**What Was the Great Vowel Shift?**

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The *Great Vowel Shift*was a series of systemic changes in the [pronunciation](https://www.thoughtco.com/pronunciation-english-1691686) of English [vowels](https://www.thoughtco.com/vowel-sounds-and-letters-1692601) that occurred in southern England during the late [Middle English](https://www.thoughtco.com/middle-english-language-1691390) period (roughly the period from Chaucer to Shakespeare).

According to [linguist](https://www.thoughtco.com/what-is-a-linguist-1691239) Otto Jespersen, who coined the term, "The great vowel shift consists in a general raising of all long vowels" (*A Modern English Grammar*, 1909). In [phonetic](https://www.thoughtco.com/phonetics-definition-1691622) terms, the GVS involved the raising and fronting of the long, stressed monophthongs.

Other linguists have challenged this traditional view. Gjertrud Flermoen Stenbrenden, for example, argues "that the concept of a 'GVS' as a unitary event is illusory, that the changes started earlier than has been assumed, and that the changes . . . took longer to be completed than most handbooks claim" (*Long-Vowel Shifts in English, c. 1050-1700*, 2016).

In any event, the Great Vowel Shift had a profound effect on English pronunciation and [spelling](https://www.thoughtco.com/spelling-definition-1692125), leading to many changes in the correspondences between vowel [letters](https://www.thoughtco.com/letter-alphabet-term-1691224) and vowel [phonemes](https://www.thoughtco.com/phoneme-word-sounds-1691621).

Examples and Observations

"By the early [Modern English](https://www.thoughtco.com/modern-english-language-1691398) period . . . all the long vowels had shifted: Middle English *ē*, as in *sweete* 'sweet,' had already acquired the value [i] that it currently has, and the others were well on their way to acquiring the values that they have in current English. . . .  
  
"These changes in the quality of the long, or tense, vowels constitute what is known as the **Great Vowel Shift**. . . .  
  
"The stages by which the shift occurred and the cause of it are unknown. There are several theories, but the evidence is ambiguous."  
(John Algeo and Thomas Pyles, *The Origins and Development of the English Language*, 5th ed. Thomson Wadsworth, 2005)

"The evidence of [spellings](https://www.thoughtco.com/spelling-definition-1692125), [rhymes](https://www.thoughtco.com/rhyme-definition-1692063), and commentaries by contemporary [language](https://www.thoughtco.com/what-is-a-language-1691218) pundits suggest that [the Great Vowel Shift] operated in more than one stage, affected vowels at different rates in different parts of the country, and took over 200 years to complete."  
(David Crystal, *The Stories of English*. Overlook, 2004)

"Prior to the **GVS**, which took place over around 200 years, Chaucer rhymed *food, good* and *blood* (sounding similar to *goad*). With Shakespeare, after the GVS, the three words still rhymed, although by that time all of them rhymed with *food*. More recently, *good* and *blood* have independently shifted their pronunciations again."  
(Richard Watson Todd, *Much Ado About English: Up and Down the Bizarre Byways of a Fascinating Language*. Nicholas Brealey, 2006)

"The 'standardization' described by the **GVS** may simply have been the social fixation upon one variant among several [dialectical](https://www.thoughtco.com/dialect-language-term-1690446) options available in each case, a variant selected for reasons of community preference or by the external force of printing standardization and not as a result of a wholesale phonetic shift."  
(M. Giancarlo, quoted by Seth Lerer in *Inventing English*. Columbia University Press, 2007)

The Great Vowel Shift and English Spelling

"One of the primary reasons that this vowel shift has become known as the **'Great' Vowel Shift** is that it profoundly affected English [phonology](https://www.thoughtco.com/phonology-definition-1691623), and these changes coincided with the introduction of the printing press: William Caxton brought the first mechanized printing press to England in 1476. Prior to mechanized printing, words in the handwritten texts had been spelled pretty much, however, each particular scribe wanted to spell them, according to the scribe's own [dialect](https://www.thoughtco.com/dialect-language-term-1690446). Even after the printing press, however, most printers used the spellings that had begun to be established, not realizing the significance of the vowel changes that were underway. By the time the vowel shifts were complete in the early 1600s, hundreds of books had been printed that used a spelling system that reflected the pre-Great Vowel Shift pronunciation. So the word 'goose,' for example, had two *o*s to indicate a long /o/ sound, /o:/--a good phonetic spelling of the word. However, the vowel had shifted to /u/; thus *goose, moose, food,* and other similar words that we now spell with *oo* had mismatched spelling and pronunciation.

"Why didn't printers just change the spelling to match the pronunciation? Because by this time, the new increased volume of book production, combined with increasing [literacy](https://www.thoughtco.com/what-is-literacy-1691249), resulted in a powerful force against [spelling change](https://www.thoughtco.com/spelling-reform-english-1691987)."  
(Kristin Denham and Anne Lobeck, *Linguistics for Everyone: An Introduction*. Wadsworth, 2010)

Scots Dialects

"Older Scots dialects were only partially affected by the **Great Vowel Shift** that revolutionized English pronunciation in the sixteenth century. Where English accents replaced the long 'uu' vowel in words like *house* with a [diphthong](https://www.thoughtco.com/diphthong-phonetics-term-1690456) (the two separate vowels heard in the southern English pronunciation of *house*), this change did not happen in Scots. Consequently, modern Scots dialects have preserved the Middle English 'uu' in words like *how* and *now*; think of the Scots cartoon *The Broons* (The Browns)."

(Simon Horobin,*How English Became English*. Oxford University Press, 2016)