English alphabet

Modern English is written with a Latin-script alphabet consisting of 26 letters, with each having both uppercase and lowercase forms. The word *alphabet* is a compound of *alpha* and *beta*, the names of the first two letters in the Greek alphabet. The earliest Old English writing during the 5th century used a runic alphabet known as the futhorc. The Old English Latin alphabet was adopted from the 7th century onward—and over the following centuries, various letters entered and fell out of use. By the 16th century, the present set of 26 letters had firmly established:

A a · B b · C c · D d · E e · F f · G g · H h · I i · J j · K k · L l · M m · N n · O o · P p · Q q · R r · S s · T t · U u · V v · W w · X x · Y y · Z z

There are 5 vowel letters and 19 consonant letters—as well as Y and W, which may function as either type.

Written English has a large number of digraphs, such as ⟨ch⟩, ⟨ea⟩, ⟨oo⟩, ⟨sh⟩, and ⟨th⟩. Diacritics are generally not used to write native English words, which is unusual among orthographies used to write the languages of Europe.

English alphabet

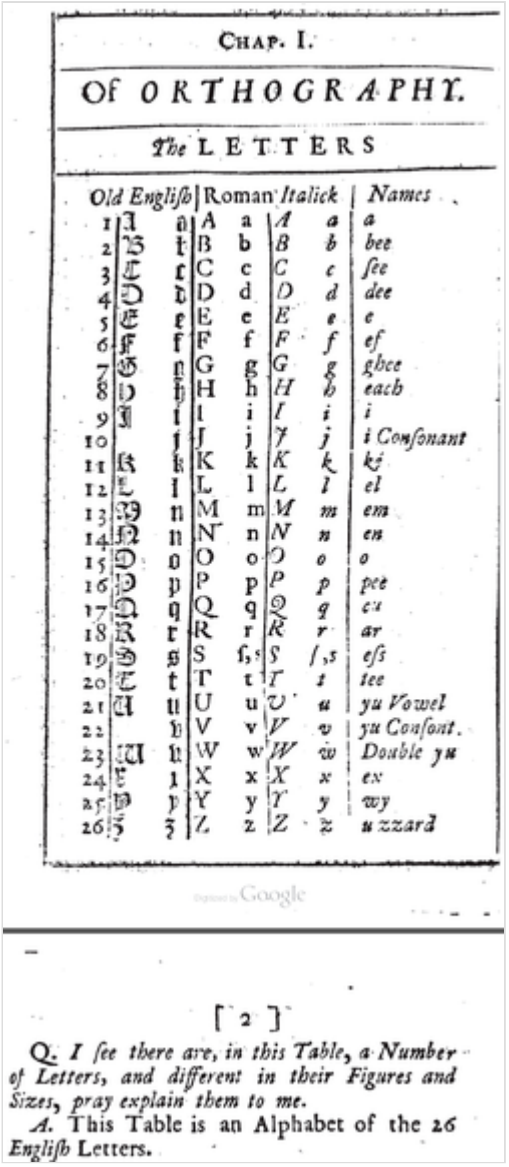
The Quick Brown Fox Jumps Over The Lazy Dog

An English-language pangram written with the FF Dax Regular typeface

Script type	Alphabet
Period	c. 16th century – present
Languages	English
Related scripts	
Parent systems	(Proto-writing) ▪ Egyptian hieroglyphs ▪ Proto-Sinaitic script ▪ Phoenician alphabet ▪ Greek alphabet ▪ Old Italic alphabet ▪ Latin alphabet ▪ English alphabet
Child systems	ISO basic Latin alphabet Cherokee syllabary Scots alphabet Osage alphabet Saanich writing system
ISO 15924	
ISO 15924	Latn (215), Latin
Unicode	
Unicode alias	Latin

Letter names

Unicode range	U+0000–U+007E (https://www.unicode.org/charts/PDF/U0000.pdf) Basic Latin



CHAP. I.

Of ORTHOGRAPHY.

