

English alphabet

The modern **English alphabet** is a Latin alphabet consisting of 26 letters, each having an uppercase and a lowercase form, and the same letters constitute the ISO basic Latin alphabet. The exact shape of printed letters varies depending on the typeface (and font), and the shape of handwritten letters can differ significantly from the standard printed form (and between individuals), especially when written in cursive style. English is the only major modern European language requiring no diacritics for native words (although adiaeresis is used by some publishers in words such as "coöperation" or "naïve").^{[1][2]} Written English does, however, have a number of digraphs.

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History

Old English

The alphabet was derived from an original series of sixteen characters, that emerged as a way to record spoken words.^[3] 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

English alphabet

The Quick Brown
Fox Jumps Over
The Lazy Dog

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

Type	Logographic (non-phonetic ideographic) and alphabetic
Languages	English Written English
Time period	~1500 to present
Parent systems	<div> <div>(Proto-writing)</div> <ul style="list-style-type: none">Egyptian hieroglyphsProto-Sinaitic alphabetPhoenician alphabetGreek alphabetOld Italic scriptLatin alphabetEnglish alphabet </div>
Child systems	ISO basic Latin alphabet Cherokee syllabary (in part) Scots alphabet Osage alphabet SENĆOŦEN alphabet

alphabet in its construction.^[4] 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* (ƒ ƒ) also appeared as a distinct letter, likewise named after a rune, *æðel*. Additionally, the v-v or u-u ligature *double-u* (W w) was in use.

	Numerous other Latin-based orthographies.
Direction	Left-to-right
ISO 15924	Latn, 215
Unicode alias	Latin
Unicode range	U+0000 to U+007E Basic Latin and punctuation

In the year 1011, a monk named *Byrhtferð* recorded the traditional order of the Old English alphabet.^[5] He listed the 24 letters of the Latin alphabet first (including *ampersand*), then 5 additional English letters, starting with the *Tironian note ond* (ŋ), 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 & ȝ ƿ þ ð Æ

Modern English

In the *orthography* of *Modern English*, *thorn* (þ), *eth* (ð), *wynn* (ƿ), *yogh* (ȝ), *ash* (æ), and *ethel* (ƒ) are obsolete. *Latin* borrowings reintroduced homographs of *ash* and *ethel* 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*, while ð is still used in present-day *Faroese*. *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 now 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^[6] 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

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) used in formal writing for certain words of Greek or Latin origin, such as *encyclopædia* and *cælom*, 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, although in American English, a lone *e* has mostly supplanted both (for example *encyclopedia* for *encyclopaedia*, and *maneuver* for *manoeuvrē*).

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*.

Diacritics

Diacritic marks mainly appear in loanwords such as *naïve* and *façade*. As such words become naturalised in English, there is a tendency to drop the diacritics, as has happened with old borrowings such as *hôtel*, from French. Informal English writing tends to omit diacritics because of their absence from the keyboard, while professional copywriters and typesetters tend to include them.^[7] Words that are still perceived as foreign tend to retain them; for example, the only spelling of *souçon* found in English dictionaries (the OED and others) uses the diacritic. Diacritics are also more likely to be retained where there would otherwise be confusion with another word (for example, *résumé* (or *resumé*) rather than *resume*), and, rarely, even added (as in *maté*, from Spanish *yerba mate*, but following the pattern of *café*, from French).


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. *È* is used widely in poetry, e.g. in Shakespeare's sonnets. J.R.R. Tolkien uses *ë*, as in *O wingèd crown*. Similarly, while in *chicken coop* the letters *-oo-* represent a single vowel sound (a digraph), in obsolete spellings such as *zoölogist* and *coöperation*, they represent two. This use of the diaeresis is rarely seen, but persists into the 2000s in some publications, such as *MIT Technology Review* and *The New Yorker*.

An acute, grave, or diaeresis may also be placed over an "e" at the end of a word to indicate that it is not silent, as in *saké*. In general, these devices are often not used even where they would serve to alleviate some degree of confusion.

Letters

The names of the letters are rarely spelled out, except when used in derivations or compound words (for example *tee-shirt*, *deejay*, *emcee*, *okay*, *aitchless*, etc.), derived forms (for example *exed out*, *effing*, *to eff and blind*, etc.), and in the names of objects named after letters (for example *em* (*space*) in printing and *wye* (*junction*) in railroading). The forms listed below are from the Oxford English Dictionary. Vowels stand for themselves, and consonants usually have the form *consonant* + *ee* or *e* + *consonant* (e.g. *bee* and *ef*). The exceptions are the letters *aitch*, *jay*, *kay*, *cue*, *ar*, *ess* (but *es-* in compounds), *double u*, *wye*, and *zed*. Plurals of consonants end in *-s* (*bees*, *efs*, *ems*) or, in the cases of *aitch*, *ess*, and *ex*, in *-es* (*aitches*, *esses*, *exes*). Plurals of vowels end in *-es* (*aes*, *ees*, *ies*, *oes*, *ues*); these are rare. All letters may stand for themselves, generally in capitalized form (*okay* or *OK*, *emcee* or *MC*), and plurals may be based on these (*aes* or *As*, *cees* or *Cs*, etc.)

English alphabet



▶ ●

A Received Pronunciation British English speaker reciting the English alphabet

Problems playing this file? See [media help](#).

Letter	Name		Name pronunciation				Frequency
	Modern English	Latin	Modern English	Latin	Old French	Middle English	
<u>A</u>	a	ā	<u>/ˈeɪ/, /ˈæ/</u> ^[nb 1]	/ɑː/	/ɑː/	/ɑː/	8.17%
<u>B</u>	bee	bē	<u>/ˈbiː/</u>	/beː/	/beː/	/beː/	1.49%
<u>C</u>	cee	cē	<u>/ˈsiː/</u>	/keː/	/tʃeː/ > /tseː/ > /seː/	/seː/	2.78%
<u>D</u>	dee	dē	<u>/ˈdiː/</u>	/deː/	/deː/	/deː/	4.25%
<u>E</u>	e	ē	<u>/iː/</u>	/eː/	/eː/	/eː/	12.70%
<u>F</u>	ef (eff as a verb)	ef	<u>/ˈɛf/</u>	/ɛf/	/ɛf/	/ɛf/	2.23%
<u>G</u>	gee	gē	<u>/ˈdʒiː/</u>	/geː/	/dʒeː/	/dʒeː/	2.02%
<u>H</u>	aitch	hā	<u>/ˈeɪtʃ/</u>	/haː/ > /ˈaha/ > /ˈakːa/	/ˈaːtʃə/	/aːtʃ/	6.09%
	haitch ^[nb 2]		<u>/ˈheɪtʃ/</u>				
<u>I</u>	i	ī	<u>/ˈaɪ/</u>	/iː/	/iː/	/iː/	6.97%
<u>J</u>	jay	–	<u>/ˈdʒeɪ/</u>	–	–	[nb 3]	0.15%
	jy ^[nb 4]		<u>/ˈdʒaɪ/</u>				
<u>K</u>	kay	kā	<u>/ˈkeɪ/</u>	/kaː/	/kaː/	/kaː/	0.77%
<u>L</u>	el or ell	el	<u>/ˈɛl/</u>	/ɛl/	/ɛl/	/ɛl/	4.03%
<u>M</u>	em	em	<u>/ˈɛm/</u>	/ɛm/	/ɛm/	/ɛm/	2.41%
<u>N</u>	en	en	<u>/ˈɛn/</u>	/ɛn/	/ɛn/	/ɛn/	6.75%
<u>O</u>	o	ō	<u>/ˈoʊ/</u>	/oː/	/oː/	/oː/	7.51%
<u>P</u>	pee	pē	<u>/ˈpiː/</u>	/peː/	/peː/	/peː/	1.93%
<u>Q</u>	cue ^[nb 5]	qū	<u>/ˈkjuː/</u>	/kuː/	/kyː/	/kiw/	0.10%
<u>R</u>	ar	er	<u>/ˈɑːr/</u>	/ɛr/	/ɛr/	/ɛr/ > /ar/	5.99%
	or ^[nb 6]		<u>/ˈɔːr/</u>				
<u>S</u>	ess (es-) ^[nb 7]	es	<u>/ˈɛs/</u>	/ɛs/	/ɛs/	/ɛs/	6.33%
<u>T</u>	tee	tē	<u>/ˈtiː/</u>	/teː/	/teː/	/teː/	9.06%
<u>U</u>	u	ū	<u>/ˈjuː/</u>	/uː/	/yː/	/iw/	2.76%
<u>V</u>	vee	–	<u>/ˈviː/</u>	–	–	–	0.98%
<u>W</u>	double-u	–	<u>/ˈdʌbəl.juː/</u> ^[nb 8]	–	–	–	2.36%
<u>X</u>	ex	ex	<u>/ˈɛks/</u>	/ɛks/	/iks/	/ɛks/	0.15%
		ix		/ɪks/			
<u>Y</u>	wy	hȳ	<u>/ˈwaɪ/</u>	/hyː/	ui, gui ?	/wiː/ ?	1.97%
		ī		/iː/			
		graeca		/iː ˈgraɪka/			
<u>Z</u>	zed ^[nb 9]	zēta	<u>/ˈzɛd/</u>	/ˈzeːta/	/ˈzɛːdəl/	/zɛd/	0.07%
	zee ^[nb 10]		<u>/ˈziː/</u>				

Etymology

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 /u:/ to Middle French /y:/, becoming Middle English /iw/ and then Modern English /ju:/. 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, *gy*, 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*; *zee*, an American leveling of *zed* by analogy with the majority; and *izzard*, from the Romance phrase *i zed* or *i zeto* "and Z" said when reciting the alphabet.

Some groups of letters, such as *aspee* 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

Frequencies

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]

Ampersand

The [&](#) has sometimes appeared at the end of the English alphabet, as in Byrhtferð's list of letters in 1011.^[5] Historically, the figure is a [ligature](#) for the letters *Et*. In English and many other languages it is used to represent the word *and* and occasionally the Latin word *et*, as in the abbreviation [&c](#) (et cetera).

Apostrophe

The [apostrophe](#), while not considered part of the English alphabet, is used to [contract](#) English words. A few pairs of words, such as *its* (belonging to *it*) and *it's* (*it is* or *it has*), *were* (form of 'to be') and *we're* (we are), and *shed* (to get rid of) and *she'd* (*she would* or *she had*) are distinguished in writing only by the presence or absence of an apostrophe. The apostrophe also distinguishes the [possessive endings](#) -'s and -s' from the common [plural ending](#) -s, a practice introduced in the 18th century; before, all three endings were written -s, which could lead to confusion (as in *the Apostles words*).^[9]

Phonology

The letters A, E, I, O, and U are considered vowel letters, since (except when silent) they represent [vowels](#); the remaining letters are considered consonant letters, since when not silent they generally represent [consonants](#). However, Y commonly represents vowels as well as a consonant (e.g., "myth"), as very rarely does W (e.g., "[cwm](#)"). Conversely, U and I sometimes represent a consonant (e.g., "quiz" and "onion" respectively).

W and Y are sometimes referred [asemivowels](#) by linguists.

Proposed reforms

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

See also

- 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

Notes

1. often in Hiberno-English, due to the letter's pronunciation in the Irish language
2. mostly in Hiberno-English, sometimes in Australian English, usually in Indian English (although often considered incorrect), and also used in Malaysian English
3. The letter J did not occur in Old French or Middle English. The Modern French name *jés/zé*, corresponding to Modern English *je* (rhyming with *i*), which in most areas was later replaced with *jay* (rhyming with *kay*).
4. in Scottish English
5. One of the few letter names not spelled with the letter in questionThe spelling *qu* ~ *que* is obsolete, being attested from the 16th century
6. in Hiberno-English
7. in compounds such as *ases-hook*
8. Especially in American English, the // is often not pronounced in informal speech(*Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, 10th ed). Common colloquial pronunciations are *[ⓘ]*, *[ⓘ]*, and *[ⓘ]* (as in the nickname "Dubya"), especially in terms like *www*.
9. in British English, Hiberno-English and Commonwealth English
10. in American English

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Further reading

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