As of 14 July 2021, this document is not completed, but may nevertheless be helpful to a total beginner at learning languages. Especially, the initial section which introduces various formal grammar concepts, may provide a good spring forward before moving onto more formalized and complete Old English learning books which already exist.

KEY CONCEPTS

Note that in this document, **key concepts** wich you need to get a good understanding of for you to learn Old English well, will be **bolded** when first introduced so you can notice them easily.

In examples, the word you should focus on will often be *italicized.*

You should revisit sections of this document as often as you need to to feel comfortable with a concept or paradigm.

This introduction assumes that you are a native or native-like speaker of Modern English, and was designed as such.

It has also been written under the assumption that the reader has very little, or only very rusty, familiarity with formal grammar concepts and jargon.

GENERAL CAUTION ON SPEAKING OLD ENGLISH

Exactly why you would want to learn a dead language, is an interesting question to ponder, and I hope you come up with an answer, because I won't.

However, if you must, please spare my soul more trashy internet Old English, and do your homework thoroughly, thank you kindly.

What do I mean with such a passive-aggressive opener?

Think of it this way: Old English is *dead*. Because it is *dead* and because you are unlikely to run into people who speak it well, if you try to speak it on your own steam, you are extremely likely to make *mistakes*, *ever so many mistakes*.

And because you are unlikely to meet people who speak it well, since there are no native speakers of it, you will constantly go on producing fakey, very wrong "Old English" content, never knowing the better, because no one is there to pull you up on your mistakes.

I mean, just think about it: Even for modern languages which are well and alive, such as Modern English, non-native speakers will often preserve some degree of error in their speech even after having been exposed to the language for many years. Yet the situation is so much scarcer for Old English, so you are so much more likely to have very wrong Old English.

How does one even begin to address such a problem? You must constantly compare your own speech to historical sources of sufficiently idiomatic Old English (namely, poetry and especially prose - but not interlinear texts and glosses, which constitute a significant portion of the Old English corpus). You must get a decent handle on the grammar and the syntax. You must be open to being corrected by people who are able. You must not assume that Old English has this or that feature of this or that modern language (such as Modern English or Modern High German) - Old English is its own language, and if you assume it is the same as any modern language, you will not produce decent-quality Old English. Even amongst people who have a nearly-good grasp of the language,

you frequently find unwitting Modern-Englishisms polluting their Old English. How wretched!

I take this opportunity to invite you to seriously consider learning another living language to at least an intermediate level, before you learn Old English, and if you still want to learn Old English after doing that, knowing that it will be a much harder task, come back and learn Old English. Modern German and Modern Icelandic would be especially beneficial options for a learner of Old English due to their similarities to Old English. Learning an accessible livchapter IXing language before learning a dead language, also has the benefit, hopefully, of confronting you, in a way that dead languages can't, with the fact that you make many mistakes when you speak.

There are, though, luckily, a handful of intermediate-level users of Old English in existence (which is almost as good as you can get, so far), as of 2021, who are active on the Old English subreddit, and the Old English Discord server (a link to which can no doubt be found on the subreddit). You may wish to go to those communities to benefit from those who are further along than yourself in their learning.

PRONUNCIATION OF OLD ENGLISH

I recommend you view the englisċ-swēġcræft channel of the Old English discord for pronunciation guidance for Old English. Old English pronunciation *is* quite foreign to Modern English speakers, and will require considerable dilligence, attention to detail, and competent learning to master. By way of example, most academics of Old English who I have heard speak, have rather sloppy pronunciation, and you might imagine that they would be better than average.

1. NOUNS, NAMES, AND PRONOUNS

What is a **noun**? A **noun** is a word used to denote a *thing*, whether that be a person, an idea, an object, an action, etc. Consider, here are some **nouns** in Modern English:

person
dog
strawberry
art
thought
tool
motorbike
child
lover

Almost always in Modern English, it is possible to add the words "a/an" (the indefinite article - note that Old English did not have an indefinite article, and simply would use nothing where we use "a/an" in Modern English) or "the" (the **definite article**) in front of a noun, to give a particular sense to the noun:

a thing
the thing
a man
the man

As a rule of thumb, if *it doesn't feel right* to add an article ("a/an" or "the") in front of a particular word, then that word very likely isn't a noun.

However, the exception to the rule: a special kind of noun, a **proper noun** or a **name**, usually *can't* have an article in front of it, unless the article is itself part of the **name**. **Names** indicate specific people, places, ideas, and so forth, not just *any old* thing: A *specific* thing. That's why they don't have articles: Articles regulate the specificness of a thing, but **names** are always specific. Here are some **names**:

Samuel
Sarah
London
Christianity
Islam
Liberalism
the University of Toronoto

To illustrate the earlier point about names usually not being able to take articles unless they are part of the name, one does not normally say "the Samuel", "the Christianity", and so forth.

