English alphabet

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The alphabet for Modern English is a Latin-script alphabet consisting of 26 letters, each having an upper- and lower-case form. The word *alphabet* is a compound of the first two letters of the Greek alphabet, *alpha* and *beta*. The alphabet originated around the 7th century CE to write Old English from Latin script. Since then, letters have been added or removed to give the current 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

The exact shape of printed letters varies depending on the typeface (and font), and the standard printed form may differ significantly from the shape of handwritten letters (which varies between individuals), especially cursive.

Written English has a large number of digraphs (e.g., *would*, *beak*, *moat*); it stands out (almost uniquely) as a European language without diacritics in native words. The only exceptions are:

- a diaeresis (e.g., "coöperation") may be used to distinguish two vowels with separate pronunciation from a double vowel[nb 1][1]
- a grave accent, very occasionally, (as in *learnèd*, an adjective) may be used to indicate that a normally silent vowel is pronounced

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English alphabet

The Quick Brown Fox Jumps Over The Lazy Dog

An English pangram displaying all the characters in context, in Dax Regular typeface

Script type	Alphabet
Time period	c.1500 to present
Languages	English
Related scripts	
Parent systems	(Proto-writing) • Egyptian hieroglyphs ◦ Proto-Sinaitic alphabet ▪ Phoenician alphabet ▪ Greek alphabet ▪ Old Italic script ▪ Latin alphabet ▪ English alphabet
Child systems	ISO basic Latin alphabet Cherokee syllabary (in part) Scots alphabet Osage alphabet Saanich writing system Numerous other Latin-based orthographies
ISO 15924	
ISO 15924	Latn, , Latin
Unicode	
Unicode alias	Latin
Unicode range	U+0000 to U+007E Basic Latin and punctuation

This article contains **phonetic transcriptions** in the **International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA)**. For an introductory guide on IPA symbols, see Help:IPA. For the distinction between [ ], / / and ⟨ ⟩, see IPA § Brackets and transcription delimiters.

English alphabet (0:29)

A Received Pronunciation British English speaker reciting the English alphabet

Problems playing this file? See media help.

Letter names [edit]

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, effing, to eff and blind, aitchless*, 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 capitalized form, in which case the plural just takes *-s* or *-'s* (e.g. *Cs* or *c's* for *cees*).

Letter	Name		Name pronunciation				Frequency
	Modern English	Latin	Modern English	Latin	Old French	Middle English	
A	*a*	*ā*	/eɪ/, /æ/[nb 2]	/aː/	/aː/	/aː/	8.17%
B	*bee*	*bē*	/biː/	/beː/	/beː/	/beː/	1.49%
C	*cee*	*cē*	/siː/	/keː/	/tʃeː/ > /tseː/ > /seː/	/seː/	2.78%
D	*dee*	*dē*	/diː/	/deː/	/deː/	/deː/	4.25%
E	*e*	*ē*	/iː/	/eː/	/eː/	/eː/	12.70%
F	*ef*, *eff* *eff* as a verb	*ef*	/ɛf/	/ɛf/	/ɛf/	/ɛf/	2.23%
G	*gee*	*gē*	/dʒiː/	/geː/	/dʒeː/	/dʒeː/	2.02%
H	*aitch* *haitch*[nb 3]	*hā*	/eɪtʃ/ /heɪtʃ/	/haː/ > /ˈaha/ > /ˈakːa/	/ˈaːtʃə/	/aːtʃ/	6.09%
I	*i*	*ī*	/aɪ/	/iː/	/iː/	/iː/	6.97%
J	*jay* *jy*[nb 5]	–	/dʒeɪ/ /dʒaɪ/	–	–	[nb 4]	0.15%
K	*kay*	*kā*	/keɪ/	/kaː/	/kaː/	/kaː/	0.77%
L	*el*, *ell*[nb 6]	*el*	/ɛl/	/ɛl/	/ɛl/	/ɛl/	4.03%
M	*em*	*em*	/ɛm/	/ɛm/	/ɛm/	/ɛm/	2.41%
N	*en*	*en*	/ɛn/	/ɛn/	/ɛn/	/ɛn/	6.75%
O	*o*	*ō*	/oʊ/	/oː/	/oː/	/oː/	7.51%
P	*pee*	*pē*	/piː/	/peː/	/peː/	/peː/	1.93%
Q	*cue*, *kew*, *kue*, *que*[nb 7]	*qū*	/kjuː/	/kuː/	/kyː/	/kiw/	0.10%
R	*ar*	*er*	/ɑːr/	/ɛr/	/ɛr/	/ɛr/ > /ar/	5.99%

	or[nb 8]		/ˈɔːr/				
S	*ess* *es*- in compounds[nb 9]	*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/[nb 10]	–	–	–	2.36%
X	*ex*	*ex* *ix*	/ˈɛks/	/ɛks/ /ɪks/	/iks/	/ɛks/	0.15%
Y	*wy*, *wye*	*hȳ* *ī graeca*	/ˈwaɪ/	/hyː/ /iː/ /iː ˈgraɪka/	*ui*, *gui* ? /iː grɛːk/	/wiː/	1.97%
Z	*zed*[nb 11] *zee*[nb 12]	*zēta*	/ˈzɛd/ /ˈziː/	/ˈzeːta/	/ˈzɛːdə/	/zɛd/	0.07%

