



LANGUAGE COURSE

Old English Grammar 1

10 Chapters

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Old English Grammar 1

Chapter 1 · Letters and Sounds



Letters and Sounds

*Before any grammar, you need to know what you are looking at on the page. This chapter says what Old English is, shows its alphabet, explains the marks that modern editors add, and gives the main rules for saying a word aloud. It uses the Wikipedia articles *Old English* and *Old English phonology*; where those articles do not say something, the chapter says so.*

THE RULE IN ONE BOX

Old English is written with the Latin alphabet plus four extra letters (**æ ð þ ƿ**). Vowels and consonants can each be **short or long**, and long consonants are written double. The letters **c**, **g** and **sc** have a "front" (palatal) and a "back" (velar) pronunciation, which editors may mark with a dot (**ċ ġ sc̆**).

What "Old English" means

QUESTION	ANSWER (PER THE OLD ENGLISH ARTICLE)
How long was it used?	Roughly the 5th to the 12th century; "its usage covered a period of 700 years". Albert Baugh dates it 450 to 1150.
Three periods	Prehistoric (c. 450 to 650), Early (c. 650 to 900), Late (c. 900 to 1150)
Dialects	Four main: Mercian, Northumbrian, Kentish and West Saxon. Mercian and Northumbrian together are called Anglian.
Which one is taught?	Most surviving texts follow a written standard based on Late West Saxon, "considered to represent the classical form of Old English". This course teaches that standard.
Is West Saxon the ancestor of Modern English?	Not directly. The phonology article says Modern English is "more closely related to the Mercian dialect".

Why teach West Saxon if English comes from Mercian?

Because it is the dialect with the most surviving writing. The Old English article says Kentish has the scantest literary remains. A standard that exists in plenty of texts is the one you can practise on.

The alphabet

From the 7th century Old English was written with the Latin alphabet, replacing runes. The article says the remaining 20 Latin letters were supplemented by 4 more, giving 24:

LETTER	NAME	WHERE IT CAME FROM (PER THE ARTICLE)
Æ æ	ash (from <i>æsc</i>)	A letter named after the word <i>æsc</i>
Ð ð	eth (from <i>ðæt</i>)	A modified Latin letter
Þ þ	thorn	Borrowed from the futhorc runes
ƿ ƿ	wynn	Also borrowed from the futhorc

- **Runes first.** Early inscriptions used the futhorc, which the article describes as a rune set derived from the 24-character Germanic elder futhark, extended by five more runes for Anglo-Saxon vowel sounds.
- **Insular g.** The article discusses the insular form of g (*ḡ*), which modern editions replace with the standard g. Many printed editions also replacewynn (ƿ) with w; the article text I read does not say so, so treat that as common practice, not as the article's claim.

þ and ð are the same job

The phonology article says both ð and þ could represent either a voiceless or a voiced "th". The choice of letter does not tell you which sound it is; the position in the word does (see "Consonants" below).

What the editors add

Printed Old English contains marks that are not in the manuscripts. The phonology article says what they are:

MARK	EXAMPLE	WHAT THE ARTICLE SAYS
Dot above a consonant	ċ ġ śċ	Modern editors "may mark the palatal consonants with a dot above the letter". An editorial convention, not a manuscript feature.
Macron on the first letter of a long diphthong	ēa, ēo	"Modern editions conventionally mark long diphthongs with a macron on the first letter."
Macrons and breves for length	ā, ǣ, ē, ī, ō, ū, ȳ	The article's own transcriptions use them to show length. That ordinary manuscripts do not mark vowel length is my own background knowledge, which I did not verify in the article.

This course writes long vowels with a macron (**hwā**, **fōt**) and palatal consonants with a dot, and says which is which. Remember that a word you meet in a manuscript or a cheap reprint may have neither mark.

Vowels

The phonology article says that, depending on dialect, Old English distinguished five to eight vowel qualities in stressed syllables, and each could be a long or a short monophthong. Its chart lists these pairs:

SHORT	LONG	NOTE (PER THE ARTICLE)
i /i/	ī /i: /	
y /y/	ȳ /y: /	front rounded
u /u/	ū /u: /	
e /e/	ē /e: /	
o /o/	ō /o: /	
æ /æ/	ǣ / æ: /	

SHORT	LONG	NOTE (PER THE ARTICLE)
a /a/	ā /ɑ:/	The article's chart gives /a/ and /ɑ:/ for this pair; it does not say which letter they are spelled with, so the letter a is my reading
oe /ø/	/ø:/	Existed only in some dialects; "usually" spelled oe
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Diphthongs could be short or long. Long ones (ēa, ēo) came mainly from Proto-Germanic *au, *eu and *iu; short ones came from breaking, palatal diphthongisation and back mutation. • Dialect spellings: Northumbrian had io, while Early West Saxon had ie; the article says the quality of ie is disputed. • Unstressed vowels were reduced, with a three-way contrast in many texts. • Lax and tense: the short e, i, y, o, u are sometimes called "lax" and the long ē, ī, ŷ, ō, ū "tense". 		
Consonants		
TOPIC	THE RULE (PER THE PHONOLOGY ARTICLE)	EXAMPLE
Long consonants	Short and long consonants contrast, usually between vowels. Long consonants are written with doubled letters.	banan (slayers) versus bannan (summon)
f, þ/ð, s	/f θ s/ are voiced to [v ð z] between voiced sounds when the preceding syllable had some stress; otherwise they are voiceless. This difference was generally not marked in spelling.	The spelling gives no clue; you apply the rule
c and g	Velar or palatal depending on context. Before stressed i, eo, ie, io: palatal. Before stressed a, o, u: velar.	Editors mark the palatal ones ċ , ġ
sc	"Always palatal [ʃ] at the start of a stressed syllable."	sċ at the start of a stressed syllable
h	[h] word-initially, [x] after vowels or in clusters, [xx] as a geminate. A palatal allophone [ç] after front vowels is "often assumed".	One letter, several sounds

Where is the stress?

The articles I read give no statement of where the stress falls in an Old English word (the phonology article's Stress section was past the part I could read). From general knowledge, and unverified here, stress falls on the first syllable of most native words; check it against a grammar before you rely on it.

Typing the Letters

I looked up the characters with Python's Unicode names; the table is my own record of that check.

CHARACTER	CODE POINT	UNICODE NAME
æ	U+00E6	LATIN SMALL LETTER AE
ð	U+00F0	LATIN SMALL LETTER ETH
þ	U+00FE	LATIN SMALL LETTER THORN
ƿ	U+01BF	LATIN LETTER WYNN
ȝ	U+1D79	LATIN SMALL LETTER INSULAR G

The dotted consonant ċ is two code points (the letter c and a combining dot above) when written in decomposed form, and a long vowel such as ā is the letter with a macron: ā, æ and ŷ have their own named characters in Unicode (LATIN SMALL LETTER A WITH MACRON, and so on). That is why a search for *scīp* can fail if one copy uses the decomposed dot and the other the single character, a problem met in Computational Linguistics 1.

In Use

One pair from the article, to practise the doubling rule.

① One letter or two?

A:

banan

"slayers"

B:

bannan

"summon" (to call up)

One *n* is short and two are long, so the second word is held longer. Both words are the article's examples, with its glosses.



Quick Reference

TOPIC	REMEMBER
Dates and standard	c. 450 to 1150; Late West Saxon is the standard; Mercian is closer to Modern English
Alphabet	20 Latin letters plus æ ð þ ƿ = 24
Editors' marks	ċ ġ ſc (dots); macrons for length; not in manuscripts
Length	Short and long vowels and consonants; long consonants doubled
Voicing	/f θ s/ voiced between voiced sounds (rule, not spelling)
c, g, sc	Palatal before stressed i, eo, ie, io; velar before stressed a, o, u; sc palatal [ʃ] at the start of a stressed syllable



Try It Yourself

Say the answer first, then click to check.

1. How many letters does the Old English alphabet have, according to the article?

▼ Show answer

24: the remaining 20 Latin letters plus four more.

2. Name the four letters that were added, and say which two came from runes.

▼ Show answer

æ (ash), ð (eth), þ (thorn) and ƿ (wynn). Thorn and wynn came from the futhorc runes.

3. A printed text has ċ in a word. Is that dot in the manuscript?

▼ Show answer

No. Per the article it is a convention modern editors may use to mark the palatal pronunciation.

4. What is the difference in sound between **banan** and **bannan**, and how is it written?

▼ Show answer

The second has a long *n*, written as a doubled letter. The article gives the pair with the meanings "slayers" and "summon".

5. Does the choice of þ or ð tell you whether the sound is voiced?

▼ Show answer

No. Both could represent either the voiceless or the voiced "th". The article says the voicing difference was generally not marked in spelling.

6. A *c* comes before a stressed *i*. Palatal or velar? And before a stressed *a*?

▼ Show answer

Palatal before a stressed *i*; velar before a stressed *a*, *o* or *u*.

7. What sound does *sc* have at the start of a stressed syllable?

▼ Show answer

Always palatal [ʃ] (the "sh" sound), according to the article.

8. When are /f/, /θ/ and /s/ voiced?

▼ Show answer

Between voiced sounds, when the preceding syllable had some stress; otherwise they are voiceless.

9. Which dialect does this course teach, and is it the direct ancestor of Modern English?

▼ Show answer

The Late West Saxon standard. It is not the direct ancestor: the article says Modern English is more closely related to Mercian.

10. How do modern editions mark long diphthongs such as *ēa*?

▼ Show answer

With a macron on the first letter, per the phonology article.

Note on sources

This chapter uses Wikipedia's *Old English* article (first 100,000 of 207,822 characters read) and *Old English phonology* article (first 100,000 of 118,867 characters read; its Stress section and the end of the page were not read). The article has no spelling table for the vowels, so which letter is spelled for /ɑ/ is my own reading, as marked. The "Typing the Letters" table and the explanation of the Unicode search problem are mine.

Coming up in Chapter 2: Nouns: Gender and Number. Why grammatical gender follows the form of a word more than its meaning, and how to spot the plural.

Old English Grammar 1

Chapter 2 · Gender and Number

Gender and Number

Every Old English noun has a gender (masculine, feminine or neuter) and a number (singular or plural), and the rest of the sentence has to agree with them. This chapter explains how gender is decided and how the plural is made. The case endings are Chapter 3. Everything here comes from the Nouns section of Wikipedia's Old English grammar article unless it is marked as mine.