Okay, not all words are nouns or names, though. For example, "sing" is not a noun. "Cool" is not a noun.

Often, we use a few common words, in place of a noun, which we already know that we are talking about, in order to sound more natural, and speak more efficiently. These common words used instead of some particular noun are colled **pronouns**. Here are some **personal pronouns**:

I
you
he
she
it
they
we
us
them

A special kind of pronoun, **interrogative pronouns,** is used to ask questions:

who?
what?
which?

Another special kind of pronoun is used to add comments to nouns, called **relative pronouns**:

the man *who* did that
the thing *that* I want
the subject *which* I am about to begin

Note that I will use the word **substantive** to refer to nouns, pronouns, and names all together as one group.

Cool! Now you should know about **nouns, pronouns** (including **personal pronouns, interrogative pronouns, and relative pronouns), names** (proper nouns), **substantives,** and the **definite article** "the".

2. VERBS, SUBJECTS, AND OBJECTS

Verbs are words which show activity (including mental activity) or work. For examples:

dance
sing
think
work
walk
see
feel
run

Here are some sentences which use **verbs**:

God *sees* the truth, but *waits*
I *wish* he *came* here
Those goldfish are *dying*

Auxillary verbs or **helping verbs** can be used to limit or regulate the meaning of a main verb, and occur together with the main verb. Some **helping verbs** in Modern English are:

can
must
should
will
want (to)
have

Here are some examples of **helping verbs** being used:

I *would* do that
Those people *should* watch their back.
Can he stop it?
You *want to* leave us.

A special kind of verb which, instead of activity, shows condition, state, or essence, is **linking verbs**:

be (am, is, are, was, were, am, being, been)
seem
smell (nice, etc)
sound (good, etc)
appear
become

Linking verbs can be used to link one substantive to another, or link substantives to adjectives (see section 3):

John *is* Sarah
We *seem like* friends

The cat *became* fat
You *smell* like a wet rag

Note that all verbs must have a **subject**, and many non-linking verbs can have one or more **objects.** In linking verbs, the substantive or adjective which follows the linking verb is called the **predicate**.

Here are some examples of **predicates**:

John is *Sarah*
We seem like *friends*
The cat became *fat*
You smell like a *wet rag*

The **subject** is the substantive which the verb describes:

John kicks things
He seems unhappy
Those fools dance miserably
Who are you?

The **object** is the substantive which the verb is being done to:

John kicks *things*
I love *you*
The cat ate *the food*
Who would do *that*?

There are different kinds of objects: **direct objects** (the thing which the verb directly applies to) and **indirect objects** (the person *to whom* or *for whom* the direct object is being actioned upon). Some verbs can take both a **direct** and an **indirect object:**

I gave *her* (indirect) *the food* (direct)
We sang *a song* (direct) *them them* (indirect)
The officer sent *me* (indirect) *a parcel* (direct)

Note that a particular kind of verb construction is called a **passive** verb. **Passive verbs** are used to show than an action occurs to the **subject** instead of the **object.** For examples:

"I *was being* tormented (by somebody)"
"I *have been beaten* so many times"
"The roses *were planted* in June"

In this section, you should have learned about: **verbs, helping verbs, linking verbs, subjects, objects, predicates,** and **passive verbs.**

3. ADJECTIVES AND LINKING VERBS

You may have noticed that nouns often have a few words before them, which describe them or change their meaning. These words are called **adjectives**:

the *cool* thing
a *nice* day

my *good* friend
the *best* food

Note that when an adjective is directly attached to a noun like in the examples above, the article and the adjective(s) and the noun are together known as the **noun phrase.**

For example, here are some **noun phrases:**

the good, slow man
a nice, warm bed
those kind people
this red nose

Adjectives modern English don't have to be put right in front of a noun. They can also be connected to a noun or a pronoun through a linking verb (see section 2), like "is" or "seems" or "smells". When this happens, the adjective is described as being **predicate**:

the man is *cool*
a thing is *red*
he is *happy*
we seem *tired*
the fly smells *rotten*

Note that adjectives have different **degrees of comparison**. The normal form is just the **positive degree***:*

I am *happy*
she is *fast*
he is *fat*
the *slow* cat

When you compare two nouns or prounouns to say that one is *more* of this quality than the other, that is the **comparitive degree**:

He is *bigger* than me
The door is *taller* than my car
The *stronger* man wins (implied: stronger than other men)
A *longer* distance is always harder to bear (implied: longer than another distance)

