

Old English is the term that describes the English used between the arrival of the Anglo-Saxon peoples in the **fifth century AD** and the Norman Conquest of **1066**. Another name for this form of English is **Anglo-Saxon**.

How do we know about Old English?

In comparison with later periods, we have little evidence for the language, except from place names (most modern place names date from Old English times) and a few inscriptions carved on stone, metal and bone. Some inscriptions are written in runes, a special alphabet different from our own. Towards the end of the period, many texts were written in manuscripts (books and documents handwritten on animal skin). Several hundred such manuscripts can still be seen in modern libraries, such as the British Library in London. As with Middle English, what Old English sounded like can be worked out by comparing it with other languages and with later forms of English, and by looking at spellings. However, Old English poetry does not rhyme, so rhyming words cannot be studied.

What did people write in Old English?

Most people who wrote in Old English times were priests or monks, and so most Old English manuscripts are religious, such as collections of sermons. However, there are also history books, legal documents, and books of poetry. Most poetry is religious, but some is about mythological heroes. The best-known Old English poem is *Beowulf*. The surviving manuscript dates from 1000 AD but the poem itself dates from much earlier.



What does Old English look like?

Here are some lines from *Beowulf*, describing the monster Grendel. Old English writing contains some letters we no longer use: **æ** ('ash'), which was pronounced rather like the 'a' in 'cat', and **þ** ('thorn'), which was pronounced like 'th' in 'thing'.

**Wæs se grimma gæst Grendel haten,
mære mearcstapa se þe moras heold,
fen ond fæsten; fifelcynnes eard
wonsæli wer weardode hwile.**

Translation

That grim spirit was called Grendel, a well-known wanderer in the borderlands who ruled the moors, marsh and stronghold; (that) unhappy being occupied for a time the land of the giant race.