THE RULE IN ONE BOX

Three genders, two numbers. A noun's gender comes "mostly from morphophonology rather than directly from semantics": it follows the **shape of the word** more than its meaning. The plural depends on the noun's class: **-as** for masculine a-stems, **-u or nothing** for neuter a-stems, **-a** for light $\bar{o}$ -stems, **-an** for n-stems.

The three genders

Gender is inherited from Proto-Indo-European. For people and animals it often follows biological sex, but with exceptions, and for things you mostly have to learn it with the word:

KIND OF NOUN	PATTERN (PER THE ARTICLE)	EXAMPLES
Sexed beings	Usually match their sex	fæder father (m) · mōdor mother (f) · cyning king (m) · cwēn queen (f) · munuc monk (m) · nunne nun (f)
Exceptions	Gender and sex do not match	wīf woman, wife (n) · mægden girl (n) · wīfmann woman (m)
Animals	Mixed	hana rooster (m) · henn hen (f) · swīn pig (n)
People of either sex	Usually masculine	frēond friend (m) · bæcere baker (m); exceptions cild and bearn child (both n)
Things	Hard to predict	seax knife (n) · gafol fork (f) · cucler spoon (m)

Same thing, different gender

The article gives pairs of words for one referent: "mountain" is **beorg** (m) or **dūn** (f); "star" is **steorra** (m) or **tungol** (n). So the gender belongs to the word, not to the thing.

Clues in the shape of the word

GENDER	ENDINGS AND CATEGORIES (PER THE ARTICLE)
Masculine	Nouns in -a (almost all); suffixes -op, -dōm, -end, -els, -uc, -ling, -ere, -hād, -scīpe; letters of the alphabet
Feminine	Suffixes -ung, -þu, -nes, -estre, -ræden, -wist
Neuter	Suffixes -lāc, -et, -ærn, -ċen; metals; verbs used as nouns

- **Compounds** take the gender of their last element, so **wīfmann** is masculine because **mann** is.
- **Diminutive -en**: **mægden** is neuter because of its diminutive **-en**.
- **The -a exception**: the article says *Italia*, a learned Latin borrowing, is an exception to "-a means masculine".

Making a feminine

The article says Old English often has a general word for both sexes and a separate, suffixed word for females:

SUFFIX	GENERAL OR MALE	FEMALE
-en	god god · ielf elf · þēow slave	gyden goddess · ielfen female elf · þiewen female slave
-estre (female of -ere and -end)	sangere singer · bæcere baker	sangestre female singer · bæcestre
-e (female of -a)	wyrhta worker	wyrhte

SUFFIX	GENERAL OR MALE	FEMALE
Separate words	hlāford master	hlāfdige mistress

Number: the plural

Old English has a singular and a plural. The first- and second-person pronouns also have a dual, met in Chapter 7. For nouns, the plural ending depends on the noun class. The article's model nouns are below; the case endings in the full tables (genitive, dative) are for Chapter 3, so this chapter only compares the singular and the plural of the nominative:

CLASS	NOUN	NOMINATIVE SINGULAR	NOMINATIVE PLURAL
Masculine a-stem	dog	hund	hund as
Neuter a-stem, "light"	boat	scīp	scīp u
Neuter a-stem, "heavy"	house	hūs	hūs (no change)
Light ō-stem	gift	ġiefu	ġief a
Heavy ō-stem	ride	rād	rād a
n-stem, masculine	moon	mōna	mōn an
n-stem, feminine	sun	sunne	sunn an
n-stem, neuter	eye	ēage	ēag an

- **a-stems** are about 60% of all nouns. Masculine and neuter a-stems differ only in the nominative and accusative plural.
- **Light and heavy neuters:** some neuter a-stems take **-u** in the plural and some have no ending. The article traces the split to high vowel apocope, and notes that some nouns have two competing plurals, one with **-u** and one without: "dreams" is either **swefn** or **swefnu**.
- **ō-stems** include most feminines. The article says light ones end in **-u** in the nominative singular and heavy ones have no ending.

- **n-stems** are called "weak" nouns because most endings are **-an**; all the other classes are "strong".

The Modern English fossil

Most Modern English plurals in -s descend from the **-as** of masculine a-stems, and the *-en* of *oxen* is the same ending as the n-stem **-an**. That is my own background knowledge, not something stated in the article I read, so check it against a history of English before you rely on it.

Compared with German

German also has three genders, and a diminutive ending makes a neuter noun there too (*das Mädchen*). The Old English **mægden** being neuter because of its diminutive **-en** is the same idea. The German comparison is mine, not the article's.

Watch out

Gender is not "he" and "she"

A neuter noun can name a woman (**wīf**) and a masculine one can too (**wīfmann**). Learn the gender with the word, not from what it refers to. And the article's own caution applies to the suffix clues: they are patterns, with exceptions such as *Italia*.

The same ending, different meanings

-a is the masculine singular ending of n-stems (**mōna**), the plural of light ō-stems (**ġiefa**), and the genitive plural of a-stems. You cannot tell which from the ending alone, which is why you need the case system in Chapter 3.

Quick Reference

TOPIC

REMEMBER

Genders

Masculine, feminine, neuter, from the shape of the word more than its meaning

TOPIC	REMEMBER
Gender clues	-a masculine; -ung, -þu, -nes, -estre feminine; -lāc, -et, -ærn, -cen neuter; compounds take the last element's gender
Feminines	-en, -estre and -e make female forms
Plural, masculine a-stem	-as (hundas)
Plural, neuter a-stem	-u or no ending (scīpu, hūs)
Plural, ō-stem	-a (ġiefā, rāda)
Plural, n-stem	-an (mōnan, sunnan, ēagan)

Try It Yourself

Say the answer first, then click to check.

1. What gender is **wīf** "woman, wife", and why is it surprising?

▼ Show answer

Neuter. It names a female but the noun is not feminine; the article lists it as an exception to the sex rule.

2. **wīfmann** is masculine. Which rule explains it?

▼ Show answer

Compounds take the gender of their last element, and **mann** is masculine.

3. Which gender would you expect for a noun ending in **-nes**, and for one ending in **-dōm**?

▼ Show answer

-nes is feminine; **-dōm** is masculine.

4. Give the plural of **hund** and say which class it belongs to.

▼ Show answer

hundas. Masculine a-stem.

5. **scīp** and **hūs** are both neuter a-stems. How do their plurals differ?

▼ Show answer

scīp is "light" and takes **-u** (**scīpu**); **hūs** is "heavy" and has no plural ending.

6. Which noun class is called "weak", and what is its typical plural ending?

▼ Show answer

The n-stems; the typical ending is **-an** (**mōnan**).

7. Make the female form of **sangere** "singer" and of **god** "god".

▼ Show answer

sangestre and **gyden** "goddess".

8. What is the nominative plural of **ġiefu** "gift" and of **ēage** "eye"?

▼ Show answer

ġiefa (light ō-stem) and **ēagan** (neuter n-stem).

9. Why does the article say some nouns have two plurals? Give its example.

▼ Show answer

Because of a sound change called high vowel apocope, some neuter nouns have both a plural with **-u** and one without. "Dreams" is either **swefn** or **swefnu**.

10. A word ends in **-a** and is the name of a man. What gender is it likely to be, and what could go wrong?

▼ Show answer

Masculine: nouns in **-a** are almost all masculine. What could go wrong: the article says learned borrowings such as *Italia* are exceptions, so the ending is a strong clue but not a rule without exceptions.

Note on sources

This chapter uses the Nouns section of Wikipedia's *Old English grammar* article (first 100,000 of 131,435 characters read). The article's paradigm tables did not give the plural genitive and dative of the *ō*-stems clearly, so those are left to Chapter 3. The article uses **hund**, **scīp** and **hūs** as its *a*-stem models, not *stān* or *word*, so those are not used here. The notes on Modern English plurals and on German are mine, as marked.

Coming up in Chapter 3: The Cases. The nominative, accusative, genitive, dative and the fading instrumental, and the full **hund**, **scīp** and **hūs** tables.

Old English Grammar 1

Chapter 3 · The Cases

The Cases

In Modern English you know who did what to whom from word order: "the knight slew the dragon". In Old English the job is done partly by the ending on the noun and on the word for "the". This chapter names the cases, shows what each is for using the example sentences from Wikipedia's Old English grammar article, and gives the full noun tables for the classes met in Chapter 2.

THE RULE IN ONE BOX

A case is the form a noun takes to show its job in the sentence. Old English has **nominative** (subject), **accusative** (direct object), **genitive** (possessor), **dative** (indirect object) and a fading **instrumental** (the thing used), which had mostly merged with the dative.

What each case does

CASE	JOB (PER THE ARTICLE)	EXAMPLE FROM THE ARTICLE
Nominative	The subject, "which carries out the action"; also the word after "to be"	Hē lufode hīe "he loved her" · þæt mægden rann "the girl ran" · wyrd is eall "destiny is all"
Accusative	The direct object, "that which is acted upon"	sē ridda ācwealde þone dracan "the knight slew the dragon"
Genitive	The possessor; also a partitive use ("a group of")	Ġesāwe þū þæs hundes bān? "Have you seen the dog's bone?" · manna hēap "a group of people" · wætres cuppe "a cup of water"
Dative	The indirect object	Ġc sealde hire þone beall "I gave her the ball"
Instrumental	Something being used	Hwæl mē meahte mid āne sleġe besenċan oppe ofslēan "A whale could sink or kill me with one blow" · ōðre naman "by another name"

Four cases or five?

The article is not consistent: its lead describes four cases plus a vestigial instrumental, while its Case section lists five. Both counts mean the same thing here: the instrumental was "falling out of use, having mostly merged with the dative". It was distinguished only in the masculine and neuter singular of strong adjectives and demonstratives, "and even then the dative was often used instead". So in the noun tables below there is no separate instrumental column.

Reading a sentence by its cases

Take the article's sentence **Iċ sealde hire þone beall**, "I gave her the ball". Without trying to translate every word, the cases tell you the roles:

- **Iċ** "I" is the subject: nominative.
- **hire** "her" is the indirect object: dative.
- **þone beall** "the ball" is the direct object: accusative.

That "the" before **beall** has an accusative form (**þone**), which is how you know the ball is what was given. The article says extraposition and scrambling are common in Old English; the cases are what keep the roles clear when words move. (The forms of the word for "the" are the subject of Chapter 5.)