The LETTERS

	Old Engliſh		Roman		Italick		Names
1	𝔄	𝔞	A	a	*A*	*a*	*a*
2	𝔅	𝔟	B	b	*B*	*b*	*bee*
3	ℭ	𝔠	C	c	*C*	*c*	*ſee*
4	𝔇	𝔡	D	d	*D*	*d*	*dee*
5	𝔈	𝔢	E	e	*E*	*e*	*e*
6	𝔉	𝔣	F	f	*F*	*f*	*ef*
7	𝔊	𝔤	G	g	*G*	*g*	*ghee*
8	𝔇	𝔥	H	h	*H*	*h*	*each*
9	𝔍	𝔦	I	i	*I*	*i*	*i*
10		𝔧	J	j	*J*	*j*	*i Conſonant*
11	𝔎	𝔨	K	k	*K*	*k*	*kj*
12	𝔏	𝔩	L	l	*L*	*l*	*el*
13	𝔐	𝔪	M	m	*M*	*m*	*em*
14	𝔑	𝔫	N	n	*N*	*n*	*en*
15	𝔒	𝔬	O	o	*O*	*o*	*o*
16	𝔓	𝔭	P	p	*P*	*p*	*pee*
17	𝔔	𝔮	Q	q	*Q*	*q*	*cu*
18	𝔎	𝔯	R	r	*R*	*r*	*ar*
19	𝔖	𝔰	S	ſ, s	*S*	*ſ, s*	*eſs*
20	𝔗	𝔱	T	t	*T*	*t*	*tee*
21	𝔘	𝔲	U	u	*U*	*u*	*yu Vowel*
22		𝔳	V	v	*V*	*v*	*yu Conſont.*
23	𝔘	𝔴	W	w	*W*	*w*	*Double yu*
24	𝔛	𝔵	X	x	*X*	*x*	*ex*
25	𝔜	𝔶	Y	y	*Y*	*y*	*wy*
26	ℨ	𝔷	Z	z	*Z*	*z*	*uzzard*

[2]

Q. *I ſee there are, in this Table, a Number of Letters, and different in their Figures and Sizes, pray explain them to me.*

A. This Table is an Alphabet of the 26 *Engliſh* Letters.

English alphabet from 1740, with some unusual letter names. Note the use of long s.

English alphabet

0:00 / 0:00

A Received Pronunciation British English speaker reciting the English alphabet

Problems playing this file? See media help.

The names of the letters are commonly spelled out in compound words and initialisms (e.g., *tee-shirt*, *deejay*, *emcee*, *okay*, etc.), derived forms (e.g., *exed out*,[a] *effing*,[b] *to eff and blind*, *aitchless*,[c] etc.), and objects named after letters (e.g., *en* and *em* in printing, and *wye* in railroading). The spellings listed below are from the Oxford English Dictionary. Plurals of consonant names are formed by adding *-s* (e.g., *bees*,

efs or *effs*, *ems*) or *-es* in the cases of *aitches*, *esses*, *exes*. Plurals of vowel names also take *-es* (i.e., *aes*, *ees*, *ies*, *oes*, *ues*), but these are rare. For a letter as a letter, the letter itself is most commonly used, generally in capitalised form, in which case the plural just takes *-s* or *-'s* (e.g. *Cs* or *c's* for *cees*).

Letter	Name		Name pronunciation				Freq.
	Modern English[1]	Latin	Modern English	Latin	Old French	Middle English	
A	*a*	*ā*	/ˈeɪ/, /ˈæ/[d]	/aː/	/aː/	/aː/	8.17%
B	*bee*	*bē*	/ˈbiː/	/beː/	/beː/	/beː/	1.49%
C	*cee*	*cē*	/ˈsiː/	/keː/	/tʃeː/ > /tseː/ > /seː/	/seː/	2.78%
D	*dee*	*dē*	/ˈdiː/	/deː/	/deː/	/deː/	4.25%
E	*e*	*ē*	/ˈiː/	/eː/	/eː/	/eː/	12.70%
F	*ef*, *eff*	*ef*	/ˈɛf/	/ɛf/	/ɛf/	/ɛf/	2.23%
G	*gee*	*gē*	/ˈdʒiː/	/geː/	/dʒeː/	/dʒeː/	2.02%
H	*aitch* *haitch*[e]	*hā*	/ˈeɪtʃ/ /ˈheɪtʃ/	/haː/ > /ˈaha/ > /ˈakːa/	/ˈaːtʃə/	/aːtʃ/	6.09%
I	*i*	*ī*	/ˈaɪ/	/iː/	/iː/	/iː/	6.97%
J	*jay* *jy*[g]	—	/ˈdʒeɪ/ /ˈdʒaɪ/	—	—	[f]	0.15%
K	*kay*	*kā*	/ˈkeɪ/	/kaː/	/kaː/	/kaː/	0.77%
L	*el*, *ell*[h]	*el*	/ˈɛl/	/ɛl/	/ɛl/	/ɛl/	4.03%
M	*em*	*em*	/ˈɛm/	/ɛm/	/ɛm/	/ɛm/	2.41%
N	*en*	*en*	/ˈɛn/	/ɛn/	/ɛn/	/ɛn/	6.75%
O	*o*	*ō*	/ˈoʊ/	/oː/	/oː/	/oː/	7.51%
P	*pee*	*pē*	/ˈpiː/	/peː/	/peː/	/peː/	1.93%
Q	*cue*, *kew*, *kue*, *que*	*qū*	/ˈkjuː/	/kuː/	/kyː/	/kiw/	0.10%
R	*ar* *or*[i]	*er*	/ˈɑːr/ /ˈɔːr/	/ɛr/	/ɛr/	/ɛr/ > /ar/	5.99%
S	*ess* *es-*[j]	*es*	/ˈɛs/	/ɛs/	/ɛs/	/ɛs/	6.33%
T	*tee*	*tē*	/ˈtiː/	/teː/	/teː/	/teː/	9.06%
U	*u*	*ū*	/ˈjuː/	/uː/	/yː/	/iw/	2.76%
V	*vee*	—	/ˈviː/	—	—	—	0.98%
W	*double-u*	—	/ˈdʌbəl.juː/[k]	—	—	—	2.36%
X	*ex*	*ex* *ix*	/ˈɛks/	/ɛks/ /ɪks/	/iks/	/ɛks/	0.15%
Y	*wy*, *wye*	*hȳ*	/ˈwaɪ/	/hyː/	*ui, gui* ?	/wiː/	1.97%

