

**The Screwed-Up History of English Spelling | Otherwords**  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zdRY0x2x6PQ> Transcript  
<https://dontveter.com/ec/spelling.pdf>

Did you know that the spelling bee was invented in the United States?

Yeah, that's not a flex.

Spelling bees are kind of pointless outside English, because most other languages have spelling systems that are regular and predictable, but English spelling is such a mess that just being able to do it correctly can earn you a trophy.

These two words rhyme, but these two don't. These two words rhyme. These two don't.

These two rhyme, but these two don't.

In fact, none of these words rhyme with any of the others.

English is full of these contradictions, making it one of the hardest languages to learn.

Almost every spelling rule comes with a long list of exceptions.

I before E except after C. Yeah, well, what about these? Weird, huh?

An E at the end of the word supposedly makes the vowel long, like in home and hive and hate.

Well, I'd love for someone to give me an explanation for these.

Many letters can have multiple sounds, and others seem to serve no purpose whatsoever.

A K in knife, an H in ghost, an S in island?

In fact, almost every letter of the alphabet is silent somewhere. Yeah, I got the receipts.

Some have accused English spelling of being irrational and arbitrary, but, actually, there are good reasons why our spellings are so strange.

Well, some good reasons, some snobby reasons, and some that are downright dum-buh.

I'm Dr. Erica Brozovsky and this is "Other Words".

Origins of the alphabet. English's wacky spelling goes all the way back to the origin of the alphabet.

Old English was a Germanic language spoken by Anglo Saxons who used a runic alphabet known as a Futhorc.

As Latin missionaries Christianized England during the seventh century, they replaced the Futhorc with the Latin alphabet.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anglo-Saxon\\_runes](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anglo-Saxon_runes)

The thing is the Latin alphabet was not designed for a Germanic tongue.

There were sounds that Anglo Saxons used that had no equivalent in Latin.

This required some improvisations.

Some letters had to do double duty, like C, which stood for [k], as in macian and [ch], as in circe, and a couple runic letters were kept around, like wynn, which signified the [w-] sound and thorn, which made the [th] sound.

As you can see, the English alphabet had barely begun and it was already getting a bit confusing.

But plenty of other non-Latin languages use the same alphabet, like German, Dutch, and Czech, and their spellings, while not exactly easy, are at least consistent.

So how did English spelling get so uniquely screwed up?

In 1066, William the Conqueror invaded England from Normandy and installed French speaking nobles to rule it.

Not only did they bring a ton of French words with them, but the Norman scribes changed the spelling of a lot of English words to look more familiar to French readers.

One of the first things they did was get rid of those pesky runic letters.

They replaced the thorn with T-H and the wynn with two Us, which eventually became, what do you know, W.

In French, the ooh sound was spelled O-U, as in crouton and rouge, so old English words like hus and hund had Os added.

The French used G-H to signify the [kh] sound, so the old English words niht and miht had Gs added.

By the time the Normans were done tinkering with it, the Middle English spelling system was already a jumble of Germanic, Latin, and French conventions, but two big events in linguistic history were about to make things much, much worse.

The pronunciations between 1400 and 1700, the pronunciations of many English vowels shifted.

No one knows exactly why this happened, but it's essentially what created the modern English sounds we use today.

For instance, the [oo] sound became [ow], so hoose and hoond became house and hound.

[Ah] became [eh], so nah-meh became name-eh.

[Ee] became [ai], so lee-keh became like-eh.

A lot of words lost their second syllables altogether, so name-eh and like-eh became name and like.

We still commemorate that second syllable with the silent E.

Other consonant sounds faded away as well.

Dum-buh became dumb.

Ni-kht and li-kht became night and light.

Keh-nife and keh-nikht became knife and night.

You might be thinking, if you're not gonna pronounce the sounds anymore, why not get rid of the extra letters?

Well, some scholars at the time did want to update the spelling system to match the new pronunciations, but something was happening concurrently that would lock in those outdated spellings permanently. The Printing Press

Around 1440, Johannes Gutenberg invented the printing press in Germany, and within 100 years, it had spread all across Europe.

In England, this meant that spellings had to become standardized right at the time that pronunciations were shifting.

Moreover, the people who did the standardizing didn't always have the best reasons.

Dutch type setters changed some spellings to match their Flemish conventions, like adding an H to ghost and ghastly.

And since dumb ended with a B, some printers mistakenly added Bs to limb, crumb, and numb, an error known as hypercorrection.

There was also a lot of snobbery going on.

By now, the Renaissance was in full swing, and scholars were importing tons of fancy words from Greek, Latin, and French with their fancy spellings.

These were derogatorily known as "inkhorn words," named for the ink pots that nerds and know-it-alls kept on their desks.

As if that wasn't bad enough, the Renaissance fanboys also wanted to change the spellings of existing English words to pay tribute to their etymological roots.

Words of Greek descent were signified by adding an H after the C, as in chronicle and chaos, and substituting P-H for F, as in physics, phlegm, and pharmacy.

And words of Latin origin, like det, dout, sine, receipt, indite, and ile had letters added, not to be pronounced, but just as a reminder to readers where those words originally came from.

In another instance of hypercorrection, they even added an S to the word island, mistakenly believing it was related to the word isle.

In fact, the two words have totally different origins. Classic case of over-nerding.

The end of the great vowel shift represents the beginning of modern English, but thanks to the printing press, it was stuck with a spelling system that was based on Germanic roots with a Latin script using French spellings to describe Middle English pronunciations.

Some have attempted to modernize English spelling, most notably Noah Webster, who in the early 1800s suggested a bunch of phonetically corrected changes.

Some stuck, others did not.

This list kind of reminds me of the recent trend in phonetic spelling popularized by texting and social media.

Though it's typically employed for humor and brevity, it does speak to an underlying desire for our written language to more closely match our spoken one.

While it may seem far-fetched that dictionaries would ever make these things official, stranger things have happened.

Until then, we can at least take comfort knowing that our spelling quirks are evidence of language that is uniquely flexible, absorbent, and multicultural.

And that we live in the age of spell-check.

I take great comfort in spell-check.