

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 **a** in father (ah), never like modern cat or modern long a in name.
 - **Example:** alle (AH-luh)
 - **Example:** tale (TAH-luh)
 - **Example:** maken (MAH-kuhn)

APSU Writing Center
Middle English

Vowel (ai, ay, ey, ei)

- Pronounced like the vowel in kite (long i sound /aɪ/).
 - **Example:** sayle (SY-luh)
 - **Example:** day (dye)
 - **Example:** wey (why)
 - **Example:** eighte (eight)

Vowel (e)

- Before one consonant and another syllable: Similar to the vowel in hey, but shorter and tenser.
 - **Example:** here (HEH-ruh, not modern “heer”)
 - **Example:** swere (SWEH-ruh)
- Before two consonants: like the vowel in bet.
 - **Example:** herkneth (HERK-neth)
- In unstressed syllables (especially final –e): A soft “uh” sound, similar to the second syllable in horses.
 - **Example:** gode (GOH-duh)
 - **Example:** name (NAH-muh)

Vowel (i / y)

- Pronounced like the vowel in machine (long ee /i:/).
 - **Example:** wives (WEE-ves)
 - **Example:** knyght (knee-kht)

Vowel (o)

- Pronounced like the vowel in note (long o), never like hot.
 - **Example:** holden (HOHL-duhn)
 - **Example:** holy (HOH-lee)

APSU Writing Center
Middle English

Vowel (ou / ow)

- Often pronounced like the vowel in boot (long oo /u:/), though this could vary.
 - **Example:** brouth (brooth)
 - **Example:** mouthe (mooth-uh)

Vowel (u)

- Often like the vowel in boot, though sometimes shorter (between put and boot depending on dialect).
 - **Example:** ful (fool)
 - **Example:** cuppe (koop-uh)

Vowel (oi / oy)

- Pronounced like the vowel in boy.
 - **Example:** joye (joy-uh)

Important Notes About -e

- Final -e is extremely important in Middle English.
- It is:
 - Often pronounced as a soft “uh”
 - Sometimes silent (especially before a vowel or at the end of a poetic line)
 - Sometimes signals a historically long vowel
 - **Example:** gode → good
 - **Example:** yhere → hear
 - **Example:** bord → board

Consonant (h)

- Pronounced as in heaven, though sometimes silent in certain dialects.

APSU Writing Center
Middle English

Consonant (k)

- Pronounced in words where Modern English has dropped it.
 - **Example:** knight (kuh-NEE-kht)
 - **Example:** know (kuh-NOH)

Consonant (w / wh / hw)

- **Often pronounced distinctly.**
 - **Example:** what could sound like “hwat”
 - **Example:** when like “hwen”

Consonant (ch)

- Often pronounced like the sound in Scots loch or German Bach.
 - **Example:** knicht (knee-kht)
 - **Example:** thurgh (thoor-kh)

Consonant (gn)

- Often pronounced like modern ny.
 - **Example:** signe (seen-ye)
 - **Example:** compaignye (com-PAN-yuh)

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).

APSU Writing Center
Middle English

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

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.

APSU Writing Center
Middle English

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.

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