				/iː/			
		ī graeca		/iː ˈgraɪka/	/iː grɛːk/		
Z	*zed*[l]	*zēta*	/ˈzɛd/	/ˈzeːta/	/ˈzɛːdə/	/zɛd/	0.07%
	zee[m]		/ˈziː/				

Diacritics

The most common diacritic marks seen in English publications are the acute (é), grave (è), circumflex (â, î, or ô), tilde (ñ), umlaut and diaeresis (ü or ï—the same symbol is used for two different purposes), and cedilla (ç).[2] Diacritics used for tonal languages may be replaced with tonal numbers or omitted.

Loanwords

Diacritic marks mainly appear in loanwords such as *naïve* and *façade*. Informal English writing tends to omit diacritics because of their absence from the keyboard, while professional copywriters and typesetters tend to include them.

As such words become naturalised in English, there is a tendency to drop the diacritics, as has happened with many older borrowings from French, such as *hôtel*. Words that are still perceived as foreign tend to retain them; for example, the only spelling of *soupçon* found in English dictionaries (the OED and others) uses the diacritic. However, diacritics are likely to be retained even in naturalised words where they would otherwise be confused with a common native English word (for example, *résumé* rather than *resume*).[3] Rarely, they may even be added to a loanword for this reason (as in *maté*, from Spanish *yerba mate* but following the pattern of *café*, from French, to distinguish from *mate*).

Native English words

Occasionally, especially in older writing, diacritics are used to indicate the syllables of a word: *cursed* (verb) is pronounced with one syllable, while *cursèd* (adjective) is pronounced with two. For this, *è* is used widely in poetry, e.g., in Shakespeare's sonnets. J. R. R. Tolkien used *ë*, as in *O wingëd crown*.

Similarly, while in *chicken coop* the letters *-oo-* represent a single vowel sound (a digraph), they less often represent two which may be marked with a diaresis as in *zoölogist*[4] and *coöperation*. This use of the diaeresis is rare but found in some well-known publications, such as *MIT Technology Review* and *The New Yorker*. Some publications, particularly in UK usage, have replaced the diaeresis with a hyphen such as in co-operative.

In general, these devices are not used even where they would serve to alleviate some degree of confusion.

Punctuation marks within words

Apostrophe

The apostrophe (′) is not usually considered part of the English alphabet nor used as a diacritic, even in loanwords. But it is used for two important purposes in written English: to mark the "possessive"[n] and to mark contracted words. Current standards require its use for both purposes. Therefore, apostrophes are necessary to spell many words even in isolation, unlike most punctuation marks, which are concerned with indicating sentence structure and other relationships among multiple words.

- It distinguishes (from the otherwise identical regular plural inflection *-s*) the English possessive morpheme "*'s*" (apostrophe alone after a regular plural affix, giving *-s'* as the standard mark for plural + possessive). Practice settled in the 18th century; before then, practices varied but typically all three endings were written *-s* (but without cumulation). This meant that only regular nouns bearing neither could be confidently identified, and plural and possessive could be potentially confused (e.g., "the Apostles words"*;* "those things over there are my husbands"[5])—which undermines the logic of "marked" forms.
- Many common contractions have near-homographs from which they are distinguished in writing only by an apostrophe, for example *it's* (*it is* or *it has*) as opposed to *its*, the possessive form of "it", or *she'd* (*she would* or *she had*) as opposed to *shed*.

