

# **Middle English**

## **1066-1500**

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# A.D. 1150-1500 is considered to be the Middle English Period

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# Stages of development of English

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The documented stages of development of the English language are conventionally reckoned as follows:

- Old English (ca.700 -- ca.1150) Middle English (ca.1150 -- ca.1500) Early Modern English (ca.1500 -- ca.1700) Modern English (ca.1650 -- the present).
- There are no sharp boundaries between the periods because language change is gradual and changes affect only small parts of the language structure at any given time, so that there's a great deal of continuity.
- The standard dates given here are used for the following reasons.

# Historical markers

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- ❑ Our earliest surviving documents in English date from about 700; thus Old English is reckoned from that date.
- ❑ After the Norman Conquest (1066) writing in English declined rapidly, most official documents being written in French or Latin.
- ❑ Until about 1150, documents in English were still in the official Anglo-Saxon court dialect that had been developed before the Norman Conquest.
- ❑ In around 1150, the documents shift to colloquial dialects and the Anglo-Saxon court dialect disappears.
- ❑ 1500 is chosen as the end of the Middle English period because printing had been introduced into England in 1476, so that the conditions of survival of literary texts become very different from about 1500 on.
- ❑ From about 1700, documents in English are recognizable as fully modern in grammar.

# Middle English

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- **Middle English** is the name given by historical linguists to the diverse forms of the English language spoken between the Norman invasion of 1066 and about 1470.
- Then the **Chancery Standard**, a form of London-based English, began to become widespread, a process aided by the **introduction of the printing press** into England by **William Caxton** in the **1470s**.



# The Chancery Standard

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- ❑ The Chancery Standard was a written form of English used by government bureaucracy and for other official purposes from the late 14th century.
- ❑ It is believed to have contributed in a significant way to the development of the English language as spoken and written today. Because of the differing dialects of English spoken and written across the country at the time, the government required a clear and unambiguous form for use in its official documents.
- ❑ The Chancery Standard was developed to meet this need.



## History of the Chancery Standard

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- The Chancery Standard was developed during the reign of King Henry V (1413 to 1422) in response to his order for his chancery (government officials) to use, like himself, English rather than Anglo-Norman or Latin.
- It had become broadly standardised by about the 1430s.

## History of the Chancery Standard

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- It was largely based on the London and East Midland dialects, because these areas were the political and demographic centers of gravity.
- However, it used other dialectical forms where they made meanings more clear; for example, the northern "they", "their" and "them" (derived from Scandinavian forms) were used rather than the London "hi/they", "hir" and "hem."
- This was perhaps because the London forms could be confused with words such as he, her, and him.



# History of the Chancery Standard

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- ❑ In its early stages of development, the clerks that used Chancery Standard (CS) would have been familiar with French and Latin.
- ❑ The strict grammars of those languages influenced the construction of the standard.
- ❑ It was not the only influence on later forms of English—its level of influence is disputed and a variety of spoken dialects continued to exist—but it provided a core around which Early Modern English could crystallize.
- ❑ By the mid-15th century, CS was used for most official purposes except the Church (which used Latin) and some legal matters (which used French and some Latin).
- ❑ It was disseminated around England by bureaucrats on official business, and slowly gained prestige.
- ❑ CS provided a widely intelligible form of English for the first English printers, from the 1470s onwards.

# The change from Old English to Middle English

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- ❑ The Middle English (ME) period lasted from about 1100-1500.
- ❑ Major historical events influenced the language change.
- ❑ In 1066, the Duke of Normandy, the famous William, henceforth called "the Conqueror", sailed across the British Channel.
- ❑ He challenged King Harold of England in the struggle for the English throne.
- ❑ After winning the Battle of Hastings where he defeated Harold, William was crowned King of England.
- ❑ A Norman Kingdom was now established.
- ❑ The Anglo-Saxon period was over.

# So why did the language change?

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- There are a number of reasons, but a major factor was the Norman invasion of Britain in 1066.
- The Normans spoke an early form of French, which quickly became the ‘official’ language of England, overtaking the native language for governmental administration and legal matters.
- But the Normans and the English had to communicate somehow, and their struggles to speak changed the English language.
- New French vocabulary was introduced to Old English, and the English grammar gradually became simplified as the Normans struggled with it.
- As well as French and English, Latin was also an important language in the Middle Ages. It was used for some government business, for education and during religious worship in church.