When you want to say that a substantive is of some quality, *most out of a selected group*, that is the **superlative degree:**
He is the *strongest* man
They are the *most intelligent* people on earth
The *fastest animal of all* is the cheetah
Lilian is my *best* friend

In this section, you have learned about **adjectives, noun phrases, degrees of comparison,** the **positive degree,** the **comparitive degree**, and the **superlative degree.**

4. ADVERBS

Adverbs, like adjectives, describe other words; but whereas adjectives describe substantives (nouns, pronouns, names), **adverbs** describe method, degree, etc of:

verbs
adjectives
and other adverbs

In Modern English, adverbs often (but not always) have the ending "-ly".

Here are some adverbs:

The dogs panted *heavily*
These people talk so *loudly*
He was *very* pretty
Some cat laughed *very angrily*

Just like adjectives, most adverbs have different **degrees of comparison**: the **positive**, the **comparitive**, and the **superlative**.

Here are some examples of **positive degree** adverbs:

Please do it *quickly*
He thinks *often*
They eat food *greedily*

Here are some examples of **comparitive degree** adverbs:

They laughed *louder* than the rest
Those dogs are breathing *more heavily* than I expected
Don't take *longer* than you need to

Here are some examples of **superlative degree** adverbs:

The medal winner jumped the *furtherst* of them all
I cooked *nicest*, so everyone liked me
The swan bit *hardest* of all our pets

One very common and important adverb is "not". Note that it doesn't have comparitive or superlative degrees.

In this section, you have learned about **adverbs** and **degrees of comparison**.

5. PREPOSITIONS

Prepositions are words which show relationship or position of a substantive, a verb, an adjective, or an adverb, relative to a substantive (this substantive being the object of the preposition), whether in time, place, or conceptually, etc.

Here are some common English prepositions:

in
on

under
before
behind
after
because of
of
from
to
at
beside

Here are some examples of prepositions being used:

I sat *in front* of him
Mice die *because of* cats
After the wedding, they went home.
The words *of* woe which she spoke to me, were hard to hear.

The **preposition** together with the the prepositional object, is known as the **prepositional phrase.**

Here are some prepositional phrases:

to my house
at ten o'clock
after midnight
beside the barn
south of the river
upon the ugly mountain

You have learned about **prepositions** and **prepositional phrases** in this section.

6. SENTENCES, CLAUSES, AND CONJUNCTIONS

A **sentence** is a grammatically complete phrase. Usually in Modern English, a sentence must contain at least an **independent clause**, and a **independent clause** must contain at least a subject and a verb.

Here are some minimal sentences in Modern English:

She went
I ate
He sat down
We knew

In addition, sentences may contain adverbs, prepositional phrases, as many objects an the verb can take, additional **independent clauses**, or **dependent clauses.**

A **independent clause** is a simple phrase which can stand by itself as a sentence. As mentioned, it must have at least a subject and a verb, but may also have adverbs, prepositional phrases, and, if the verb allows it, it may take objects.

Here are some **independent clauses:**

That's a nice dog.
I went to the shop to buy a car.
My parents aren't home yet.
Now we must pay with our lives.

A **dependent clause** (or **subordinate clause**) is a clause which must occur with some other clause(s) to form a complete sentence. For example, conside, "if I went". That's not a complete sentence, but "if I went, then so would she" is.

Here are some examples of **subordinate clauses:**

If I went, then so would she.
I wanted to eat, *so I went to the cupboard.*
Because the cat stopped, the traffic stopped.
I said *that you would not succeed.*

Independent clauses can be joined together with **conjunctions**, which show logical relationships between the clauses. For example:

and
or
but
nor

Subordinate clauses are almost always introduced by particular conjunctions. Some conjunctions which often introduce **subordinate clauses** are:

so
that
so that
because
since
while
if... then...

In this section, you've learned about **sentences, clauses, independent clauses, subordinate clauses,** and **conjunctions.**

7. OLD ENGLISH SUBSTANTIVE ATTRIBUTES

YEEEEE! Now you get to start learning Old English for actual, though. JOY!

Old English nouns had 3 special properties: **number**, **case**, and (**grammatical**) **gender**.