Etymology [edit]

The names of the letters are for the most part direct descendants, via French, of the Latin (and Etruscan) names. (See Latin alphabet: Origins.)

The regular phonological developments (in rough chronological order) are:

- palatalization before front vowels of Latin /k/ successively to /tʃ/, /ts/, and finally to Middle French /s/. Affects C.
- palatalization before front vowels of Latin /g/ to Proto-Romance and Middle French /dʒ/. Affects G.
- fronting of Latin /uː/ to Middle French /yː/, becoming Middle English /iw/ and then Modern English /juː/. Affects Q, U.
- the inconsistent lowering of Middle English /ɛr/ to /ar/. Affects R.
- the Great Vowel Shift, shifting all Middle English long vowels. Affects A, B, C, D, E, G, H, I, K, O, P, T, and presumably Y.

The novel forms are *aitch*, a regular development of Medieval Latin *acca*; *jay*, a new letter presumably vocalized like neighboring *kay* to avoid confusion with established *gee* (the other name, *jy*, was taken from French); *vee*, a new letter named by analogy with the majority; *double-u*, a new letter, self-explanatory (the name of Latin V was *ū*); *wye*, of obscure origin but with an antecedent in Old French *wi*; *izzard*, from the Romance phrase *i zed* or *i zeto* "and Z" said when reciting the alphabet; and *zee*, an American levelling of *zed* by analogy with other consonants.

Some groups of letters, such as *pee* and *bee*, or *em* and *en*, are easily confused in speech, especially when heard over the telephone or a radio communications link. Spelling alphabets such as the ICAO spelling alphabet, used by aircraft pilots, police and others, are designed to eliminate this potential confusion by giving each letter a name that sounds quite different from any other.

Ampersand [edit]

The ampersand (&) has sometimes appeared at the end of the English alphabet, as in Byrhtferð's list of letters in 1011.[2] *&* was regarded as the 27th letter of the English alphabet, as taught to children in the US and elsewhere. An example may be seen in M. B. Moore's 1863 book *The Dixie Primer, for the Little Folks*.[3] Historically, the figure is a ligature for the letters *Et*. In English and many other languages, it is used to represent the word *and*, plus occasionally the Latin word *et*, as in the abbreviation *&c* (et cetera).

Archaic letters [edit]

Old and Middle English had a number of non-Latin letters that have since dropped out of use. These either took the names of the equivalent runes, since there were no Latin names to adopt, or (thorn, wyn) were runes themselves.

- Æ æ *ash* or *æsc* /ˈæʃ/, used for the vowel /æ/, which disappeared from the language and then reformed.
- Ð ð *edh*, *eð* or *eth* /ˈɛð/, and Þ þ *thorn* or *þorn* /ˈθɔːrn/, both used for the consonants /ð/ and /θ/ (which did not become phonemically distinct until after these letters had fallen out of use).
- Œ œ *ethel*, *ēðel*, *cēþel*, etc. /ˈɛðəl/, used for the vowel /œ/, which disappeared from the language quite early.
- Ƿ ƿ *wyn*, *ƿen* or *wynn* /ˈwɪn/, used for the consonant /w/ (the letter 'w' had not yet been invented).
- Ȝ ȝ *yogh*, *ȝogh* or *yoch* /ˈjɒg/ or /ˈjɒx/, used for various sounds derived from /g/, such as /j/ and /x/.

Diacritics [edit]

Main article: English terms with diacritical marks

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).[4] Diacritics used for tonal languages may be replaced with tonal numbers or omitted.

Loanwords [edit]

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*).[5] 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 [edit]

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*[6] 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.[*citation needed*]

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

Punctuation marks within words [edit]

Apostrophe [edit]

The apostrophe (’) is not 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"[nb 13] 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"[7])—which undermines the logic of "marked" forms.
- Most 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*), *we're* (we are), or *she'd* (*she would* or *she had*).