# So why did the language change?

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- The Norman invasion naturally had a profound effect on England's institutions and its language.
- The Norman French spoken by the invaders became the language of England's ruling class.
- The lower classes, while remaining English-speaking, were influenced nevertheless by the new vocabulary.
- French became the language of the affairs of government, court, the church, the army, and education where the newly adopted French words often substituted their former English counterparts.

## So why did the language change?

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- ❑ The linguistic influence of Norman French continued for as long as the Kings ruled both Normandy and England.
- ❑ When King John lost Normandy in the years following 1200, the links to the French-speaking community subsided.
- ❑ English then slowly started to gain more weight as a common tongue within England again.

# So why did the language change?

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- A hundred years later, English was again spoken by representatives of all social classes, this new version of the English language being strikingly different, of course, from the Old English used prior to the Norman invasion.
- The English spoken at this turn of events is called Middle English.



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## **Did you know?**

For 150 years after the Norman Conquest, most of the kings of England spoke no English at all - although it's thought that some of them could swear in English.

# The Norman Conquest and Middle English

- William the Conqueror, the Duke of Normandy, invaded and conquered England and the Anglo-Saxons in 1066 A.D. The new overlords spoke a dialect of Old French known as Anglo-Norman.
- The Normans were also of Germanic stock; "Norman" comes from "Norseman", and Anglo-Norman was a French dialect that had considerable Germanic influences in addition to the basic Latin roots.
- Prior to the Norman Conquest, Latin had been only a minor influence on the English language, mainly through vestiges of the Roman occupation and from the conversion of Britain to Christianity in the seventh century (ecclesiastical terms such as *priest*, *vicar*, and *mass* came into the language this way), but now there was a wholesale infusion of Romance (Anglo-Norman) words.



# The Norman Conquest and Middle English

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- The influence of the Normans can be illustrated by looking at two words, "beef" and "cow". *Beef*, commonly eaten by the aristocracy, derives from the Anglo-Norman, while the Anglo-Saxon commoners, who tended the cattle, retained the Germanic *cow*.
- Many legal terms, such as *indict*, *jury*, and *verdict* have Anglo-Norman roots because the Normans ran the courts.
- This split, where words commonly used by the aristocracy have Romantic roots and words frequently used by the Anglo-Saxon commoners have Germanic roots, can be seen in many instances.

# The Norman Conquest and Middle English

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- Sometimes French words replaced Old English words; "crime" replaced *firen* and "uncle" replaced *eam*.
- In other times, French and Old English components combined to form a new word; such as, the French "gentle" and the Germanic "man" formed *gentleman*.
- It is useful to compare various versions of a familiar text to see the differences between Old, Middle, and Modern English.



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Take for instance this sample:

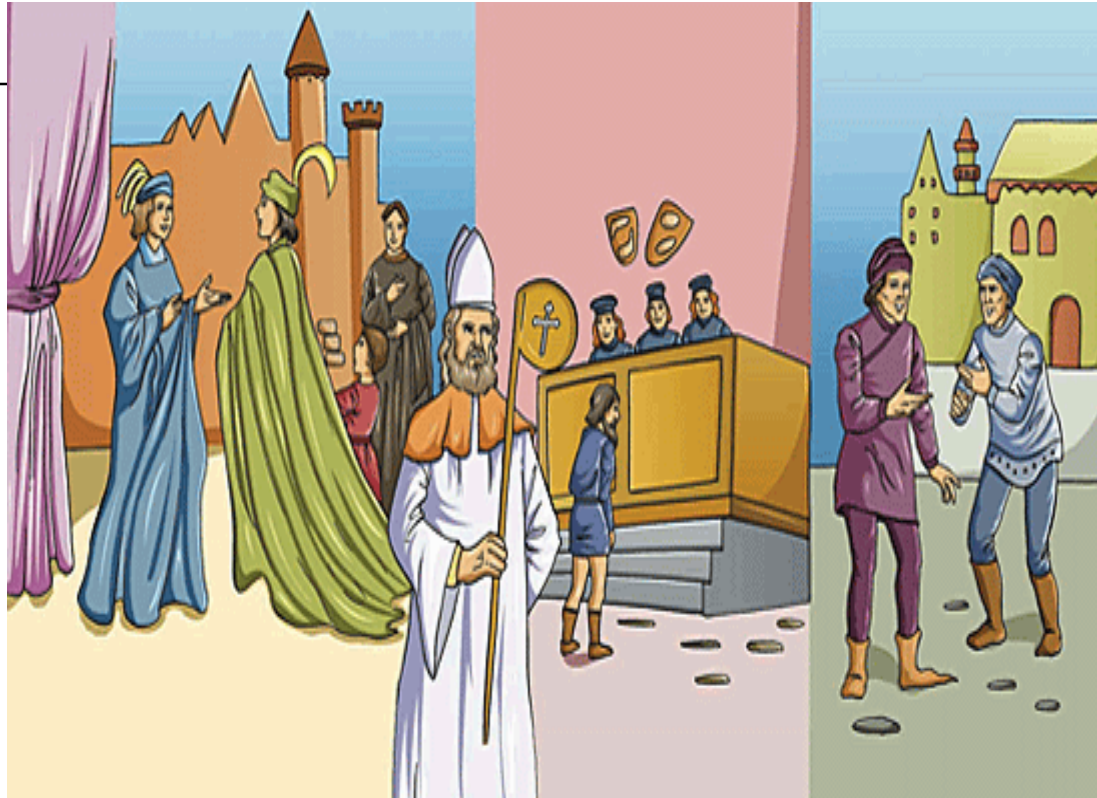
<b>French</b>	<b>English</b>
close	shut
reply	answer
odour	smell
annual	yearly
demand	ask
chamber	room
desire	wish