In a *Chronicle of Higher Education* blog, Geoffrey Pullum argued that apostrophe is the 27th letter of the alphabet, arguing that it does not function as a form of punctuation.[6]

Hyphen

Hyphens are often used in English compound words. Written compound words may be hyphenated, open or closed, so specifics are guided by stylistic policy. Some writers may use a slash in certain instances.

Frequencies

The letter most commonly used in English is E. The least used letter is Z. The frequencies shown in the table may differ in practice according to the type of text.[7]

Phonology

The letters A, E, I, O, and U are considered vowel letters, since (except when silent) they represent vowels, although I and U represent consonants in words such as "onion" and "quail" respectively.

The letter Y sometimes represents a consonant (as in "young") and sometimes a vowel (as in "myth"). Very rarely, W may represent a vowel (as in "cwm", a Welsh loanword).

The consonant sounds represented by the letters W and Y in English (/w/ and /j/ as in went /wɛnt/ and yes /jɛs/) are referred to as semi-vowels (or *glides*) by linguists, however this is a description that applies to the *sounds* represented by the letters and not to the letters themselves.

The remaining letters are considered consonant letters, since when not silent they generally represent consonants.

History

Old English

The English language itself was initially written in the Anglo-Saxon futhorc runic alphabet, in use from the 5th century. This alphabet was brought to what is now England, along with the proto-form of the language itself, by Anglo-Saxon settlers. Very few examples of this form of written Old English have survived, mostly as short inscriptions or fragments.

The Latin script, introduced by Christian missionaries, began to replace the Anglo-Saxon futhorc from about the 7th century, although the two continued in parallel for some time. As such, the Old English alphabet began to employ parts of the Roman alphabet in its construction.[8] Futhorc influenced the emerging English alphabet by providing it with the letters *thorn* (Þ þ) and *wynn* (Ƿ ƿ). The letter *eth* (Ð ð) was later devised as a modification of *dee* (D d), and finally *yogh* (Ȝ ȝ) was created by Norman scribes from the insular *g* in Old English and Irish, and used alongside their Carolingian *g*.

The a-e ligature *ash* (Æ æ) was adopted as a letter in its own right, named after a futhorc rune *æsc*. In very early Old English the o-e ligature *ethel* (Œ œ) also appeared as a distinct letter, likewise named after a rune, *æðel*. Additionally, the v–v or u-u ligature *double-u* (W w) was in use.

In the year 1011, a monk named Byrhtferð recorded the traditional order of the Old English alphabet.[9] He listed the 23 letters of the Latin alphabet first, plus the ampersand, then 5 additional English letters, starting with the Tironian note *ond* (⁊), an insular symbol for *and*:

A B C D E F G H I K L M N O P Q R S T V X Y Z & ⁊ Ƿ Þ Ð Æ

Modern English

In the orthography of Modern English, the letters thorn (þ), eth (ð), wynn (ƿ), yogh (ȝ), ash (æ), and ethel (œ) are obsolete. Latin borrowings reintroduced homographs of æ and œ into Middle English and Early Modern English, though they are largely obsolete (see "Ligatures in recent usage" below), and where they are used they are not considered to be separate letters (e.g., for collation purposes), but rather ligatures. Thorn and eth were both replaced by *th*, though thorn continued in existence for some time, its lowercase form gradually becoming graphically indistinguishable from the minuscule y in most handwriting. *Y* for *th* can still be seen in pseudo-archaisms such as "Ye Olde Booke Shoppe". The letters þ and ð are still used in present-day Icelandic (where they now represent two separate sounds, /θ/ and /ð/ having become phonemically-distinct – as indeed also happened in Modern English), while ð is still used in present-day Faroese (although only as a silent letter). Wynn disappeared from English around the 14th century when it was supplanted by *uu*, which ultimately developed into the modern *w*. Yogh disappeared around the 15th century and was typically replaced by *gh*.