Hyphen [edit]

Hyphens are often used in English compound words. Writing 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 [edit]

Main article: Letter frequency

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.[8]

Phonology [edit]

Main article: English 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 yes /jɛs/ and went /wɛnt/) 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 [edit]

See also: History of the Latin alphabet and English orthography

Old English [edit]

Main article: Old English Latin alphabet

The English language itself was first 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.[9] 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, *œðel*[citation needed]. 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.[2] He listed the 24 letters of the Latin alphabet first, including 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 [edit]

In the orthography of Modern English, thorn (þ), eth (ð), wynn (ƿ), yogh (ȝ), ash (æ), and 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[10] of digraphs, but they are not considered separate letters of the alphabet:

ch · ci · ck · gh · ng · ph · qu · rh · sc · sh · th · ti · wh · wr · zh

Ligatures in recent usage [edit]

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)[citation needed] 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,[citation needed] although in American English, a lone *e* has mostly supplanted both (for example, *encyclopedia* for *encyclopaedia*, and *maneuver* for *manoeuvre*).

Some fonts for typesetting English contain commonly used ligatures, such as for ⟨tt⟩, ⟨fi⟩, ⟨fl⟩, ⟨ffi⟩, and ⟨ffl⟩. These are not independent letters, but rather allographs.

Proposed reforms [edit]

Alternative scripts have been proposed for written English—mostly extending or replacing the basic English alphabet—such as the Deseret alphabet, the Shavian alphabet, etc.

Even Gregg shorthand has been suggested.[citation needed]

See also [edit]

- Alphabet song
- NATO phonetic alphabet
- English orthography
- English-language spelling reform

- American manual alphabet
- Two-handed manual alphabets
- English Braille
- American Braille
- New York Point
- Chinese respelling of the English alphabet
- Burmese respelling of the English alphabet

Notes and references [edit]

Notes [edit]

1. ^ As an example, this article contains a diaeresis in "coöperate", a cedilla in "façades" and a circumflex in the word "crêpe": Grafton, Anthony (2006-10-23), "The Nutty Professors: The History of Academic Dharisma", *The New Yorker* (Books section), retrieved 2019-06-17.
2. ^ often in Hiberno-English, due to the letter's pronunciation in the Irish language
3. ^ The usual form in Hiberno-English and Australian English
4. ^ 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*).
5. ^ in Scottish English
6. ^ In the US, an L-shaped object may be spelled *ell*.
7. ^ One of the few letter names commonly spelled without the letter in question.
8. ^ in Hiberno-English
9. ^ in compounds such as *es-hook*
10. ^ 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.*
11. ^ in British English, Hiberno-English and Commonwealth English
12. ^ in American English, Newfoundland English and Philippine English
13. ^ 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*.

References [edit]

1. '^ "The New Yorkers Odd Mark—The Diaeresis"
2. ^ a b Michael Everson, Evertype, Baldur Sigurðsson, Íslensk Málstöð, *On the Status of the Latin Letter Þorn and of its Sorting Order*
3. ^ "The Dixie Primer, for the Little Folks". *Branson, Farrar & Co., Raleigh NC*.
4. ^ Strizver, Ilene, "Accents & Accented Characters", *Fontology*, Monotype Imaging, retrieved 2019-06-17
5. ^ Modern Humanities Research Association (2013), *MHRA Style Guide: A Handbook for Authors and Editors* (pdf) (3rd ed.), London, Section 2.2, ISBN 978-1-78188-009-8, retrieved 2019-06-17.
6. ^ Zoölogist, Minnesota Office of the State (1892). *Report of the State Zoölogist*.
7. ^ Kingsley Amis quoted in Jane Fyne, "Little Things that Matter," *Courier Mail* (2007-04-26) Retrieved 2013-04-07.
8. ^ Beker, Henry; Piper, Fred (1982). *Cipher Systems: The Protection of Communications*. Wiley-Interscience. p. 397. Table also available from Lewand, Robert (2000). *Cryptological Mathematics*. Mathematical Association of America. p. 36. ISBN 978-0883857199. and "Archived copy". Archived from the original on 2008-07-08. Retrieved 2008-06-25.
9. ^ Shaw, Phillip (May 2013). "Adapting the Roman alphabet for Writing Old English: Evidence from Coin Epigraphy and Single-Sheet Characters". **21**: 115–139 – via Ebscohost.
10. ^ "Digraphs (Phonics on the Web)". *phonicsontheweb.com*. Archived from the original on 2016-04-13. Retrieved 2016-04-07.

Further reading [edit]

- Michael Rosen (2015). *Alphabetical: How Every Letter Tells a Story*. Counterpoint. ISBN 978-1619027022.
- Upward, Christopher; Davidson, George (2011), *The History of English Spelling*, Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, ISBN 978-1-4051-9024-4, LCCN 2011008794.

v • t • e **Description of the English language** [hide]

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