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- Because the English underclass cooked for the Norman upper class, the words for most domestic animals are English (ox, cow, calf, sheep, swine, deer) while the words for the meats derived from them are French (beef, veal, mutton, pork, bacon, venison).
  - The Germanic form of plurals (house, housen; shoe, shoen) was eventually displaced by the French method of making plurals: adding an "s" (house, houses; shoe, shoes). Only a few words have retained their Germanic plurals: men, oxen, feet, teeth, children.
  - French also affected spelling so that the *cw* sound became *qu*; for example, *cween* became "queen".

## 1200-1500: The Re-establishment of English took place

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- In the early 1200's, England had a trilingual composition. French was the literary and courtly language; Latin was the language of the church and legal documents; English was the language of communication among the common people.





**A series of events accelerated the spread of English during the 12th to 14th centuries**

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- During the thirteenth century certain events of history combined to lift the English language from its humble estate as the vernacular of a conquered people and to impel it on its slow climb back to ascendancy as the national tongue.
- By mid-century a large proportion of the nobility no longer thought of themselves as Normans but essentially, and politically, as English.
- The slogan was "England for the English" and the outcome was a linguistic, as well as a political, victory for the English because Henry III was forced to agree to the appointment of a commission for reform of the government whose proposals were embodied in the "Provisions of Oxford".


# Provisions of Oxford, 1258


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- The king accepted the provisions in a historic proclamation issued in English, French, and Latin; the first official document to include the English language since the Norman Conquest.





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- Devotion to England and its ancient vernacular now developed such strength that Henry's son, the great and energetic Edward I, was able to rally the support of Parliament in 1295 for war against France by declaring that it was Philip's "detestable purpose, which God forbid, to wipe out the English tongue."

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- In 1337-1453, during the Hundred Years' War, French became the language of England's enemy.