The letters *u* and *j*, as distinct from *v* and *i*, were introduced in the 16th century, and *w* assumed the status of an independent letter. The variant lowercase form long s (ſ) lasted into early modern English, and was used in non-final position up to the early 19th century. Today, the English alphabet is considered to consist of the following 26 letters:

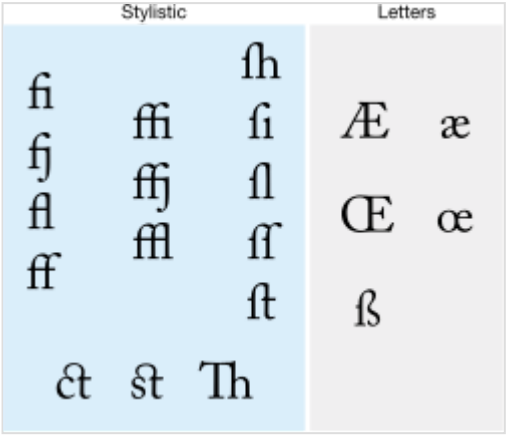
A a · B b · C c · D d · E e · F f · G g · H h · I i · J j · K k · L l · M m · N n · O o · P p · Q q · R r · S s · T t · U u · V v · W w · X x · Y y · Z z

Written English has a number of digraphs,[10] but they are not considered separate letters of the alphabet:

ch (usually /t͡ʃ/) · ck (/k/) · gh (/f/, /g/ or /∅/) · ng (/ŋ/) · ph (/f/) · qu (/kw/) · sh (/ʃ/) · th (/θ/ or /ð/) · wh (/ʍ/ or /w/) · zh (/ʒ/)

Ligatures in recent usage

Outside of professional papers on specific subjects that traditionally use ligatures in loanwords, ligatures are seldom used in modern English. The ligatures *æ* and *œ* were until the 19th century (slightly later in American English) used in formal writing for certain words of Greek or Latin origin, such as *encyclopædia* and *cœlom*, although such ligatures were not used in either classical Latin or ancient Greek. These are now usually rendered as "ae" and "oe" in all types of writing, although in American English, a lone *e* has mostly supplanted both (for example, *encyclopedia* for *encyclopaedia*, and *maneuver* for *manoeuvre*).



The ligatures of Adobe Caslon Pro

Some typefaces used to typeset English texts contain commonly used ligatures, such as for ⟨tt⟩, ⟨fi⟩, ⟨fl⟩, ⟨ffi⟩, and ⟨ffl⟩. These are not independent letters – although in traditional typesetting, each of these ligatures would have its own sort (type element) for practical reasons – but simply type design choices created to optimize the legibility of the text.

Proposed reforms

There have been a number of proposals to extend or replace the basic English alphabet. These include proposals for the addition of letters to the English alphabet, such as *eng* or *engma* (Ŋ ŋ), used to replace the digraph "ng" and represent the voiced velar nasal sound with a single letter. Benjamin Franklin's phonetic alphabet, based on the Latin alphabet, introduced a number of new letters as part of a wider proposal to reform English orthography. Other proposals have gone further, proposing entirely new scripts for written English to replace the Latin alphabet such as the Deseret alphabet and the Shavian alphabet.

See also

- Alphabet song – Song that teaches an alphabet
- NATO phonetic alphabet – Letter names for unambiguous communication

- English orthography – Norms for writing the English language
- English-language spelling reform – Proposed reforms to English spelling to be more phonetic
- American manual alphabet – Manual alphabet that augments the vocabulary of American Sign Language
- Two-handed manual alphabets – Part of a deaf sign language
- English Braille – Tactile writing system for English
- American Braille
- New York Point – Tactile alphabet invented by William Bell Wait
- Chinese respelling of the English alphabet – Chinese pronunciation of the English alphabet
- Burmese respelling of the English alphabet – Burmese Transcription
- Base36 – Binary-to-text encoding scheme

Notes

a. Clicked the [X] box to close a tab or app
b. Fucking
c. Without the letter H
d. often in Hiberno-English, due to the letter's pronunciation in the Irish language
e. The usual form in Hiberno-English and Australian English
f. The letter J did not occur in Old French or Middle English. The Modern French name is *ji* /ʒi/, corresponding to Modern English *jy* (rhyming with *i*), which in most areas was later replaced with *jay* (rhyming with *kay*).
g. in Scottish English
h. In the US, an L-shaped object may be spelled *ell*.
i. in Hiberno-English
j. in compounds such as *es-hook*
k. Especially in American English, the /l/ is often not pronounced in informal speech. *(Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, 10th ed). Common colloquial pronunciations are /ˈdʌbəjuː/, /ˈdʌbəjə/, and /ˈdʌbjə/ (as in the nickname "Dubya") or just /ˈdʌb/, especially in terms like *www.*
l. in British English, Hiberno-English and Commonwealth English
m. in American English, Newfoundland English and Philippine English
n. Linguistic analyses vary on how best to characterise the English possessive morpheme *-'s*: a noun case inflectional suffix distinct to *possession*, a *genitive case* inflectional suffix equivalent to prepositional periphrastic *of X* (or rarely *for X*), an *edge inflection* that uniquely attaches to a noun phrase's final (rather than *head*) word, or an *enclitic postposition*.

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