Number is easy to understand: We have it in Modern English. Nouns which denote only one thing are **singular** in number, for examples:

thing
person
man
woman

friend
loaf

Most singular nouns can be slightly modified to denote more than one thing. This is called the **plural**. Here are some plural nouns:

things
people
men
women
friends
loaves

Grammatical gender, or from now on, just **gender**, *is not* a concept which we have in Modern English. **Gender** is simple a categorization of nouns into 3 different categories: masculine, feminine, and neuter. *Don't be confused though!* **Grammatical gender** is not the same as natural gender or gender identity, and masculine grammatical gender does not mean masculine natural gender. Feminine grammatical gender is not the same as feminine natural gender. Neuter grammatical gender is not the same as having no natural gender. In the context of grammar, it's simply a tradition to use **masculine, feminine,** and **neuter** to talk about these 3 semi-arbitrary categories that all Old English nouns belong to.

For example, "duguð" (troop; virtue; experience through age) is of the feminine gender. Does that mean troops are only made up of women? No! Nor does virtue only belong to women, nor do only women get experience through age.

Again, "mæġden" (maiden; girl) is of the neuter gender. But, we know that girls are female. So, the grammatical gender does not correspond to the natural gender.

When learning an Old English noun, it is best to memorize it with its unique definite article (form of "the") in order to remember its gender correctly.

Substantives, including nouns, are usually modified in Old English, depending on their role in the sentence (subject? direct object? indirect object? possessive? following a particular preposition?), according to **case**. The act of modifying a noun, pronoun, name, or adjective, according to case, is called **declension** (and the verb is: **decline**).

In Modern English, we have 2 cases for nouns:

oblique case (catch-all case which is most common)
genitive case (possessive)

The oblique case is the normal form of a noun, such as "man". The genetive case refers to the "-s" which we add to the end, to show that a noun possesses or owns something else, for examples:

man's
friend's
men's
people's
animals'

For pronouns, we have 3 cases:

nominative (subject case)
genitive case
oblique case (used for objects and following prepositions)

For example, consider the 3 case declensions of "he":

he (nominative/subject)
his (genitive/possessive)
him (oblique)

Or "they":

they (nominative)
their (genitive)
them (oblique)

In Old English, they used 4 distinct cases:

nominative:
Used for the subjects of clauses (see section 2)

accusative:
Used on direct objects (see section 2) following most verbs
Used after certain prepositions (see section 5)
Used to show duration of time
Used to show distance of travel

genitive:
Used to show possession or ownership
Used to show various other relationships
Used descriptively, similar to an adjective (like "house *of cards*")
Used after particular verbs
Used after particular prepositions

dative:
Used for indirect objects (see section 2)
Used for direct objects after particular verbs
Used after many prepositions
Used for many other purposes

In addition, Old English still had visible vestiges of 1 additional case:

instrumental
Used to show instrument to achieve an action ("I cut it *with a knife*", "The ant was squashed *with my shoe*")
Used to show occurrence in time
Used after particular prepositions
Used in particular set constructions

Note that **instrumental** was often indestinguishable from the **dative** case, and when the form was

being used with an instrumental meaning, it was sometimes habitual to use an additional preposition to make it clear.

In this lesson, you have learned about: **grammatical number, grammatical gender, cases, declension, nominative case, accusative case, genitive case, dative case, instrumental case.**

8. OLD ENGLISH ARTICLE AND MAIN NOUN DECLENSIONS

OKAY! Time to learn some actual Old English words. First, let's memorize the declension for the article, a very important word. Note that by convention, adjectives, and adjective-like words (including the article) are given in the dictionary under the **masculine singular nominative** form:

sē - "the"				
	Neut	Masc	Fem	Pl
Nom	þæt	sē(/þē)	sēo(/ sīo/þēo)	þā
Acc		þone	þā	
Gen	þæs		þære	þāra(/ þǣra)
Dat	þǣm/þām			þǣm/þām
Ins	þȳ(/þon)			

Note that the abbreviations are: masc - masculine; fem - feminine; neut - neuter; nom - nominative; acc - accusative; gen - genitive; dat - dative; ins - instrumental; pl - plural; sg – singular.

I'll make a few basic observations which will help to learn declensions in Old English:

-Neuter singular nominative and accusative forms are *always identical* for any word.
-Masculine and neuter singular genitive forms are identical.
-Masculine singular, neuter singular, and plural for any gender, are always the same for any word.
-Instrumental has merged with dative except in masculine and neuter singular.
-Nominative and accusative plural are always the same for any word

Note that when a slash occurs between words, it means they are different variants. If the form is in brackets, it is a minority variant - it occurs noticibly less frequently than forms outside of brackets.

Some important notes:
-In casual speech, for the later part of the Old English period, it is possible that the long vowels of some of the forms of the article would have been pronounced short
-"þē" and "þēo" are very late forms, by far the minority
-"þǣm" may have a slight association with Anglian Old English dialects, and is the most common form in Old English poetry
-"þām" seems to be preferred in Late West Saxon, which is the dialect in which most Old English prose was written
-"sīo" is an archaic form only present in earlier manuscripts

As mentioned earlier, whenever you memorize a noun, it is recommend that you memorize it with its correct, gendered, nominative pronoun, so that you can remember the noun's gender. E.g. Don't

just memorize "mann" (person), memorize "sē mann" (the person), and you will then know that it is a masculine noun.

