:
  - I herde, thou herdest, he herde, and we herden

**Past Participles**

- Could include i-/y-: maked, imaked

**Pronoun (I)**

- Often appears as ich.

**Pronouns (Thou vs. Ye/You)**

- Middle English distinguished singular and plural “you”:
  - **thou/thu** = singular
  - **ye** = plural subject
  - **you** = plural object
- Ye could also be used formally for one person.

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**Thee**

- Object form of thou; sometimes spelled with one e, making it easy to confuse with the.

**Contractions**

- Thou often contracts with verbs:
  - **artow** = art thou
  - **wiltou** = wilt thou

**She**

- The word for “she” varied by dialect: heo, hi, etc.
- These forms can resemble words for “he” or “they,” so context is important.

**Object and Possessive Forms**

- him = him
- hire = her
- hem = them
- his = his
- hire = her / their

**It**

- The word for “it” was hit.
- Its possessive form was his.

This is not a complete guide to Middle English grammar. Much of your understanding will come through repeated exposure and practice.