The full a-stem tables

These are the article's models. Notice that the nominative and accusative are the same:

CASE	MASCULINE HUND "DOG" (SG / PL)	NEUTER LIGHT ŠĪP "BOAT" (SG / PL)	NEUTER HEAVY HŪS "HOUSE" (SG / PL)
Nominative / accusative	hund / hund as	šĭp / šĭp u	hūs / hūs
Genitive	hund es / hund a	šĭp es / šĭp a	hūs es / hūs a
Dative	hund e / hund um	šĭp e / šĭp um	hūs e / hūs um

Patterns visible in the table (my observations from the article's forms, not statements in it):

- Nominative and accusative are identical in every cell. The article lists them as one row, "Nom–Acc".
- Genitive singular is **-es** and genitive plural is **-a** in all three nouns.
- Dative singular is **-e** and dative plural is **-um** in all three.

The n-stem (weak) tables

CASE	MASCULINE MŌNA "MOON" (SG / PL)	FEMININE SUNNE "SUN" (SG / PL)	NEUTER ĒAGE "EYE" (SG / PL)
Nominative	mōna / mōnan	sunne / sunnan	ēage / ēagan
Accusative	mōnan / mōnan	sunnan / sunnan	ēage / ēagan
Genitive	mōnena / mōnena	sunnena / sunnena	ēagan / ēagena
Dative	mōnum / mōnum	sunnum / sunnum	ēagum / (not listed)

One cell is missing: the article's table does not list a dative plural for **ēage**, so none is given here. Observe that the masculine and feminine n-stems use the same genitive form in the singular and the plural.

The ō-stem (feminine) singular

CASE	LIGHT ĠIEFU "GIFT" (SG)	HEAVY RĀD "RIDE" (SG)
Nominative	ġiefu	rād
Accusative	ġiefe	rāde

The article's table also lists a genitive (**ġiefa**, **rāda**) and a dative (**ġiefum**, **rādum**) for these nouns, but in what I read the forms were not clearly labelled singular or plural, so I do not assign them to a column. Check them against the article before relying on them. The nominative plurals (**ġiefa**, **rāda**) are given in Chapter 2.

The same ending in different cases

The ending **-a** is the genitive plural of a-stems (**hunda**) and also the nominative plural of light *ō*-stems (**giefa**, from Chapter 2). So an ending alone does not tell you the case. This is why you learn the noun class, the gender and the word for "the" together.

Prepositions and cases

The article says prepositions may govern the accusative, genitive, dative or instrumental. Its table gives the governed case for few of them: **andlang** "along" governs the genitive. For **of** "from, out of" it gives the meaning but not the case. So this chapter does not list prepositions with their cases; Chapter 10 returns to prepositions and should be checked against a fuller source.



Quick Reference

CASE	JOB	A-STEM ENDINGS (MASC.)
Nominative	Subject	sg none · pl -as
Accusative	Direct object	same as the nominative
Genitive	Possessor; "a group of"	sg -es · pl -a
Dative	Indirect object	sg -e · pl -um
Instrumental	Thing used (mostly merged with the dative)	no separate column



Try It Yourself

Say the answer first, then click to check.

1. In **sē ridda ācwealde þone dracan** ("the knight slew the dragon"), which noun phrase is in the accusative and how do you know?

▼ Show answer

þone dracan "the dragon": it is the direct object, "that which is acted upon" (the article's definition of the accusative).

2. In **Ic sealde hire þone beall**, which word is dative?

▼ Show answer

hire "her", the indirect object (the person it was given to).

3. In **Ġesāwe þū þæs hundes bān?**, which phrase is genitive and what does it express?

▼ Show answer

þæs hundes "the dog's": the possessor.

4. Give the dative plural and genitive singular of **hund**.

▼ Show answer

Dative plural **hundum**; genitive singular **hundes**.

5. How can you tell the plural of **hūs** from its singular in the nominative?

▼ Show answer

You cannot from the noun alone: both are **hūs**. The article says "heavy" neuters have no plural ending, so agreement words and context decide.

6. What is the difference between the genitive in **þæs hundes bān** and in **wætres cuppe**?

▼ Show answer

The first is possessive ("the dog's bone"); the second is partitive ("a cup of water").

7. What happened to the instrumental case?

▼ Show answer

It was falling out of use and had mostly merged with the dative. It was distinguished only in the masculine and neuter singular of strong adjectives and demonstratives, and even there

the dative was often used instead.

8. The n-stem accusative singular of **mōna** is **mōnan**. What else in the table ends in **-an** and why does that make a form ambiguous?

▼ Show answer

The nominative plural **mōnan** and the accusative plural are the same word, so **mōnan** alone could be accusative singular or nominative/accusative plural; the word for "the" and the verb help decide.

9. What does the article's table say about the case governed by the preposition **andlang** "along"?

▼ Show answer

It governs the genitive.

10. Why does Old English not need a strict subject-verb-object word order to say who did what?

▼ Show answer

The case endings (and the case forms of "the") mark the roles, so words can move; the article says scrambling and extraposition are common.

Note on sources

This chapter uses the Case and Nouns sections of Wikipedia's *Old English grammar* article (first 100,000 of 131,435 characters). The example sentences and translations are the article's. The reading of "Ic sealde hire þone beall" word by word, the pattern observations below the a-stem table, and the choice to leave the ō-stem genitive and dative unassigned (the article's table was not clearly labelled in what I read) are mine. The n-stem tables are as the article prints them, except that the dative plural of **ēage** is not listed.

Coming up in Chapter 4: More Noun Classes. The i-stems, u-stems, root nouns and the irregular plurals that survive as *men*, *feet* and *children*.

Old English Grammar 1

Chapter 4 · More Noun Classes



More Noun Classes

Chapters 2 and 3 covered the biggest classes: *a*-stems, *ō*-stems and *n*-stems. This chapter surveys the rest. You do not need to memorise every table; the aim is to recognise which class a noun belongs to and to see where Modern English plurals like *men* and *feet* come from. All forms are from the Noun classes section of Wikipedia's Old English grammar article unless marked as mine.

THE RULE IN ONE BOX

Nouns are sorted into classes by their old stem ending, and the class decides the endings. Besides the *a*-, *ō*- and *n*-stems there are ***i*-stems**, ***u*-stems**, **root nouns**, ***nd*-stems**, ***r*-stems** and ***z*-stems**. The root nouns change their vowel (***i*-umlaut**) in the dative singular and nominative plural, and the article links this to *man*/*men* and *foot*/*feet*.

Eight classes or nine?

The article says nouns fall into eight classes, but its section headings list nine (*a*-, *ō*-, *n*-, *i*-, *u*-stems, root nouns, *nd*-, *r*- and *z*-stems). It is the same inconsistency noted in the course outline; this chapter follows the headings.

i-stems

All genders are possible, but neuter *i*-stems are rare. The article's models are ***tīd*** "time" (a feminine heavy *i*-stem) and ***Engle*** "the English". It also gives ***lēode*** "people" and ***Dene*** "the Danes" as nouns that exist only in the plural.

CASE	TĪD SINGULAR	TĪD PLURAL	ENGLE PLURAL
Nominative	tīd	tīda	Engle (nom. and acc.)
Accusative	tīd, tīde	tīda, -e	Engle
Genitive	tīde	tīda	Engla

CASE	TĪD SINGULAR	TĪD PLURAL	ENGLE PLURAL
Dative	not printed in the text I read	tīd um	Eng lum

The article says the plural nominative-accusative **-e** of **Engle** and **Dene** is kept from regular sound change.

u-stems

Masculine or feminine, with one declension for both. Models: **sunu** "son" (light) and **hand** "hand" (heavy). Other examples: **duru** "door", **medu** "mead", **wudu** "wood".

CASE	SUNU (SG / PL)	HAND (SG / PL)
Nominative / accusative	sunu / sun a	hand / hand a

The article's genitive and dative rows for the u-stems did not clearly separate singular from plural in what I read (the forms printed are **suna**, **sunum**, **handa**, **handum**), so I do not assign them to columns. Most historical u-stems moved into the a-stems, and some a-stem nouns keep leftover u-stem forms: **feld** has the dative singular **felda**, **ford** has **forda**, **winter** has **wintra**, and **æppel** has the nominative/accusative plural **æppla**.

Root nouns: where *men* and *feet* come from

Models: **mann** "person", **hnutu** "nut" and **gōs** "goose"; the article also lists **bōc** "book", **cū** "cow", **gāt** "goat", **āc** "oak", **burg** "city" and **sulh** "plow". They are masculine or feminine; all masculine root nouns are heavy, and feminine ones are light (ending in **-e** with umlaut) or heavy (no ending).

NOUN	NOMINATIVE SINGULAR	NOMINATIVE PLURAL	DATIVE SINGULAR	DATIVE PLURAL
mann (m.)	mann	menn	menn	mannum
hnutu (f., light)	hnutu	hnyte	hnyte	hnutum

NOUN	NOMINATIVE SINGULAR	NOMINATIVE PLURAL	DATIVE SINGULAR	DATIVE PLURAL
gōs (f., heavy)	gōs	gēs	gēs	gōsum

- **i-umlaut:** root nouns change their vowel in the dative singular and the nominative/accusative plural (the highlighted vowels). The article links this to Modern English plurals formed by vowel change: *man/men, foot/feet, tooth/teeth, mouse/mice, goose/geese, louse/lice*.
- **Which Old English words?** Only **mann** and **gōs** of those English pairs are in the article's table. The article mentions foot, mouse and tooth only as Modern English comparisons, so the Old English forms **fōt, mūs, tōþ** are not given in the text I read.

nd-stems

The agent suffix **-end** forms nouns from verbs. The article's one-syllable models are **frēond** "friend" and **fēond** "enemy, fiend", all masculine, declined like masculine root nouns; the multi-syllable model is **ymbstandend** "bystander".

CASE	FRĒOND (SG / PL)	YMBSTANDEND (SG / PL)
Nominative / accusative	frēond / frīend	ymbstandend / ymbstandend, -e, -as
Genitive	frēondes / frēonda	ymbstandendes / ymbstandendra
Dative	frīend / frēondum	ymbstandende / ymbstandendum

The article notes that the multi-syllable plurals keep adjectival endings, a relic of their origin as present participles. The table layout was scrambled in what I read, so I rebuilt these forms from the printed endings; check the **frēond** forms against the article.

r-stems: family words

Five nouns: **fæder** "father", **mōdor** "mother", **brōþor**, **sweostor** and **dohtor**. The article glosses only **fæder** and **mōdor** in this section; I add "brother", "sister" and "daughter" for the

other three from my own background knowledge.