# Hundred Years' War, 1337-1453



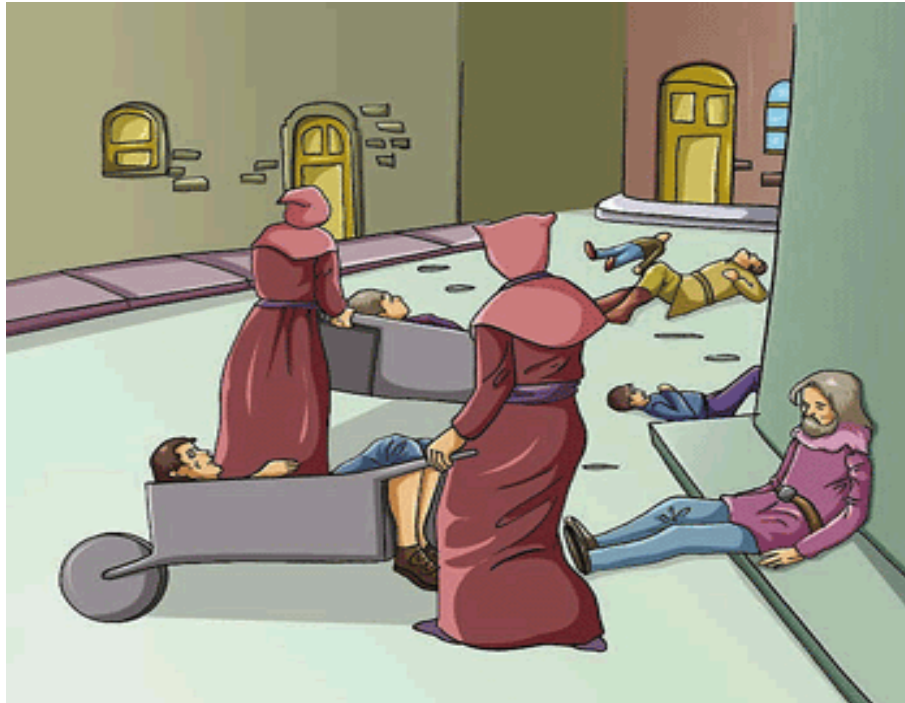
# The Hundred Years War


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- The Hundred Years War, lasting from 1337 until 1453, was a defining time for the history of both England and France. The war started in May 1337 when King Philip VI of France attempted to confiscate the English territories in the duchy of Aquitaine (located in Southwestern France).
- It ended in July 1453 when the French finally expelled the English from the continent (except for Calais).
- The Hundred Years War was a series of chevauchees (plundering raids) sieges and naval battles interspersed with truces and uneasy peace.

# The Black Death, 1348-1350

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- In 1348-1350, the Black Death cut the population of England by almost half, causing serious labor shortages. As a consequence, the importance of the working classes, of artisans and craftsmen, was greatly enhanced; wages increased and the resultant ascendancy of the yeoman in the country and the bourgeois in the town; both of whom only spoke English, further abetted the use of the native tongue.

# Hundreds of Latin and French teachers and scholars died during the Black Death plague





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- ❑ Faced with a lack of academicians versed in French and Latin, many schools resorted to English as a common medium of instruction.
  - ❑ By 1385, the practice became general, and even universities and monastic institutions started to conduct their curricula, or academic courses, in English.
  - ❑ The emergency action induced by the Black Death engendered an educational reaction.
  - ❑ Alarmed by the decline in what today would be called "language skills", school-masters prepared and published manuals and workbooks of French grammar.
  - ❑ Oxford and Cambridge enacted statutes (legal decisions) requiring students to construe, or to interpret, and compose in both English and French "lest the French language be entirely disused."

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- ❑ Concerned with the new insularity, or isolation, of English education; Parliament decreed that all "lords, barons, knights, and honest men of good towns," should teach their children French.
  - ❑ The historical significance of these developments lay in the fact that by the fifteenth century, the ability to speak French had come to be regarded as an accomplishment.
  - ❑ In schools and universities, French was taught, like Latin, as an ancillary (unimportant) language requisite to the cultural wardrobe of the properly educated person.
  - ❑ Government officials who lacked this accessory had to retain on their staffs a "secretary in the French Language".
  - ❑ The linguistic balance had shifted forever.

# Middle English is often characterized as ....

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- Vernacular spoken and written in England *c.* 1100 – 1500, the descendant of Old English and the ancestor of Modern English.
  - It can be divided into three periods: Early, Central, and Late. The Central period was marked by the borrowing of many Anglo-Norman words and the rise of the London dialect, used by such poets as John Gower and Geoffrey Chaucer in a 14th-century flowering of English literature.
  - The dialects of Middle English are usually divided into four groups: Southern, East Midland, West Midland, and Northern.

# Background of Middle English

- The Norman conquest of England in 1066 traditionally signifies the beginning of 200 years of the domination of French in English letters.
- French cultural dominance, moreover, was general in Europe at this time. French language and culture replaced English in polite court society and had lasting effects on English culture.
- But the native tradition survived, although little 13th-century, and even less 12th-century, vernacular literature is extant, since most of it was transmitted orally.
- Anglo-Saxon fragmented into several dialects and gradually evolved into Middle English, which, despite an admixture of French, is unquestionably English.
- By the mid-14th cent., Middle English had become the literary as well as the spoken language of England.

