English is a West Germanic language of the Indo-European language family, originally spoken by the inhabitants of early medieval England. It is named after the Angles, one of the ancient Germanic peoples that migrated from Anglia, a peninsula on the Baltic Sea (not to be confused with East Anglia in England), to the area of Great Britain later named after them: England. The closest living relatives of English include Scots, followed by the Low Saxon and Frisian languages. While English is genealogically West Germanic, its vocabulary is also distinctively influenced by Old Norman French and Latin, as well as by Old Norse (a North Germanic language). Speakers of English are called Anglophones.

The earliest forms of English, collectively known as Old English, evolved from a group of West Germanic (Ingvaeonic) dialects brought to Great Britain by Anglo-Saxon settlers in the 5th century and further mutated by Norse-speaking Viking settlers starting in the 8th and 9th centuries. Middle English began in the late 11th century after the Norman conquest of England, when considerable French (especially Old Norman) and Latin-derived vocabulary was incorporated into English over some three hundred years.[9][10] Early Modern English began in the late 15th century with the start of the Great Vowel Shift and the Renaissance trend of borrowing further Latin and Greek words and roots into English, concurrent with the introduction of the printing press to London. This era notably culminated in the King James Bible and plays of William Shakespeare.

Modern English has spread around the world since the 17th century as a consequence of the worldwide influence of the British Empire and the United States of America. Through all types of printed and electronic media of these countries, English has become the leading language of international discourse and the lingua franca in many regions and professional contexts such as science, navigation and law. Modern English grammar is the result of a gradual change from a typical Indo-European dependent-marking pattern, with a rich inflectional morphology and relatively free word order, to a mostly analytic pattern with little inflection, and a fairly fixed subject–verb–object word order. Modern English relies more on auxiliary verbs and word order for the expression of complex tenses, aspect and mood, as well as passive constructions, interrogatives and some negation.

English is the most spoken language in the world (if Chinese is divided into variants) and the third-most spoken native language in the world, after Standard Chinese and Spanish. It is the most widely learned second language and is either the official language or one of the official languages in 59 sovereign states. There are more people who have learned English as a second language than there are native speakers. As of 2005, it was estimated that there were over 2 billion speakers of English. English is the majority native language in the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand (see Anglosphere) and the Republic of Ireland, and is widely spoken in some areas of the Caribbean, Africa, South Asia, Southeast Asia and Oceania. It is a co-official language of the United Nations, the European Union and many other world and regional international organisations. It is the most widely spoken Germanic language, accounting for at least 70% of speakers of this Indo-European branch. There is much variability among the many accents and dialects of English used in different countries and regions in terms of phonetics and phonology, and sometimes also vocabulary, idioms, grammar, and spelling, but it does not typically prevent understanding by speakers of other dialects and accents, although mutual unintelligibility can occur at extreme ends of the dialect continuum.