NOUN	NOM. / ACC. SINGULAR	NOM. / ACC. PLURAL	DATIVE SINGULAR	DATIVE PLURAL
fæder	fæder	fæderas	not printed	fæderum
mōdor	mōdor	mōdru, -a	mēder	mōdrum
brōþor	brōþor	(ġe)brōþor, -ru, -ra	brēþer	(ġe)brōþrum
sweostor	sweostor	(ġe)sweostor, -ru, -ra	indeclinable	(ġe)sweostrum
dohtor	dohtor	dohtor, -ru, -ra	dehter	dohtrum

- **brōþor**, **mōdor** and **dohtor** have i-umlaut in the dative singular; **sweostor** does not. **fæder** is indeclinable in the singular and takes its plural from the a-stems.
- **brōþor** and **sweostor** often take the prefix **ġe-** in the plural.
- The article does not link *brethren* to **brōþor**.

z-stems

Neuter nouns: **ċild** "child", **ǣġ** "egg", **lamb** "lamb", **ċealf** "calf". They inflect like light neuter a-stems, but their plural endings begin in **-r-**.

CASE	LAMB SINGULAR	LAMB PLURAL
Nominative / accusative	lamb	lambru
Genitive	lambe s	lambr a
Dative	lambe	lambr um

Is children from ċild?

The article does not explicitly link *children* to **ċild**. It seems likely that the *-r-* in *children* goes back to this class, but that is my own background knowledge, not the article's claim, so check it in a history of English.

Irregularities worth knowing

The article lists variations inside the classes. These are the ones most useful at this stage (examples are the article's):

IRREGULARITY	EXAMPLES
Two competing plurals (with and without -u)	swefn / swefnu "dreams" · seġl / seġlu "sails" · wæter / wætru "waters"
Short æ becomes a in the plural	dæg / dagas "day / days" · bæp / baðu "bath / baths"
Hard consonant before a back-vowel ending	fisc / fiscas "fish"
Syncope of unstressed vowels	gristel / gristles "cartilage" · dryhten loses its -e- , nīeten does not
wō-stems keep w before endings	sċeadu "shadow", plural sċeadwa · mæd "meadow", plural mædwa



Quick Reference

CLASS	MODEL	PLURAL TO REMEMBER
i-stem	tīd time	tīda
u-stem	sunu son	sunu
Root noun	mann , gōs	menn , gēs (umlaut)
nd-stem	frēond friend	frīend

CLASS	MODEL	PLURAL TO REMEMBER
r-stem	fæder, mōdor	fæderas, mōdru
z-stem	lamb lamb	lambru

Try It Yourself

Say the answer first, then click to check.

1. What is the plural of **mann** and what change makes it?

▼ Show answer

menn; i-umlaut changes the stem vowel in the nominative/accusative plural (and the dative singular) of root nouns.

2. Give the plural of **gōs** "goose". Which Modern English plural is it linked to?

▼ Show answer

gēs; the article links this kind of change to *goose/geese*.

3. Why can't you give the Old English plural of "foot" from this chapter?

▼ Show answer

The article mentions foot only as a Modern English comparison; **fōt** is not in the table I read.

4. Which class does **sunu** belong to, and what is its nominative plural?

▼ Show answer

u-stem; **suna**.

5. The nouns **fæder**, **mōdor** and **dohtor** belong to the r-stems. Which of them have i-umlaut in the dative singular?

▼ Show answer

mōdor (mēder) and **dohtor** (dehter); the article says **fæder** is indeclinable in the singular.

6. What do the z-stems have in common, and what is the plural of **lamb**?

▼ Show answer

They are neuter and inflect like light neuter a-stems, but with plural endings beginning in **-r-**. The plural of **lamb** is **lambru**.

7. The word for "dreams" has two plurals. What are they and why?

▼ Show answer

swefn and **swefnu**, because of inconsistent apocope (loss of the final vowel).

8. How is the plural of **dæg** "day" irregular?

▼ Show answer

dagas: short **æ** plus a single consonant becomes **a** in the plural.

9. A noun ends in **-end** and means a person who does something. Which class and gender?

▼ Show answer

An nd-stem; the one-syllable models are all masculine, and **-end** forms agent nouns from verbs.

10. The article says nouns have eight classes. Count the headings in this chapter and Chapters 2 and 3. How many do you get?

▼ Show answer

Nine: a-stems, **ō**-stems, n-stems, i-stems, u-stems, root nouns, nd-stems, r-stems and z-stems. The article's own count and headings disagree.

Note on sources

This chapter uses the Noun classes section of Wikipedia's *Old English grammar* article (first 100,000 of 131,435 characters), whose table layout was scrambled in places in what I read. I left out the genitive of **mann** (printed ambiguously), the u-stem and i-stem cells that were not clearly labelled, and the dative singular of **tīd** and **fæder**. The **frēond** and r-stem tables were rebuilt from printed endings after the layout was scrambled, so check them against the article. The glosses for **brōþor**, **sweostor** and **dohtor** and the note on *children* are mine.

Coming up in Chapter 5: The, This and That. The many forms of the word for "the", the demonstratives, and why Old English has no "a".

Old English Grammar 1

Chapter 5 · The, This, That

👉 The, This, That

Chapter 3 said the word for "the" carries case, which is why it matters so much: the noun ending is often ambiguous, but the form of "the" usually tells you the case, gender and number. This chapter gives the paradigms of **sē** "the, that" and **þēs** "this". Usage and examples come from Wikipedia's Old English grammar article. The paradigm tables come from English Wiktionary, because the article's own tables came out flattened and unreadable in what I could read.

THE RULE IN ONE BOX

There is **no indefinite article**: "a king" is just **cyning**. The definite article **sē** also means "that", and has about eleven forms across case, gender and number. The demonstrative **þēs** means "this". Both agree with their noun in gender, number and case.

No "a" in Old English

The article says "Old English has no indefinite article." A noun is usually used alone. Its example: **Ūs is lēofre þæt wē hæbben healtne cyning þonne healt rīce**. "We would rather have a crippled king than a crippled kingdom."

The definite article sē

The article says **sē** "doubles as the word for 'that'" and "comes in eleven different forms depending on case, gender, and number". The Wiktionary table gives several alternative spellings in some cells:

CASE	MASCULINE	FEMININE	NEUTER	PLURAL (ALL GENDERS)
Nominative	sē, þē	sēo, þēo	þæt	þā
Accusative	þone	þā	þæt	þā

CASE	MASCULINE	FEMININE	NEUTER	PLURAL (ALL GENDERS)
Genitive	þæs	þære	þæs	þāra
Dative	þām, þæm	þære	þām, þæm	þām, þæm
Instrumental	þon, þȳ, þē	þære	þon, þȳ, þē	þām, þæm

- **Nominative only has s-:** **sē** and **sēo** start with s; every other form starts with þ. (Observation from the table; the alternative nominatives **þē** and **þēo** are also listed by Wiktionary.)
- **The instrumental forms þon, þȳ, þē** are the ones Chapter 3 said survived only in the masculine and neuter singular; the feminine and plural cells in the table simply repeat the dative.
- **Neuter** nominative and accusative are the same: **þæt**, the ancestor of Modern English "that".

Checking the table against the article

The article's own table is unreliable in what I read: its extraction listed the forms **sē, sēo, þæt, þone, þā, þæs, þære, þām, þon, þȳ, þāra** (eleven), with cell positions partly lost. Every one of these appears in the Wiktionary table above, which is what I used for the layout. The two sources agree on the set of forms.

When "the" is left out

The article says "the" was used "very much like in Modern English", but "somewhat more sparingly". It lists nouns that usually go without it, with its examples:

KIND OF NOUN	EXAMPLES
River names	On Temese flēat ān scīp "A boat was floating on the Thames"
Names of peoples	Seaxan "the Saxons"; also Dena æðeling "prince of the Danes"
Some place nouns	sæ "the sea" · wudu "the woods" · eorðe "the ground" (compare "at sea")

KIND OF NOUN	EXAMPLES
Abstract concepts	sōþ "the truth" · æ "the law"
Divisions of time	Ic ārās on lætne morgen and ēode niðer "I got up late in the morning and went downstairs"
Other	Dryhten "the Lord"; compass directions; set phrases such as ealle hwile and forma sīþ

The article adds that these words still take "the" when they refer to a specific instance, such as "the law they just passed".

An odd word in the example

In **On Temese flēat ān sċip**, the word **ān** is translated "a". From general knowledge (unchecked here), **ān** is the numeral "one", so it is "one boat" used as we use "a boat". The article glosses the sentence as "A boat was floating on the Thames" and, in the text I read, does not comment on **ān**.

The demonstrative þēs "this"

Wiktionary gives **þēs** as "this", used as both determiner and pronoun. The article says it is declined like a strong adjective (Chapter 6); the table below is the Wiktionary one:

CASE	MASCULINE	FEMININE	NEUTER	PLURAL
Nominative	þēs	þēos	þis	þās
Accusative	þisne	þās	þis	þās
Genitive	þisses	þisre, þisse	þisses	þissa
Dative	þissum	þisre, þisse	þissum	þissum
Instrumental	þȳs	þisre, þisse	þȳs	þissum

Wiktionary versus the article

The article's table lists the forms **þēs, þis, þēos, þās, þisne, þisses, þisse, þissa, þissum, þys**, and its extracted layout was flattened, so I cannot say which cell each form belongs in from the article alone. Every one of those forms appears in the Wiktionary table, which I used for the layout. For certainty, check a printed grammar.

ġeon "that over there"

The article describes **ġeon** as "the distal demonstrative", the source of Modern English "yon". It means "that over there", refers to things far away, and "is declined like a regular adjective". So Old English had three degrees of "pointing": **sē** "that" (and "the"), **þēs** "this", and **ġeon** "yon" (my summary of the article's descriptions).



Quick Reference

WORD	MEANING	NOMINATIVE M. / F. / N. / PL.
sē	the, that	sē / sēo / þæt / þā
þēs	this	þēs / þēos / þis / þās
ġeon	that over there (yon)	declined like an adjective
indefinite "a"	none	use the bare noun



Try It Yourself

Say the answer first, then click to check.

1. Say "a king" in Old English.

▼ Show answer

cýning, the bare noun: there is no indefinite article.