# Middle English


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- The period of **Middle English** covers the period between the twelfth and the first half of the fifteenth century – the time when Britain was under the Norman rule.
- The French kings who ruled England at that time spoke no, or very little English and only some of them, as for example Henry II understood it, but did not speak it.
- As the French introduced their laws the predominant external influence on the Middle English was French.
- Moreover, many bishops, craftsmen and merchants arrived to Britain which increased the influence of the French language.

# Middle English

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- There were many intermarriages between people arriving to Britain and natives and in the 12 th century English was used by the upper class of the society.
- At the end of that century children of the nobility spoke English as their mother tongue and learned French at schools.
- Although there are not many documents produced in the 12th century stating the role of the English language it is known that French was the language of law, administration, literature and government, while Latin was used in education, worship and administration.



A.D. 1350-1400 was a period of great literary  
production in Britain

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## In 1384, John Wycliffe made an important translation of the Bible into English

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- Latin words continued to be absorbed by such writers as John Wycliffe (also: Wyclif, Wiclif, et al.), an ardent reformer of the Church, who insisted that Holy Writ should be available in the vernacular, and produced his translation of the Bible.
- Wycliffe and his associates are credited with more than a thousand Latin words not previously found in English.
- Since many of them occur in the so-called Wycliffe translation of the Bible and have been retained in subsequent translations, they have passed into common use.




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- Caxton helped to stabilize the language by standardizing spelling and using East Midland (London) dialect as the literary form which became the standard modern English of Britain.
  - Wycliffe's translation of the Bible has such words as "generation" and "persecution", which did not appear in the earlier Anglo-Saxon version. Anglo-Saxon compounds like "handbook" and "foreword" were dropped from the language in favor of the foreign "manual" and "preface" (many centuries later, they were reintroduced as neologisms, and objected to by purists unskilled in linguistic history).

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- Wycliffe is credited with making English a competitor with French and Latin; his sermons were written when London usage was coming together with the East Midlands dialect, to form a standard language accessible to everyone

# William Tyndale, the man who first printed the New Testament in English

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- The Roman Catholic church in England had forbidden vernacular English Bibles in 1408, after handwritten copies of a translation by John Wycliffe (an earlier Oxford scholar) had circulated beyond the archbishop's control.
  - Some of the manuscripts survived and continued to circulate, but they were officially off-limits.
  - Translating the Bible into English without permission of the Catholic church was a serious crime, punishable by death.

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- ❑ William Tyndale was born into a well-connected family in Gloucestershire, England, around 1494.
  - ❑ We don't know much about his early life, but we know that he received an excellent education, studying from a young age under Renaissance humanists at Oxford.
  - ❑ By the time he left Oxford, Tyndale had mastered Greek, Latin, and several other languages (contemporary accounts say he spoke eight).
  - ❑ He also had become an ordained priest and a dedicated proponent of church reform; a "protestant", before that word existed.
  - ❑ All he needed now was a vocation. He found one, thanks in part to Desiderius Erasmus.

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- Erasmus, one of Europe's leading intellectual lights, had caused a stir in 1516 by publishing a brand-new Latin translation of the New Testament--one that departed significantly from the Vulgate, the "common" Latin translation the Catholic church had used for a millennium.
  - Knowing that many readers saw the Vulgate as the immutable Word of God, Erasmus decided to publish his source text (a New Testament in Greek, compiled from sources older than the Vulgate) in a column right next to his Latin translation.

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- ❑ It was a momentous decision. For the first time, European scholars trained in Greek gained easy access to biblical "originals."
  - ❑ Now they could make their own translations straight from the original language of the New Testament.
  - ❑ In 1522, Martin Luther did just that, translating from the Greek into German. In England, Tyndale decided to publish an English Bible--one so accessible that "a boy that driveth the plough shall know more of the scripture" than a priest.
  - ❑ One problem: the Catholic church in England had forbidden vernacular English Bibles in 1408, after handwritten copies of a translation by John Wyclif (an earlier Oxford scholar) had circulated beyond the archbishop's control.
  - ❑ Some of the manuscripts survived and continued to circulate, but they were officially off-limits.
  - ❑ Translating the Bible into English without permission was a serious crime, punishable by death.

