

The English language is divided into three periods: **Old English** (OE, also called Anglo-Saxon, from the 400s through 1066), **Middle English** (ME, from 1066 to about the 1400s) and **Modern English** (MnE, from the late 1400s onward). What is the difference between them? You can see the difference by looking at a text in each version.

Old English

Uren Fader þat art in heofnas
 Sic gehalged þin noma
 To cymeð þin ric
 Sic þin willa sue is in heofnas and
 in earðas
 Uren hlaf ofer wirðe sel us to
 daez
 And forgef us scylda urna
 Sue we forgefian sculdun urum
 And no inleade urich in costung
 Als zefrig urich fro ifle

Middle English

Our Fadir that art in heuenes
 Halewid be thi name
 Thi Kingdom comme to
 Bi Thi wille done as in heuen
 so in erthe
 Gyve to us this dai oure breed
 ouer other substance
 And forgyve to us oure dettis
 As we forgyven to oure
 dettouris
 And leede us not in to
 temptacioun
 But delyvere us fro yvel

Early Modern English

Our Father who art in heaven,
 Hallowed be thy name.
 Thy kingdom come,
 Thy will be done,
 On earth as it is in heaven.
 Give us this day our dayly
 bread,
 And forgyve us our trespasses,
 Even as we forgyve those who
 trespass against us.
 And lead us not into
 temptation
 But delivere us from evil

Late Modern English

Our father who are in heaven,
 Blessed be your name.
 May your kingdom come,
 May your will be done,
 On earth as it is in heaven.
 Give us this day our daily
 bread
 And forgive us our sins,
 Even as we forgive those who
 sin against us.
 Lead us not into temptation,
 But deliver us from evil.

The first difference you will note is that Old English has different letters. Many of these letters do not appear in Modern English. "Thorn" (þ or þ) represents a *th*-sound--usually at the front of words. The sound it represents is like that in the modern words *cloth* and *thin*. The letter "edh" (or "eth") ð usually appears at the end or middle of words, and it represents a sound like that in the modern word *clothes* and *then*. A capital edh is written as a crossed-d (Ð). Other Anglo-Saxon letters include the letter "ash" (æ), which stands for a nasal /-a/ sound; the runic letter "wynn" (ƿ), which stands for a /-w/ sound; and the letter yogh (ȝ), which stands for a gurgling /g-/ sound in the back of the throat that we no longer use in modern English. Other differences are that Old English does not require a specific word order, at least not the way Middle and Modern English do. Instead, OE uses declensions (little endings stuck on the end of nouns) to show what each word is doing in the sentence.

Middle English is much closer to Modern English. Spelling has not yet been formalized in a systematic way, and many Latinate terms such as "substance" (Latin *substantia*) and "temptation" (Latin *temptatio*) have entered English through intermediary French influences under the Norman conquerors in 1066. The Early Modern English of Shakespeare's day still retains a distinction between *thou/you*, *thy/your*, *thine/yours*, which will be lost in Late Modern English, and it still retains some spelling variation, though not so much as Middle English. Shakespeare's alphabet in the Early Modern period is practically identical to ours--including the letters "J" and "Z." However, Shakespearean English or Early Modern English doesn't yet have identical punctuation conventions to ours. For instance, the exclamation mark still wasn't invented in 1590.