

2.5 Distribution of Long and Short Vowels

Some characteristics of their distribution within words also distinguish long vowels and short vowels.

A. In any **unstressed syllable** a vowel is short. The words listed next have two syllables, the first taking full word-stress, the second being unstressed. The final syllable is part of the word-root, not a grammatical inflection.

fela	many	fēower	four
guma	man	seofon	seven
ofer	over, beyond	ōðer	other, second
micel	much	ēage	eye
hine	him	mōnað	month
sele	hall, dwelling	þūsend	thousand
fæder	father	nama	name
gearu	ready	ðūma	thumb

A practical corollary of this characteristic is that any vowel in a grammatical inflection is short, because inflectional syllables are always unstressed. The paradigm for /**storm-**/ 'storm' will illustrate. (The first form listed—and the fourth, too—lack overt inflection (are said to have 'zero-inflection').)

storm	stormas
stormes	storma
storme	stormum
storm	stormas

B. In either a **root morpheme** or a **derivational morpheme**, no more than one long vowel (or diphthong) will occur. Thus, for example, **rūmmōd** 'liberal, kind' can be only a compound, made up of **rūm** + **mōd** 'large-spirited.' Informally, a morpheme can be defined as a minimal element of an utterance that has a meaning. (A morpheme need not contain a long vowel, of course.) Illustration does not prove the absence of a distributional pattern. But here are some examples of words made up with one root morpheme and one derivational morpheme—'derivatives'—and with two root morphemes—'compounds.'

Derivatives

ā-drīfan	(to) drive out
tō-clēofan	(to) cleave asunder
hām-lēas	homeless
nēod-līce	diligently

Compounds

wīf-hād	womanhood
āc-lēaf	oakleaf
blōd-rēow	bloodthirsty
blōd-rēad	blood-red

C. When a vowel (or diphthong) occurs at the end of a word, in a syllable that is stressed, it is always long. In Old English there is a word /ā/ 'ever, always,' but there is no word */a/; /sæ/ 'sea' is a word, but */sæ/ is not. The forms listed next are all separate words, and there is no corresponding OE word with a short vowel or diphthong.

æ	law, custom	ēa	water, stream
bā	both	hēo	she
bēo	be (indicative)	sīe	be (subjunctive)
blēo(h)	appearance	hū	how
brū	(eye)brow	hwȳ	why
bū	dwelling	mā	more
cnēo	knee	frēa	ruler, lord
cū	cow	sū	sow
dā	doe	dō	(I) do
flā	arrow	tā	toe
flēa	flea	wā	woe
twā	two	rā	roe, roebuck
swā	so; as	þȳ	the (<i>infl.</i>)

D. A few one-syllable words end in a vowel but ordinarily do not carry word-stress, hence the vowel need not be long. These are 'grammatical' words, rather than 'content' words.

One is a coordinating conjunction /ġe/ (in contrast to pronoun /ġē/ 'ye'): **be þisse ondweardan tīde, ġe ēac be þære tōweardan** 'concerning this present time, and also concerning the future (one).' **Hē bebȳt ġe windum ġe sǣ** 'He commands both the winds and the sea'; **ġe on lande, ġe on ōþrum þingum, ġe on ōþrum ġestrēonum** 'in land, in other things, and in other riches.'

The negative particle **ne** is another; it precedes the verb it negates (whereas Modern English **not** follows the auxiliary verb it negates). Before a finite verb: **Ne sleh ðū. Ne synga ðū. Ne stel ðū.** 'Thou shalt not kill. Thou shalt not sin

(adulterously). Thou shalt not steal.' This form can also be used correlatively: **Ne ic ne dyde, ne ic ne dō** 'Neither did I, nor do I' (double negation, as in either of these clauses, is normal).

The relative particle **þe** (see 3.4 B) is yet another form that ordinarily lacks phrasal stress: **Sē ðe ēaran hæbbe tō gehýranne, gehýre!** 'He who has ears for hearing, (let him) hear!'

Alternation of stressed and unstressed forms of prepositions may occasionally be reflected in spelling differences. The spelling *big*, representing /big/, identifies a stressed form of this preposition, while the spelling *be* identifies an unstressed form: **þās tācno ... þe ic nū big sægde be þisse worlde earfoþnessum** 'These signs ... which I just now spoke-about concerning the tribulations of the world' (and see **be þisse ondweardan tīde** etc., above). The usual spelling is *bi*, rendered ordinarily in edited texts as **bī**.

Pronouns are also believed to have had long final vowels when they had stress in sentence context, short vowels when they did not; they are listed in the grammars therefore as **wē, þē, mē, þū**, etc. The pronominals **sē** and **hwā** are similar (see 3.4 A and 3.2 A).

E. Any vowel (or diphthong) that is stressed and is non-final in a word may, of course, be either long or short: **gōd** 'good,' **god** 'god' (many similar pairs occur in the illustrative lists for the separate vowels).