# The Word of God made into English

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- Undeterred, Tyndale tried to win approval for his project from the bishop of London. When that didn't work, he found financial backers in London's merchant community and moved to Hamburg, Germany.
- In 1526, he finally completed the first-ever printed New Testament in English.
- It was a small volume, an actual "pocket book," designed to fit into the clothes and life of that ploughboy.
- That made it fairly easy to smuggle. Soon Bible runners were carrying contraband scriptures into England inside bales of cloth. For the first time, English readers encountered "the powers that be," "the salt of the earth," and the need to "fight the good fight"--all phrases that Tyndale turned.
- For the first time, they read, in clear, printed English, "Why seek ye the living among the dead? He is not here, but is risen."
- Infuriated, the bishop of London confiscated and destroyed as many copies of Tyndale's New Testament as he could.
- Meanwhile, English authorities called for Tyndale's arrest.
- He went into hiding, revised his New Testament, and (after learning Hebrew) began translating the Old Testament, too. Before long, copies of a small volume titled *The First Book of Moses*, called "Genesis" started showing up on English shelves.



# William Tyndale was executed



# Spreading the Word

- ❑ Tyndale never finished his Old Testament.
- ❑ He was captured in Antwerp in 1535 and charged with heresy.
- ❑ The next year, he was executed by strangulation and burned at the stake.
- ❑ Yet others picked up his work, and Tyndale's version of the Word lived on. In fact, practically every English translation of the Bible that followed took its lead from Tyndale; including the 1611 King James Version.
- ❑ According to one study, 83 percent of that version's New Testament is unaltered Tyndale, even though a team of scholars had years to rework it.
- ❑ The reason is simple. Tyndale's English translation was clear, concise, and remarkably powerful.
- ❑ Where the Vulgate had *Fiat lux, et lux erat*, Wyclif's old version slavishly read "Be made light, and made is light".



**In 1340-1400, Geoffrey Chaucer helped make English the dominant language of Britain**





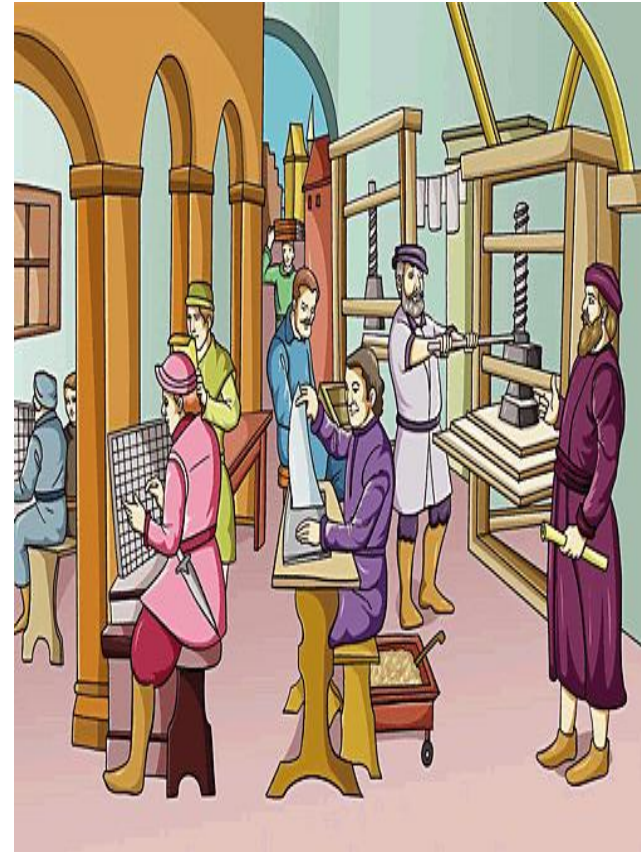
# Chaucer


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- He is credited with combining the vocabularies of Anglo-Saxon, Scandinavian, French, and Latin into an instrument of precise and poetic expression.



# William Caxton, in 1476, was the first to use Gutenberg's invention in England



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- “Mehr als das Gold hat das Blei in der Welt verändert. Und mehr als das Blei in der Flinte das im Setzkasten.”
  
  - More than gold, it's lead that changed the world, and more than the lead in a gun, it was the lead in the typesetter's (printer's) case.

Georg Christoph Lichtenberg (1742-1799)



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**The End!**