2. What is the accusative singular masculine of "the"?

▼ Show answer

þone. (As in **þone dracan** "the dragon", Chapter 3.)

3. Which form of "the" is used with a feminine noun in the dative singular?

▼ Show answer

þære (also the feminine genitive singular).

4. Give the nominative and accusative neuter of "the". Which Modern English word does it become?

▼ Show answer

þæt for both. It is the ancestor of "that" (the article says **sē** doubles as the word for "that").

5. In **þone dracan** and **þæs hundes**, what case is each and how do you know?

▼ Show answer

þone is accusative masculine singular; **þæs** is genitive masculine or neuter singular. Chapter 3 gives them as the object ("the dragon") and the possessor ("the dog's").

6. Name three kinds of noun that usually go without "the".

▼ Show answer

Any three of: river names, names of peoples, some place nouns (sea, woods, ground), abstract concepts (truth, law), divisions of time, and **Dryhten** "the Lord".

7. When do such nouns take "the" after all?

▼ Show answer

When they refer to a specific instance, such as "the law they just passed".

8. What is the nominative plural of both "the" and "this", and are they the same for all genders?

▼ Show answer

þā for "the" and **þās** for "this". Yes: the plural has one form for all three genders.

9. Which Modern English word comes from **ġeon**?

▼ Show answer

"yon", as the article says.

10. Which cases of "the" are identical in the plural?

▼ Show answer

Nominative and accusative (**þā**), and dative and instrumental (**þām, þæm**), in the Wiktionary table.

Note on sources

The usage notes and examples are from the Articles and Demonstratives sections of Wikipedia's *Old English grammar* article (first 100,000 of 131,435 characters read). The article's own paradigm tables were flattened in what I read, so the layouts of **sē** and **þēs** are from English Wiktionary (the pages for *se* and *þes*), which is a community-edited source. The observations about s- versus þ- forms and the "three degrees of pointing" summary are mine.

Coming up in Chapter 6: Adjectives. Strong and weak declension, agreement with the noun, and how to make "bigger" and "biggest".

Old English Grammar 1

Chapter 6 · Adjectives

Adjectives

An Old English adjective agrees with its noun in gender, number and case, and it has two sets of endings, strong and weak, chosen by what comes before it. This chapter gives both tables, the rules for choosing, and the comparative and superlative. Usage rules and examples are from the Adjectives section of Wikipedia's Old English grammar article. The article's tables came out unclear, so the tables here are from English Wiktionary's entry for **cwīc** "alive".

THE RULE IN ONE BOX

Use the **weak** endings after "the", "this" and possessives such as "my" and "his", and in direct address; use the **strong** endings otherwise. Compare with **-ra** and **-ost** (sometimes **-est**), not with "more" and "most".

Strong or weak?

SITUATION	DECLENSION	EXAMPLE (THE ARTICLE'S)
After "the", "that", "this", or a possessive (my, your, his)	Weak	cwīc prōwend "a live scorpion" but sē cwica prōwend "the live scorpion"
In direct address	Weak	Ēalā fægere mægden "Hey beautiful girl"
Ordinals and comparatives	Weak only (exception: ōðer "other, second" is always strong)	
"First"	forma and ærra always weak; ærest and fyrest either	

SITUATION	DECLENSION	EXAMPLE (THE ARTICLE'S)
"Own"	āgen usually strong	Hēo forlēt oðre dæge on hire āgnum horse "She left the next day on her own horse"
Otherwise	Strong	

Compare with German

German adjectives also change their endings depending on whether an article comes before them (*ein guter Mann* versus *der gute Mann*). The comparison is mine, not the article's. Modern English has lost the system entirely.

The strong declension (cwic "alive")

CASE	MASCULINE	FEMININE	NEUTER
Nominative sg.	cwic	cwicu, cwico	cwic
Accusative sg.	cwicne	cwice	cwic
Genitive sg.	cwices	cwicre	cwices
Dative sg.	cwicum	cwicre	cwicum
Instrumental sg.	cwice	cwicre	cwice
Nominative / accusative pl.	cwice	cwica, cwice	cwicu, cwico
Genitive pl.	cwicra (all genders)		
Dative / instrumental pl.	cwicum (all genders)		

Some endings resemble the noun endings of Chapters 2 and 3 (-es, -um, -u), and the accusative -ne and the feminine -re resemble the forms of "the" from Chapter 5 (þone, þære). Those resemblances are my observation from the tables, not a claim in the article.

The weak declension

CASE	MASCULINE	FEMININE	NEUTER
Nominative sg.	cwica	cwice	cwice
Accusative sg.	cwican	cwican	cwice
Genitive / dative / instrumental sg.	cwican (all genders)		
Nominative / accusative pl.	cwican (all genders)		
Genitive pl.	cwicra, cwicena		
Dative / instrumental pl.	cwicum		

The weak declension is shorter and less varied: **-an** in most cells, the same pattern as the n-stem nouns of Chapter 2 (my observation; the n-stem nouns are called "weak" in the article too).

Agreement in practice

Because the adjective copies the noun's gender, number and case, it can help you decode the noun. In **sē cwica prōwend** "the live scorpion", the article form **sē** (masculine nominative) and the weak ending **-a** (masculine nominative) both say the noun is masculine singular nominative. Words that agree give you several chances to find the case.

Comparing: -ra, -ost, -est

The article says Old English uses **-ra** for the comparative and **-ost** for the superlative, with **-est** for some words, and does not use "more" and "most" for this.

ADJECTIVE	COMPARATIVE	SUPERLATIVE
fæger beautiful	fægerra "more beautiful"	fægero st "most beautiful"
beorht bright	beorh ra "brighter"	beorht ost "brightest"

ADJECTIVE	COMPARATIVE	SUPERLATIVE
cnihtlīc boyish	cnihtlīc ra	cnihtlīc ost

With i-umlaut

ADJECTIVE	COMPARATIVE	SUPERLATIVE
eald	ieldra	ieldest
ġeong	ġingra	ġingest
strang	strengra	strengest
lang	lengra	lengest
sċort	sċyrtra	sċyrtest
hēah	hīera	hīehst

Irregular (suppletive) comparison

ADJECTIVE	COMPARATIVE	SUPERLATIVE
gōd good	betera better	betst best
yfel bad	wiersa worse	wierrest worst
mīcel much, big	māra more, bigger	mǣst most, biggest
lȳtel little	lǣssa less, smaller	lǣsest least, smallest

"More" and "most" do appear with participles: **swīðor ġelufod** "more loved" and **swīðost ġelufod** "most loved" (the article lists **mā/swīðor** and **mǣst/swīðost**).

Modern English echoes

Good, better, best, bad, worse, worst, little, less, least and much, more, most are the survivors of this irregular group; the match between the Modern English words and **gōd/betera/betst** and the others is my own observation, not a claim in the article.

Spelling oddities in adjectives

The article lists several. A few that help with reading:

- **-ig and -lic adjectives** regain the **-u** ending: **bisigu sweord** (nominative plural neuter), **broðorlicu lufu** (nominative singular feminine).
- **Short æ + consonant** becomes **a** before a vowel ending: **glæd** gives **glade**.
- **Final h** disappears: **hēah** gives **hēane, hēam, hēa**; **þweorh** gives **þwēorre**.
- **Adjectives in -e** drop the **-e** but keep **-u**: **blīðne, blīðu cildru** "happy children".



Quick Reference

TOPIC	REMEMBER
Agreement	Gender, number and case of the noun
Weak	After "the", "this", possessives; direct address; ordinals and comparatives; mostly -an
Strong	Everything else; -ne acc. masc., -re fem. gen./dat., -um dat.
Comparison	-ra, -ost / -est ; umlaut group; irregular group



Try It Yourself

Say the answer first, then click to check.

1. "A live scorpion" and "the live scorpion": which adjective declension is each?

▼ Show answer

"A live scorpion" is **cwic** **prōwend**, strong (no article); "the live scorpion" is **sē cwica** **prōwend**, weak (after "the").

2. Which declension follows "my" or "his"?

▼ Show answer

Weak: the article lists possessive determiners with "the" and "this".

3. Give the strong accusative masculine singular of **cwic**.

▼ Show answer

cwicne (the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle quotation on Wiktionary uses it, translated "alive").

4. What is the strong genitive singular feminine of **cwic**, and what other word has the same ending in the same case?

▼ Show answer

cwicre; the feminine genitive of "the" is **pære** (Chapter 5), which ends the same way.

5. What is the weak nominative plural of **cwic**?

▼ Show answer

cwican, for all genders.

6. Which adjective is always strong, even though ordinals are weak?

▼ Show answer

ōðer "other, second".

7. Make the comparative and superlative of **beorht** "bright".

▼ Show answer

beorhtra and **beorhtost**.

8. What are the comparative and superlative of **lang**, and what has happened to the vowel?

▼ Show answer

lengra and **lengest**: i-umlaut changed **a** to **e** (the same umlaut as in **mann** / **menn**, Chapter 4).

9. What is "worse" and "worst" in Old English?

▼ Show answer

wiersa and **wierrest**, from **yfel** "bad".

10. When does Old English use "more" and "most" words for comparison?

▼ Show answer

With participles: **swīðor ġelufod** "more loved" and **swīðost ġelufod** "most loved". Otherwise it uses **-ra** and **-ost**.

Note on sources

Usage rules, examples, irregularities and the degree forms are from the Adjectives section of Wikipedia's *Old English grammar* article (first 100,000 of 131,435 characters read). The article's strong and weak tables were unclear in what I read, so the layouts here are from English Wiktionary's *cwic* entry, a community-edited source. The German comparison, the observations linking adjective and article endings, the Modern English echoes and the agreement walkthrough are mine.

Coming up in Chapter 7: Pronouns. The personal pronouns including the dual, the interrogatives **hwā** and **hwæt**, and how *he*, *she* and *they* arrived.

Old English Grammar 1

Chapter 7 · Pronouns



Pronouns

*Pronouns kept more of the old case system than any other word class, which is why Modern English still has I / me and he / him. This chapter covers the personal pronouns (including a number Modern English has lost, the dual) and the question words **hwā** "who" and **hwæt** "what". Notes come from the Pronouns section of Wikipedia's Old English grammar article. Its table was flattened, so the first- and second-person tables are from the pronoun table on English Wiktionary (the ic, ġit, ge and heo entries); the third person is partly reconstructed and flagged below.*

THE RULE IN ONE BOX

Old English has three numbers in the first and second person: **singular** (ic "I", þū "you"), **dual** (wit "we two", ġit "you two") and **plural** (wē "we", ġē "you all"). Each has nominative, accusative, dative and genitive forms. First- and second-person pronouns are the same for all genders; only the third person distinguishes gender.

First and second person

PERSON AND NUMBER	NOMINATIVE	ACCUSATIVE	DATIVE	GENITIVE
1st singular "I"	ic	mē, mec	mē	mīn
2nd singular "you"	þū	þē, þec	þē	þīn
1st dual "we two"	wit	unc, uncit	unc	uncer
2nd dual "you two"	ġit	inc, incit	inc	incer
1st plural "we"	wē	ūs, ūsiċ	ūs	ūre, ūser
2nd plural "you"	ġē	ēow, ēowiċ	ēow	ēower

- **The dual** is for "we both" and "you two". The article says dual forms are common, but ordinary plurals can be used when the meaning is clear.

- **Accusative and dative merge.** The article says most texts merge the accusative and dative in the first and second person (so **mē** serves for both), while Anglian dialects and poetry sometimes keep them apart, with **mec** and **þec** as examples.
- **Extended forms.** For the dual and plural, new accusatives were made by adding **-iċ** or **-it** to the dative: **ūsiċ**, **ēowiċ**, **uncit**, **incit**.
- **Singular "you" and plural "you".** The singular **þū** and the plural **gē** are different words. (That the singular is the ancestor of "thou" is my own knowledge, not stated in the text I read.)

Third person

These nominative forms are certain: **hē** "he", **hit** "it", **hēo** "she" and **hīe** "they". The article's flattened table also prints the other forms **hine**, **his**, **him**, **hire**, **heora**, and the Wiktionary entries for **hēo** and the pronoun table give the feminine as nominative **hēo**, accusative **hīe**, genitive and dative **hire**. But neither source gave a layout of the masculine, neuter and plural cells that I could trust: in one extraction, for example, **him** and **his** landed in the wrong columns. So the table below is a reconstruction. The masculine, neuter and plural cells follow the usual pattern from my own background knowledge, and are unverified here:

CASE	MASCULINE	NEUTER	FEMININE	PLURAL
Nominative	hē	hit	hēo	hīe
Accusative	hine	hit	hīe	hīe (unverified)
Genitive	his	his (unverified)	hire	heora
Dative	him (unverified)	him (unverified)	hire	him

How much to trust this table

The cells marked unverified are my reconstruction. The nominatives, the feminine forms, **hine**, **heora**, and the plural dative **him** are printed in the sources I read; the rest is the standard pattern as I remember it. Check them against a printed grammar before you use them in an essay.

Pronouns that became Modern English words

OLD ENGLISH	MODERN ENGLISH	SOURCE
mīn (genitive)	my	Article
ūre (genitive)	our	Article
ēower (genitive)	your	Article
Old English third-person plural forms	replaced in stressed positions in Middle English by Old Norse forms giving "they", "them", "their"; the Old English dative survives as unstressed "'em"	Article

Question words: hwā and hwæt

CASE	HWĀ "WHO"	HWÆT "WHAT"
Nominative	hwā	hwæt
Accusative	hwone	not shown in the article
Genitive	hwæs	same as "who"
Dative	hwām	same as "who"
Instrumental	hwon, hwȳ	same as "who"

- **hwā** refers to people and **hwæt** to things, following social, not grammatical, gender. The two differ only in the nominative and accusative.
- **hwelc** "which, what kind of" is inflected like an adjective.
- **hwæðer** means "which" but only when choosing between two. The article's example: **Hwæðer wēnst þū is mære, þē þīn sweord þē mīn?** "Which one do you think is bigger, your sword or mine?"



Quick Reference

MEANING	NOMINATIVE	GENITIVE
I / we two / we	īc / wit / wē	mīn / uncer / ūre
you / you two / you all	þū / ġit / ġē	þīn / incer / ēower
he / it / she / they	hē / hit / hēo / hīe	his / (see caveat) / hire / heora
who / what	hwā / hwæt	hwæs

Try It Yourself

Say the answer first, then click to check.

1. How would you say "we two" and "you two"?

▼ Show answer

wit and **ġit** (the dual).

2. Which Old English word is the genitive of "I", and which Modern English word does it become?

▼ Show answer

mīn; "my" (the article lists it).

3. The accusative and dative of "me" are the same in most texts. What does the article say about the exceptions?

▼ Show answer

Most texts merge them (**mē**), but some, especially Anglian and poetic texts, keep them distinct, with **mec** and **þec** as the article's examples.

4. How were **ūsiċ** and **uncit** formed?

▼ Show answer

By adding **-iċ** or **-it** to dative forms (**ūs**, **unc**).

5. Name the four nominative third-person pronouns and their meanings.

▼ Show answer

hē he, **hit** it, **hēo** she, **hīe** they.

6. Where do "they", "them" and "their" come from, according to the article?

▼ Show answer

Old Norse forms replaced the Old English third-person plural in stressed positions in Middle English; the Old English dative survives as unstressed "em".

7. What is the difference between **hwā** and **hwæt**, and in which cases do they differ?

▼ Show answer

hwā is for people and **hwæt** for things; they differ only in the nominative and accusative and are identical elsewhere.

8. When would you use **hwæðer** instead of **hwelc**?

▼ Show answer

hwæðer means "which" when there are only two alternatives (the sword example); **hwelc** means "which, what kind of" and is declined like an adjective.

9. Is there a gender difference in **iċ** and **pū**?

▼ Show answer

No: the article says the first- and second-person pronouns are the same for all genders.

10. Why does this chapter mark some third-person forms "unverified"?

▼ Show answer

Both sources I used printed the third-person table in a flattened form, so the cell positions of some forms could not be read reliably; the marked cells are my own reconstruction from the usual pattern.

Note on sources

The notes, the interrogative table and the sword example are from the Pronouns section of Wikipedia's *Old English grammar* article (first 100,000 of 131,435 characters read). Its personal pronoun table was flattened, so the first- and second-person layouts are from English Wiktionary (the *ic*, *ge*, *git* and *heo* entries), a community-edited source. The extractions of the Wiktionary *wit*, *we* and *hit* entries were cut off before their Old English sections, so those pages were not used. The third-person table is partly my reconstruction, as marked, and the remark about **þū** and "thou" is mine.

Coming up in Chapter 8: Weak Verbs. The two tenses, the three weak classes, and how the past tense is made with a *-d-* or *-t-* suffix.

Old English Grammar 1

Chapter 8 · Weak Verbs

⚙ Weak Verbs

Old English verbs split into two groups: strong verbs, which change their stem vowel to make the past (Chapter 9), and weak verbs, which add an ending. Weak verbs are the larger group, and Modern English regular verbs (walk, walked) descend from them. All forms below are from the Verbs section of Wikipedia's Old English grammar article; I give its tables as printed.

THE RULE IN ONE BOX

A verb has only **two tenses**, present and past, and no synthetic passive. Weak verbs form the past with a **dental ending** (usually **-d-**, sometimes **-t-**). There are three weak classes: **Class I** (the biggest), **Class II** (the only one still productive) and **Class III** (just four verbs).

What a verb form tells you

- **Tense:** present or past. There is no separate future; the present does that job (my note from the two-tense statement, not a claim in the article's text).
- **Mood:** indicative (statements), subjunctive and imperative (commands).
- **Person and number:** first, second and third person singular; one plural form for all three persons.
- **Non-finite forms:** the infinitive, the present participle ending **-ende**, and the past participle **(ġe)-ed**, **(ġe)-od**, **(ġe)-d** or **(ġe)-en** depending on the verb.
- **No synthetic passive:** "was loved" is built with helper verbs plus the participle, not a special ending.

Class II: the simplest — lufian "to love"

Nearly all Class II verbs end in **-ian** (**hopian** "to hope", **wincian** "to wink"). They do not cause i-umlaut, so the stem matches the source word: **lufu** "love" gives **lufian** "to love". Almost all share the same endings, which makes this the pattern to learn first.

	PRESENT	PAST
Infinitive	lufian, (tō) lufienne	
Indicative 1st sg.	lufi ge	lufode
Indicative 2nd sg.	luf ast	lufode st
Indicative 3rd sg.	luf aþ	lufode
Indicative plural	lufi aþ	lufodon
Subjunctive sg.	lufi ge	lufode
Subjunctive pl.	lufi gen	lufoden
Imperative sg. / pl.	lufa / lufi aþ	
Participle	lufi ende	(ge)lufod

Class I: the biggest — dælan "to share"

Class I verbs are often made from nouns or adjectives and usually show i-umlaut in the root vowel. The article's examples: **dēman** "to judge" from **dōm** "judgment", **blæcan** "to bleach" from **blāc** "pale", **tellan** "to count" from **tæl** "number", **rýman** "to make room" from **rūm** "room". They are not conjugated uniformly: endings depend on the stem vowel's length, the final consonants and sometimes the word's history.

	DÆLAN PRESENT	DÆLAN PAST
Infinitive	dælan, (tō) dælenne	
Indicative 1st sg.	dæle	dæ lde
Indicative 2nd sg.	dæ lst	dæ ldest
Indicative 3rd sg.	dæ lþ	dæ lde
Indicative plural	dæ laþ	dæ ldon

	DÆLAN PRESENT	DÆLAN PAST
Subjunctive sg.	dæle	dæ lde
Subjunctive pl.	dælen	dæ lden
Imperative sg. / pl.	dæl / dælap	
Participle	dælede	(ge)dæ led

Two other Class I patterns from the article, compared with **dælan**:

	TEMMAN "TO TAME"	STYRIAN "TO MOVE"
Infinitive	teman*, (tō) temenne	styrian, (tō) styrienne
Present 1st sg.	temme	styrie
Present 2nd sg.	temest	styrest
Present 3rd sg.	temeþ	styreþ
Present plural	temmaþ	styraþ
Past 1st / 3rd sg.	temede	styrede
Past 2nd sg.	temedest	styredest
Past plural	temedon	styredon
Imperative sg. / pl.	teme / temmaþ	styre / styriaþ
Participles	temmende, (ge)temed	styriende, (ge)styred

* The article's table prints the infinitive of **temman** as **teman**, while naming the verb **temman**; it does not explain the difference. The article says **temman** has "the same endings" as **dælan** and the same alternation between single and double consonants. It gives no rule for predicting which Class I pattern a verb takes, and it does not discuss **nerian** or **hīeran**, so they are not covered here.

Class III: four verbs

The class was once much larger, but only four verbs remained in the written texts, each irregular: **habban** "to have", **libban** "to live", **secġan** "to say" and **hycġan** "to think".

	HABBAN	LIBBAN	SECĠAN	HYCĠAN
Present 1st sg.	hæbbe	libbe	secġe	hycġe
Present 2nd sg.	hæfst	leofast	sægst	hyġst
Present 3rd sg.	hæfþ	leofaþ	sægþ	hyġþ
Present plural	habbaþ	libbaþ	secġaþ	hycġaþ
Past 1st / 3rd sg.	hæfde	lifde	sægde	hogde
Past plural	hæfdon	lifdon	sæġdon	hogdon
Imperative sg.	hafa	leofa	sæġe	hyġe
Past participle	(ġe)hæfd	(ġe)lifd	(ġe)sæġd	(ġe)hogd

The article does not comment on the odd stems in this table (**leofast**, **leofaþ**, **leofa** beside **libbe**; **hogde** beside **hycġan**). My own comparison: **hæfde** is recognisably the ancestor of Modern English "had", and **sægde** of "said".

The dental ending

The article says the weak past uses a **-d-** ending, sometimes **-t-**, but it does not state rules for choosing among **-ede**, **-ode**, **-de** and **-te**, and **-te** does not appear in the section I read. What its tables show is a pattern by class:

CLASS	PAST 3RD SG. IN THE ARTICLE'S TABLES
I	dæelde (-de), temede and styrede (-ede)
II	lufode (-ode)

CLASS	PAST 3RD SG. IN THE ARTICLE'S TABLES
-------	--------------------------------------

III	hæfde, lifde, sægde, hogde (-de)
-----	----------------------------------

Quick Reference

CLASS	MODEL	PAST 3RD SG.	PAST PARTICIPLE
I	dælan	dælde	(ge)dæled
II	lufian	lufode	(ge)lufod
III	habban	hæfde	(ge)hæfd

Try It Yourself

Say the answer first, then click to check.

1. How many tenses does Old English have, and what is missing from the verb system compared with Gothic?

▼ Show answer

Two (present and past). It has no synthetic passive. (Gothic is mentioned in the article, but this chapter does not use it.)

2. Which weak class is the only productive one, and how do its past tense forms end?

▼ Show answer

Class II; the past is formed with **-ode (lufode)**.

3. Give the present first, second and third person singular of **lufian**.

▼ Show answer

lufige, lufast, lufap.

4. What is the past plural of **dælan** and of **lufian**?

▼ Show answer

dældon and **lufodon**.

5. Give the imperative singular and plural of **dælan**.

▼ Show answer

dæl and **dælap**.

6. How is the present participle formed, and what is the present participle of **lufian**?

▼ Show answer

With **-ende**: **lufiende**.

7. Name the four Class III verbs and their meanings.

▼ Show answer

habban have, **libban** live, **seċgan** say, **hyċgan** think.

8. What is the past 3rd singular of **habban** and of **seċgan**? Which Modern English words do they resemble?

▼ Show answer

hæfde and **sægde**; they resemble "had" and "said" (a comparison that is mine, not the article's).

9. What does the article say about rules for choosing among **-ede**, **-ode**, **-de** and **-te**?

▼ Show answer

It states no explicit rules for choosing among them, and does not explain when **-t-** is used; its tables show **-de** or **-ede** in Class I, **-ode** in Class II and **-de** in Class III.

10. What is the difference in the subjunctive plural between the present and the past of **lufian**?

▼ Show answer

The present subjunctive plural is **lufigen** and the past is **lufoden**: the past has the **-od-**dental ending before the **-en**.

Note on sources

All tables and class descriptions are from the Verbs section of Wikipedia's *Old English grammar* article (first 100,000 of 131,435 characters read), which printed them in usable form. The reading I did included some example sentences, but they were not quotations from the article, so none are used here. The remarks on the future tense, the *had* and *said* comparisons, and the exercises are mine. The article does not explain the infinitive spelling **teman** or the stems of the Class III forms; those are noted as gaps and not resolved.

Coming up in Chapter 9: Strong, Odd and Irregular Verbs. The seven strong classes and ablaut, the preterite-present verbs, and **bēon**, **dōn**, **gān** and **willan**.

Old English Grammar 1

Chapter 9 · Strong and Odd Verbs

Strong and Odd Verbs

Chapter 8 covered the verbs that add an ending to make the past. This chapter covers the ones that change their vowel (strong verbs) and the small group of verbs that behave oddly, which includes "to be", "to do", "to go" and "to want". Many of them became the irregular verbs of Modern English. Facts come from the Verbs section of Wikipedia's Old English grammar article and, for one example, from the article Germanic strong verb.

THE RULE IN ONE BOX

A **strong** verb makes its past tense by changing the stem vowel (**ablaut**), with seven classes. The **preterite-present** verbs have a present tense that looks like a strong past. A handful of **anomalous** verbs (**bēon/wesan**, **dōn**, **gān**, **willan**) have forms of their own.

Strong verbs

The article says strong verbs form the past by changing the stem vowel. They have two past stems: the "first past" is used for the first and third person singular, and the "second past" for the second person singular, all plurals, and the past subjunctive. They also show i-mutation in the second and third person singular present.

The seven classes

The article defines each class by the infinitive stem:

CLASS	INFINITIVE STEM (PER THE ARTICLE)
1	ī + one consonant
2	ēo or ū + one consonant

CLASS	INFINITIVE STEM (PER THE ARTICLE)
3	originally e + two consonants; in Old English usually short e + l and a consonant, eo + r and a consonant, i + a nasal and a consonant, or ie + l and a consonant
4	e + one consonant, usually l or r (includes brecan "to break")
5	e + one consonant, usually a stop or fricative
6	a + one consonant
7	other; always a heavy root syllable, almost always without umlaut (for example ō , ā , ēa)

What I could not give you

The article's principal-parts table (which vowel each class takes in the past and the past participle) came out misaligned, with many cells missing, and the article gives model verbs only for a few classes. So this chapter does not list the vowel pattern of each class. Look it up in a printed grammar. What the article does show in full is one verb from Class 4, below.

A model conjugation: **stelan** "to steal"

	SINGULAR	PLURAL
Present indicative	1st stele · 2nd stilst · 3rd stilþ	stelap
Past indicative	1st stæ̌l · 2nd stæ̌le · 3rd stæ̌l	stæ̌lon
Present subjunctive	stele	stelen
Past subjunctive	stæ̌le	stæ̌len
Imperative	stel	stelap
Infinitive	stelan , (tō) stelanne	
Participles	present stelende · past (ġe) stolen	

- **Ablaut:** the stem vowel is **e** in the present, **æ̌** in the first past, **æ̌** in the second past and **o** in the participle. That is what "strong" means: the change is in the stem, not in a suffix.

- **i-mutation:** the second and third person present **stilst**, **stilþ** have **i** where the rest of the present has **e**.
- **Past singular without ending:** the first and third person past (**stael**) have no ending at all.

A second model: **bēodan** "to offer"

The *Germanic strong verb* article gives a Class 2 verb with its principal parts: **bēodan** (infinitive), **bīett** (present third person singular), **bēad** (past singular), **budon** (past plural) and **(ġe)boden** (past participle). It cites English "bid" as the cognate. The same article lists Modern English examples of vowel-changing verbs: *sing, sang, sung* and *drive, drove, driven*.

Strong verbs in Modern English

The ablaut in *sing, sang, sung* is the same kind of change. Which Old English class a particular Modern English verb comes from is not covered in the text I read, so I give no verb-by-verb matches.

Preterite-present verbs

These verbs use what looks like a strong past tense as their present tense. The article lists twelve, grouped in four classes, with these glosses:

VERB	MEANING	PARTICIPLES (PER THE ARTICLE)
āgan	to own	āgende; (ġe)āgen
durran	to dare	durrende; (ġe)dorren
mōtan	may, to be allowed to	mōtende; (ġe)mōten
witan	to know (a fact)	witende; (ġe)witen
cunnan	to know (how to)	cunnende; (ġe)cunnen, (ġe)cūþ
ġemunan	to remember	ġemunende; ġemunen
unnan	to grant	unnende; (ġe)unnen

VERB	MEANING	PARTICIPLES (PER THE ARTICLE)
dugan	to work with, avail	dugende; (ġe)dugen
ġenugan	to suffice, be enough	ġenugende; ġenugen
magan	can, be able to	mægende; (ġe)mægen
sculan	should, must	sculdende; (ġe)sculen
purfan	to need	purfende; (ġe)purfen

- The article's table prints the present singular and plural, and the past, only as *stems* (for example **wāt-** against **wit-** for **witan**, and **sceal-** against **scul-** for **sculan**). The cells were not reliably aligned, so I give only the stems the table shows for the present: singular stems **āh-**, **dearr-**, **mōt-**, **wāt-**, **cann-**, **ann-**, **deah-**, **mæg-**, **sceal-**, **þearf-** and plural stems **āg-**, **durr-**, **mōt-**, **wit-**, **cunn-**, **unn-**, **dug-**, **mag-**, **scul-**, **purf-**. Which stem belongs to which person is as the article prints it.
- The pattern to notice: the singular stem differs from the plural stem, as in a strong verb's past tense, which is why these are called "preterite-presents".
- The Modern English modals *can*, *may*, *must*, *shall* descend from this group. That link is my own background knowledge, not a claim in the text I read.

The anomalous verbs

The article treats **bēon** and **wesan** as the two verbs for "to be", plus **dōn** "to do", **gān** "to go" and **willan** "to want".

Present indicative

	BĒON	WESAN	DŌN	GĀN	WILLAN
1st sg.	bēo	eom	dō	gā	wille
2nd sg.	bist	eart	dēst	gæst	wilt
3rd sg.	bip	is	dēp	gæp	wile

	BĒON	WESAN	DŌN	GĀN	WILLAN
plural	bēoþ	sind	dōþ	gāþ	willað

Past indicative

	WESAN	DŌN	GĀN	WILLAN
1st sg.	wæs	dyde	ēode	wolde
2nd sg.	wære	dydest	ēodeſt	woldeſt
3rd sg.	wæs	dyde	ēode	wolde
plural	wæron	dydon	ēodon	woldon

- **Subjunctive:** present **bēo / bēon, sīe / sīen, dō / dōn, gā / gān, wille / willen** (singular / plural); past **wære / wæren, dyde / dyden, ēode / ēoden, wolde / wolden**.
- **Imperative:** **bēo / bēoþ, wes / wesað, dō / dōþ, gā / gāþ, wille / willað**.
- **Participles:** present **bēonde, wesende, dōnde, gānde, willende**; past **(ġe)bēon, (ġe)dōn, (ġe)gān**.
- **Two verbs for "to be":** the article's table gives **bēo, bist, biþ, bēoþ** and **eom, eart, is, sind** side by side, and no past tense for **bēon**; the past comes from **wesan**. That the past is borrowed in this way is my reading of the blank cells in the table, so treat it as a likely but unconfirmed point.

The same oddities in Modern English

Modern English "to be" is also made from several roots (*am, is, are, was, been*) and "go" has a past *went* from a different verb. That these mirror the Old English patterns above is my observation; I did not read a source tracing them.



Quick Reference

TYPE	HOW THE PAST IS MADE	EXAMPLE
Strong	Vowel change; first past (1st, 3rd sg.) and second past (2nd sg., plural)	stelan : stæ l, stæ lon, (ǵe)stolen
Preterite-present	Present singular looks like a strong past	magan , sćulan , witan
Anomalous	Its own forms	dōn : dyde · gān : ēode · willan : wolde

Try It Yourself

Say the answer first, then click to check.

1. What defines a strong verb, and how many classes are there?

▼ Show answer

It forms its past by changing the stem vowel (ablaut). There are seven classes.

2. For **stelan**, which past stem is used for the first and third singular, and which for the second singular and the plural?

▼ Show answer

First past **stæ**l for first and third singular; second past **stæ**le (2nd sg.) and **stæ**lon (plural).

3. Give the present second and third person singular of **stelan**. What is unusual about the vowel?

▼ Show answer

stilst and **stilp**: i-mutation changes **e** to **i** in these two persons.

4. What is the past participle of **stelan** and of **bēodan**?

▼ Show answer

(ġe)stolen and (ġe)boden.

5. What makes a verb "preterite-present"?

▼ Show answer

Its present tense forms look like a strong-verb past: the singular and plural present stems differ (**sċeal-** against **sċul-**).

6. Give the meanings of **witan** and **cunnan**. What is the difference?

▼ Show answer

witan "to know (a fact)" and **cunnan** "to know (how to)", as the article glosses them.

7. Give the present singular and plural of **wesan** "to be".

▼ Show answer

eom, eart, is and sind.

8. Give the past 1st and 3rd singular of **dōn**, **gān** and **willan**.

▼ Show answer

dyde, ēode and wolde.

9. Which verb supplies the past of "to be" in the article's tables, and what do you notice about **bēon**?

▼ Show answer

wesan (wæs, wære, wæron); the article's table gives no past for bēon.

10. The imperative of **gān** is **gā** (singular) and **gāþ** (plural). How do you say "Go!" to two people?

▼ Show answer

Gāþ! (the plural imperative).

Note on sources

This chapter uses the Verbs section of Wikipedia's *Old English grammar* article (first 100,000 of 131,435 characters read), plus the *Germanic strong verb* article (first 100,000 of 298,583 characters) for the **bēodan** example and the Modern English comparisons. The strong-verb principal-parts table and the preterite-present table were misaligned in what I read, so the chapter says what it leaves out. Verner's law is not mentioned in the Old English article text I read, so it is not covered. The Modern English modals link, the "to be" remark and the "same oddities" tip are mine, and the chapter marks them as mine.

Coming up in Chapter 10: Putting It Together. Verb-second word order, questions, negation, relative clauses, and a procedure for analysing a whole sentence. Course Complete.

Old English Grammar 1

Chapter 10 · Putting It Together

Putting It Together

You now have the sounds, the cases, the noun classes, the articles, adjectives, pronouns and the three kinds of verb. This chapter covers how the words are arranged in a sentence, then gives a step-by-step procedure for analysing one. Sources: the Syntax and Prepositions sections of Wikipedia's Old English grammar article, and the word-order passage of the article Old English.

THE RULE IN ONE BOX

The default order is **verb-second** in main clauses and **verb-final** in subordinate clauses, more like German or Dutch than Modern English. Questions swap subject and verb, there is no *do*-support, negatives use **ne** before the verb and can stack, and "when X, Y" is a pair of **þā** clauses.

Word order

- **Main clauses:** the finite verb comes second. The article says this "resembles modern German or Dutch more than Modern English".
- **Subordinate clauses:** the verb comes at the end (the *Old English* article: "verb-second in main clauses, and verb-final in subordinate clauses").
- **Freedom:** the same article attributes the freer order to the amount of noun and verb inflection. Cases tell you who did what, so position matters less.
- **Example from *Beowulf* (line 708):** **wrāþum on andan**, "with hostile malice", word by word: hostile (dative singular) · on · malice (dative singular).

What I could not give you

Neither article supplies a glossed Old English sentence that shows verb-second order or a verb-final subordinate clause. I do not invent one: the sentences in this chapter are the two the article gives, plus the practice sentences, which are marked as mine.

Questions and negation

FEATURE	OLD ENGLISH	NOTES
Statement	hīe libbaþ	"they live"
Question	libbaþ hīe?	"live they?" — subject and finite verb are inverted
Negative	ne before the finite verb	whichever verb it is; the <i>Old English</i> article says "regardless of which verb"
Several negatives	they stack	negative concord: each one intensifies the others
Helper verb	none	no <i>do</i> -support in questions or negatives

Question words (*hw*- words) appear only as interrogatives and indefinite pronouns, according to the *Old English* article. They are not used for relative clauses or for "when".

Relative and subordinate clauses

- **Relative clauses:** no *hw*- relative pronoun. The invariable word **þe** is used, "often preceded by or replaced by the appropriate form of **se**" (Chapter 5 gives the forms of **se**, **sēo**, **þæt**).
- **"When X, Y":** a correlative pair, not a *hw*- word. The article's example:

þā ic hām ēode, þā slēp ic.

Then I home went, then slept I.

"When I went home, I slept."

Look at what the example shows. The first **þā** clause ends in its verb (**ēode**), as a subordinate clause should. The second **þā** opens the main clause, so the verb is second and the subject follows it (**slēp ic**).

Prepositions

- They stand mostly *before* their object but often *after* it, especially with pronouns.
- Each governs a case. The article's list gives the case for only one entry (**andlang**, genitive), so for the rest consult a dictionary.

OLD ENGLISH	MEANING	MODERN ENGLISH
æfter	after	after
ǣr	before	ere
æt	at	at
andlang	along (governs the genitive)	along
bæftan	behind	(nautical) abaft
be, bī	by, about	by
beforan	before	before
beġeondan	beyond	beyond
behindan	behind	behind
binnan	in, within	(cf. German, Dutch <i>binnen</i>)
benēoðan	beneath	beneath
betwēonum	between	between

These are the first twelve entries of the article's table of about forty. Many are the ancestors of the Modern English words, which makes them easy to recognise.

A procedure for analysing a sentence

SEVEN STEPS

1. **Find the finite verb(s).** Is it a main clause (verb second) or a subordinate clause (verb last)? (Chapters 8 and 9)
2. **Identify the verb type:** weak (dental ending), strong (vowel change), preterite-present, or one of **bēon/wesan, dōn, gān, willan**. Work out person, number, tense and mood from the ending.
3. **Find the subject:** a nominative noun or pronoun that agrees with the verb in number. (Chapters 3 and 7)
4. **Find the other nouns and note their cases** from their endings and noun class. (Chapters 2 to 4)
5. **Check each article or adjective** agrees with its noun in gender, number and case; strong or weak adjective endings depend on the context. (Chapters 5 and 6)
6. **Look at each preposition**, and which case it takes, remembering it may follow its object.
7. **Read the clauses together:** **þā ... þā** pairs, **þe** relatives, **ne** negatives.

Try It Yourself

Say the answer first, then click to check. Items marked "mine" are sentences I made up from forms shown in this course, to practise on, not quotations.

1. Where does the finite verb stand in a main clause, and where in a subordinate clause?

▼ Show answer

Second in a main clause; last in a subordinate clause.

2. Turn **hīe libbaþ** "they live" into a question.

▼ Show answer

libbaþ hīe? Swap the subject and the verb; no helper verb is needed.

3. Where does **ne** go?

▼ Show answer

Before the finite verb.

4. A sentence has two negatives. Does it cancel out, as in some varieties of Modern English?

▼ Show answer

No. The negatives stack and intensify each other (negative concord).

5. Translate **Þā ic hām ēode, þā slēp ic.**

▼ Show answer

"When I went home, I slept." The first **þā** is "when", the second is "then".

6. In the sentence above, which verb is in a subordinate clause, and where is it?

▼ Show answer

ēode "went" ends the first clause, as expected for a subordinate clause. It is a form of **gān** (Chapter 9).

7. What replaces the English "who" or "which" in a relative clause?

▼ Show answer

þe, alone or with the right form of **se**.

8. What case does **andlang** "along" govern?

▼ Show answer

The genitive.

9. Mine: **hē ne wolde gān**. Analyse it with the seven steps (hint: **hē** is the nominative masculine singular "he").

▼ Show answer

Main clause; finite verb **wolde**, past of **willan** (Chapter 9), 3rd singular, with **ne** before it; subject **hē**; **gān** is the infinitive. "He did not want to go." The verb is not second here in the

strict sense, because **ne** stands before it as a clitic; I mention this as my own observation, not from the sources.

10. Which of the following Modern English words come from Old English prepositions in the list above: *after*, *beyond*, *between*, *upon*?

▼ Show answer

after (**æfter**), *beyond* (**begeondan**), *between* (**betwēonum**). *Upon* is not in the twelve entries given here.

Note on sources

This chapter uses the Syntax and Prepositions sections of Wikipedia's *Old English grammar* (first 100,000 of 131,435 characters) and the word-order passage of *Old English* (first 100,000 of 207,822 characters). Neither gives a glossed example of verb-second order or a relative clause, and the preposition table gives a case only for **andlang**. Practice item 9 and its comment on **ne** are mine and unverified.



Course Complete

You can now read the shape of an Old English word and the shape of an Old English sentence: letters and sounds, gender and number, the cases, the noun classes, **se/pes**, adjectives, pronouns, weak, strong and odd verbs, and clause structure.

Next: Old English Reading 1 is the planned course for reading short texts using this grammar.