

Weak Verbs Overview

Weak verbs are the largest category of Old English verbs. They are considered grammatically weak as they form their preterite by adding a dental suffix (-**d** or -**t**) to the stem of the word. Weak verbs are subdivided into three sub-classes depending on the ending of their infinitive.

Class I

Class I weak verbs have an infinitive ending in **-an** or **-rian**. The third-person present singular ends in **-eþ**, and present plural ends in **-aþ**, while the past is formed using **-de**, or **-te**. Examine 'He commits crimes' and 'She saved his life':

He	fremeþ	firene	Heo	nerede	his	feorh
Subject	Present Tense	Direct Object	Subject	Past Tense	Pronoun	Genitive

While the endings of Class I verbs are the same, there are slight modifications to the stem which occur depending on if the stem has a long vowel, a short vowel, or double consonant. These are exemplified by *fremman* - to do, *nerian* - to save and *hieran* - to hear.

Fremman - To Do				
	Present Tense	Past Tense	Present Suffix	Past Suffix
1st Person Singular	Ic fremme	Ic fremede	-e	-de
2nd Person Singular	þu fremest	þu fremedest	-st	-dest
3rd Person Singular	He/Hit/Heo fremep	He/Hit/Heo fremede	-þ	-de
1st Person Plural	We fremmaþ	We fremedon	-aþ	-don
2nd Person Plural	Ge fremmaþ	Ge fremedon	-aþ	-don
3rd Person Plural	Hie fremmaþ	Hie fremedon	-aþ	-don

Class II

Class II weak verbs have an infinitive ending in **-ian** (except when preceded by 'r' as -rian verbs are generally Class I, like nerian). The third-person present singular ending is **-aþ**, just like Class I plurals, but class II present plurals end in **-iaþ** and the preterite suffix is preceded by an **-o**. Examine 'He reigns forever' and 'He preached in Judea':

He	ricsaþ	on	ecnesse	
Subject	Present Tense	Prep	Indirect Object	

He	bodode	on	ludea	
Subject	Past Tense	Prep	Indirect Object	

Lufian - To Love				
	Present Tense	Past Tense	Present Suffix	Past Suffix
1st Person Singular	Ic lufie	Ic lufode	-ie	-ode
2nd Person Singular	ƿu lufast	ƿu lufodest	-ast	-odest
3rd Person Singular	He/Hit/Heo lufaþ	He/Hit/Heo lufode	-aþ	-ode
1st Person Plural	We lufiaþ	We lufodon	-iaþ	-odon
2nd Person Plural	Ge lufiaþ	Ge lufodon	-iaþ	-odon
3rd Person Plural	Hie lufiaþ	Hie lufodon	-iaþ	-odon

Class III

Class III weak verbs have an infinitive ending in **-an** and no vowel before the dental suffix. They are more unpredictable in their conjugation and often combine features of the first two weak classes. There are only four Class III verbs: *habban* - *to have*, *libban* - *to live*, *secgan* - *to say* and *hycgan* - *to think/intend*. How they conjugate is irregular so they just have to be learned individually. Two examples, '*They have much power*' and '*She lived virtuously*', are included below.

Hie	habbaþ	micel	weald	Heo	lifde	peawum
Subject	Present Tense	Quantifier	Direct Object	Subject	Past Tense	Adjective

Habban - To Have				
	Present Tense	Past Tense	Present Suffix	Past Suffix
1st Person Singular	Ic hæbbe	Ic hæfde	-e	-de
2nd Person Singular	þu hæfst	þu hæfdest	-st	-dest
3rd Person Singular	He/Hit/Heo hæfþ	He/Hit/Heo hæfde	-aþ	-de
1st Person Plural	We habbaþ	We hæfdon	-aþ	-don
2nd Person Plural	Ge habbaþ	Ge hæfdon	-aþ	-don
3rd Person Plural	Hie habbaþ	Hie hæfdon	-aþ	-don

Understanding which suffix goes with which person, number or tense is vital for understanding which subject a verb is connected to in a sentence. Old English does not rely on word order as strictly as modern English, so the subject can come after the verb, or sometimes even be dropped from a long sentence. Always remember that in Old English, verbs agree with their subject, so even if a word comes slightly earlier or later in a sentence than you might expect, it can generally be paired to the correct noun by comparing the endings.