Great! You've learned you're first word. If you want to *speak* Old English, then you should memorize it by heart so that you can recite the entire declension table with ease. It's not too hard. Give it a go!

Now, let's learn some useful nouns. In Old English, in addition to the 3 attributes of nouns (number, case, gender), different nouns could belong to different **declension paradigms**. This is just a fancy way of saying that different categories of nouns were declined differently. However, the vast majority of nouns fit into the **strong** and **weak declension** paradigms, and that's what you're going to learn now.

We'll start with the masculine and neuter strong declensions:

	þing - "thing"		**hund** - "dog"	
	Sg	Pl	Sg	Pl
Nom	þing		hund	hund-as
Acc				
Gen	þinġ-es	þing-a	hund-es	hund-a
Dat/Ins	þinġ-e	þing-um(/-an/on)	hund-e	hund-um(/-an/on)

Notice that I've used the "-" to show the declensional suffix appart from the **stem** (main part of the noun) - when writing normally, you should not include it. E.g. write "hundes" not "hund-es".

Some notes:
-Just like for the article, the genitive suffix for masculine and neuter singular is the same; the same is true of masculine and neuter genitive plural, masculine and neuter dative singular, and masculine and neuter dative plural
-The nominative and accusative forms of the strong masculine singular declension are identical; in fact, so are the forms of the masculine plural, and the neuter singular, and the neuter plural
-Notice that the neuter plural nominative and accusative doesn't take any suffix. We still see this in some Modern English nouns, such as "sheep" and "deer" (instead of "sheeps" and "deers").
-The -as suffix of the strong masculine plural is where we get the most common plural suffix in Modern English, -s
-The -es suffix of the neuter and masculine genitive singular, is where we get the Modern English possessive suffix -'s
-The -um suffix of the dative plural is to be seen in the archaic English word "whilom"
-The -an/-on suffix in the dative plural is a late (no earlier than 10th century) variant of -um

Regarding **noun stems**, we need to distinguish a few different types in Old English:

-Light monosyllabic stems, which have the pattern (C)SC, where C stands for consonant and S stands for short vowel. Examples: wit (intelligence), dæġ (day), sċip (ship)
-Heavy monosyllabic stems, which have the pattern CLC, where L stands for long vowel, or CLCC, or CSCC. Examples: gād (lack), rād (riding), þing (thing).
-Light disyllabic stems, which have the pattern CSCSC. Examples: wæter, sumer
-Heavy disyllabic stems, which have the pattern CSCCSV or CLCSV. Examples: winter, stīpel

-Heady-ending disyllabic stems, which have the pattern CSCSCC. These are treated the same as heavy monosyllabic stems. Examples: rǣdenn, woruld

For light monosyllabic stems, heavy disyllabic stems, and for *some writers* for light disyllabic stems, the strong neuter and strong feminine declensions have slight differences compared to heavy monosyllabic stems.

Compare the earlier declension of "þing" (thing), which is a heavy monosyllabic stem, to that of "sċip", which is a light monosyllabic stem:

sċip - "boat, ship, watercraft"		
	Sg	Pl
Nom	sċip	sċip-u(/-o)
Acc		
Gen	sċip-es	sċip-a
Dat/Ins	sċip-e	sċip-um(/an/on)

In fact, the declension of sċip is identical to þing, except in the nominative and accusative plural, where it has an additional suffix.

Note that the -o variant of this suffix is somewhat associated with Anglian Old English texts. "-u" is more common in general.

Heavy disyllabic stems would also take the -u suffix in the plural, would would usually drop the final short vowel of the stem when adding the suffix. E.g. the new pattern would be CSCCCSC or CLCCSC.

Light disyllabic stems would usually not be treated in this way (e.g. they would follow the "þing" model); but occasionally one finds e.g. "wæteru" (waters). This treatment of light disyllabic stems might be associated with Anglian dialects of Old English.

Note that heavy disyllabic stems *also* dropped their final short stem vowel before any other declensional suffix. For example:

winter - "winter"		
	Sg	Pl
Nom	winter	wintr-as
Acc		
Gen	wintr-es	wintr-a
Dat/Ins	wintr-e	wintr-um(/an/on)

Now let's consider the strong feminine declension, for both a heavy monosyllabic noun and a light monosyllabic noun: