

## The Basic Outlines of Old English Pronunciation

As the title suggests, this is a very basic introduction to Old English pronunciation. The following chart is essentially a harmony of Campbell's *Old English Grammar*, Sweet's *Anglo-Saxon Primer*, Mitchell and Robinson's *Guide to Old English*, Cook's *First Book in Old English* and our own textbook, *Reading Old English*. Similar phonetic groups are colour-coded for reference, though I have organized the list alphabetically. As far as possible, Old English words have been chosen on the basis on their similarity to Modern English sounds (and words).

OE / IPA	MnE/German	OE	Simple Phonetic Description
a [a]	father, mann (Gr.)	<i>nama, cnafa</i> (name, child)	back, low, unrounded, lax
ā [ā]	father slightly prolonged	<i>bān, rād</i> (bone, road)	back, low, unrounded, lax
æ [æ]	at, fat	<i>þæt, wæs, hwæt!</i> (that, was, lo!)	front, low, unrounded, tense
ǣ [ǣ]	at, fāt slightly prolonged	<i>sǣ, hwær? dǣd</i> (sea, where? deed)	front, low, unrounded, tense
b [b]	bid, bury	<i>bīdeþ, byrgan</i> (awaits, bury)	voiced bilabial stop
c [k]	king, Christ	<i>cyning, Crīst</i> (king, Christ)	voiceless velar stop
ċ [ċ]	church, churl	<i>ċiriċe, ċeorl</i> (church, churl)	voiceless alveolo-palatal affricate
cg [dg]/[j]	edge, jump	<i>ecg, secgan</i> (edge, say)	voiced postalveolar affricate
d [d]	day, deep	<i>dæg, dēop</i> (day, deep)	voiced velar stop
e [ɛ]	let, feather	<i>lettan, feder</i> (hinder, feather)	front, mid, unrounded, lax
ē [e]	fate, <i>été</i> (Fr.)	<i>hē, wē, bec</i> (he, we, books)	front, mid, unrounded, tense
f [f]	field, friend	<i>feld, frēond</i> (plain, friend)	voiceless labiodental fricative
f [v]	like v in 'love' or 'even'	<i>lufian, efne</i> (love, even)	voiced labiodental fricative
g [g]	ghost, God	<i>gāst, God</i> (ghost, God)	voiced velar stop
ġ [y]	year, yet	<i>ġear, ġiet</i> (year, yet)	voiced palatal semivowel
g [ɣ]	loch	<i>daga, boga</i> (days, bow)	voiced velar fricative
h [h]	holy, home	<i>halig, hām</i> (holy, home)	voiceless glottal fricative
h [ç]	ich, niht (Gr)	<i>riht, tiht</i> (right, crime)	voiceless palatal fricative
h [x]	ach, loch	<i>þohte, meht</i> (thought, might)	voiceless velar fricative
i [i]	hit, mit, sit	<i>cwic, mid</i> (living, with)	front, high, unrounded, lax
ī [i]	feet, meet, seat	<i>wīn, rīce</i> (wine, kingdom)	front, high, unrounded, tense
j=cg [dg]/[j]	edge, jump	<i>ecg, secgan</i> (edge, say)	voiced postalveolar affricate
k [k]	king, Christ	<i>cyning, Crīst</i> (king, Christ)	voiceless velar stop
l [l]	long, lore	<i>lang, lār</i> (long, lore)	voiced lateral alveolar liquid
m [m]	moon, murder	<i>mona, morðor</i> (moon, murder)	bilabial nasal
n [n]	see, sing	<i>sēon, singan</i> (see, sing)	alveolar nasal
o [ɔ]	God, fox	<i>God, fox</i> (God, fox)	back, mid, round, tense
ō [o]	ode, open, rope	<i>gōd, sōna</i> (good, soon)	back, mid, round, tense
p [p]	path, priest	<i>þæð, prēost</i> (path, priest)	voiceless bilabial stop
r [r]	ride, here	<i>rīdan, hēr</i> (ride, here)	voiced retroflexive alveolar liquid
s [s]	sit, stone	<i>sittan, stān</i> (sit, stone)	voiceless alveolar fricative
s [z]	rise, choose	<i>rīsan, ċēosan</i> (rise, choose)	voiced alveolar fricative
sc [ʃ]	ship, fish	<i>scip, fisc</i> (ship, fish)	voiceless alveolo-palatal fricative
t [t]	take, tree	<i>tacan, trēow</i> (take, tree)	voiceless alveolar stop
þ/ ð [θ]/[ð]	thing, other	<i>ðing, oþer</i> (thing, there)	voiceless/voiced interdental fricative
ð/ þ [ð]/[θ]	thing, other	<i>ðing, oþer</i> (thing, there)	voiceless/voiced interdental fricative
u [u]	could, full	<i>full, sunu</i>	back, high, round, lax
ū [u]	rude, dune	<i>dūn, hūs, nū</i> (dune, house, now)	back, high, round, tense
v [v]	see f [v] above	<i>lufian, efne</i> (love, even)	voiced labiodental fricative
w [w]	weapon, winter	<i>wāpen, winter</i> (weapon, winter)	voiced velar semivowel
y [y]	rue (Fr)	<i>cyning, sinn</i> (king, sin)	high, central, rounded
ȳ [ü]	ruse (Fr)	<i>brȳd, rȳne</i> (bride, mystery)	high, central, rounded

## Selective Notes

FRONT VOWELS = i/ī, e/ē, æ/ǣ

BACK VOWELS = a/ā, o/ō, u/ū

LABIAL CONSONANTS = b, f, m, p, w

DENTAL CONSONANTS = r, l, n, t, d, ð, s

GUTTURAL CONSONANTS (sometimes palatals) = (ng), c, g, h

**A Short word on vowel length:** Long vowels must be carefully distinguished from short vowels. In normalized texts the length is indicated by an acute accent (´) or a macron (–), placed over a vowel or the first element of a diphthong. For instance, OE *god* is Mod. Eng. *god/God*, but OE *gōd* is Modern English *good*; so OE *for* is ‘for,’ but *fōr* is ‘went’; *ac* is but, *āc* is oak; *is*, is, but *īs*, ice; *man*, man, but *mān*, crime, etc.

**a [a]** represented a backsound, which occurred mainly before a back vowel (a, o, u) of the following syllable (e.g. *sacu*, *faran*, *habban*). It was also frequent before nasal consonants, and in this position *o* is a frequent alternative spelling, e.g. *and/ond* and, *mann/monn* man, *gelamp/gelomp* happened, *nama/noma* name (Campbell, p. 14 and Sweet, p. 2).

**æ/ǣ** short, pronounced like *a* in ‘mat,’ long as in ‘bad.’ If you experiment, you’ll see that the vowel in ‘bad’ is longer than that in ‘mat’ (Mitchell & Robinson, p. 14).

**c [k]** had the sound of *k* before, and when final after, back vowels (a, o, u) and *y/ȳ*; sometimes also before *e/ē* in words that can generally be recognized by their modern pronunciation with *k*. Here are some varied examples: *cann* ‘know’ *cōl* ‘cool’, *cuman* ‘come’, *cyning* ‘king’, *cēne* ‘bold’ (cf. keen), *bōc* ‘book’; also finally after *æ*: *bæc* ‘back’; and initially before consonants: *cnāwan* ‘know.’

**č [č]** *c* had the sound like Modern English *ch* in child when it came before or between the front vowels *i/ī* and *e/ē*. So, *čild* ‘child’, *čēosan* ‘choose’, *mičel* ‘great’; also finally after *i/ī*, *ē*, *ǣ*: *līč* ‘body’, *bēc* ‘books’, *sprāč* ‘speech’; and in some words after *n*, *l*: *penčan* ‘think’, *ǣlc* ‘each’ (Sweet, p. 3).

**e [ɛ]** pronounced as the *e* in the Modern English *set*, *beckon*, *men*.

**ē [e]** pronounced approx. as in French *été* (summer) or Modern English *fate*.

**f [f]** *f*, like *s* and *ð/p* had voiced and unvoiced values. The unvoiced labiodental fricative [f] is pronounced as in Modern English initially and finally in accented words (so, too, with *s* and *ð/p*): *feld*, *frēond*, *lēof* (plain, friend, dear).

**f [v]** *f* is voiced like *v* in ‘love’ or ‘even’ when [1] single between vowels (*lufian* to love) or [2] when between a vowel and another voiced sound such as *l*, *r*, *m*, *n*: (*efne*, even; *čēosan*, choose, *māpm*, treasure). The same is true of *s* and *ð/p*.

- g [g]** had the sound of *g* in *go* [1] initially before back vowels (a, o, u) and *y* (thus, *gylden*, *God*); [2] before consonants (*glæd*); [3] when doubled (*frogga*); also in the group *ng* (*lang*, *springan*). See Sweet, p. 4.
- ġ [y]** *g* had a sound like Modern English *y* in *yet* [1] initially and medially before the front vowels *i/ī*, *e/ē*. [2] as the final sound of a word after a vowel (*weg*, *dæg*); between front vowels as in *hīġian* (*hie*, *hasten*), etc. And there are some anomalies as well, including some words after *r* and *l*: *byrġan*, *fylġan* (*bury*, *follow*).
- g [ɣ]** *g* was sounded as in German *sagen* (like *ch* in *loch*, but voiced) medially between backvowels (a, o, u) and between *l*, *r*, and back vowels; and finally after back vowels directly or in consonant groups: *dagas* ‘days’, *boga* ‘bow’, *hālga* ‘saint’, *beorgan* ‘save’; *ġenōg*.
- h [h]** *h* initially had the same sound as now (*halig*, *hām* holy, home).
- h [ç]** Elsewhere it had the sound of *ch* in Scots *loch* after back vowels and after consonants: *þohte*, *meaht*, *hēah*, *Wealh* (thought, might, high, Welshman).
- h [x]** After front vowels it had the sound of *ch* in German *ich*, *nicht*. Examples in Old English include *riht* and *tiht* (right, crime).

**s and ð/þ** See **f [f]** and **f[v]** above.

### **Diphthongs and schwa:**

The diphthongs are represented by *ea*, *eo*, and *ie*, both short and long. The second vowel sound in each diphthong is scarcely heard in pronunciation, the first element being the one that receives the stress. As for *schwa*, by the late Old English period, most vowels in final, unstressed syllables are pronounced like *schwa*, that is “uh.”