

## 2.6 Syllable Division

Syllable division is independent of the principles outlined just above. While it is true that exact description of points of onset and termination of syllables is not yet finally settled for Modern English and that we can never have samples of Anglo-Saxon speech for analysis, what evidence there is points to a general congruity of syllabication for both Old English and Modern English. Within syllables—which are phonologically defined—the distribution features of vowels are unlike those within morpheme structure (described in the preceding section); chiefly, a vowel carrying stress in a syllable may be final and yet be short. Apart from evidence provided by trends in historical development of English (evidence too complex to be more than mentioned here), there is evidence of syllabication in the writing of some Anglo-Saxon scribes. The scribal evidence has not been fully attended to, but a sample will indicate the nature of that evidence and the principles of syllabication recognized by some native speakers of Old English. The scribe who copied the first three-fifths of *Beowulf*, for example, wrote the following words with spacing in the positions indicated here by hyphens or spaces (or both). While his practice is not always to leave space between syllables of a particular word, he is fully consistent in respect to phonologically definable positions at which spacing has been left; the spacing corresponds to syllable boundaries that are also found in Modern English principles of pronunciation.

fre-me-don	ġe- fre-me-de
freme-don	ġe freme-de
ġe- frem-man-ne	ġe- freme-de
ġe- frem-me-de	ġe- fremed
ġe- fre-mede	fremeð
ġe- freme-de	ġe- freme-de
ġe- freme-de	ġe fremed
ġe- freme-don	ġe- fremede

Other written forms in the same context also show spacing contrary to morphemic principles; it seems interpretable only as syllable division. As the examples given next illustrate, division was commonly made so that any non-initial syllable begins with a consonant (or consonant cluster) regardless of the length of the preceding or succeeding vowel. The same scribe wrote one-syllable **bearn** 'son' with ligatured **ea**, but two-syllable **bearn** 'ran (into)' (past tense of **be-irnan**) with a slight space between **e** and **a**.

Manuscript spacing	Morpheme boundary
ġēa-fon (they) gave	ġēaf-on
(sele-) rǣ-den-ne -counselors	(sele-) rǣd-enne
scyl-ding Danes	scyld-ing
seal-de (he) gave	seal-d-e
hrē-þig triumphant	hrēþ-iġ
fyre-ne crime	fyren-e
scrī-það move, glide	scrīþ-að
ear-dode (he) dwelled	eard-od-e
man-na cyn-nes of the race of men	man(n)-a cyn(n)-es

Use of blank space between strings of letters was also an aspect of the writing of Old English that was being worked out, and it is different in some ways from the writing of Modern English. One problem was, What elements are to be separated with space—words, word-roots (as in a compound), syllables, phrases? Another was, Is spacing to be binary, or can it be variable? And ultimately, What in the utterance does it symbolize? The quite separate problem of capitalization was also solved only in subsequent stages of the writing of English.

Two pairs of terms relevant to syllable structure are standard. First, closed and open syllables. A **closed syllable** is one that terminates with one or more consonants, such as **dæg** ‘day,’ **pæþ** ‘path,’ **hēold** ‘held,’ **forst** ‘frost.’ An **open syllable** is one that terminates in a vowel, such as **wā** ‘woe, misery,’ **tō** ‘to,’ or the first syllable of **æcer** ‘field, acre,’ **grædig** ‘hungry, covetous.’

Next, long and short syllables. A **long syllable** is one that contains a long vowel (or diphthong) or terminates in two or more consonants, such as **sē** ‘sea,’ **lýt** ‘little,’ **wyrm** ‘serpent,’ or the first syllable of **sōfte** ‘softly.’ A **short syllable** is one that contains a short vowel (or diphthong) without two or more consonants following it, such as **æt** ‘at,’ **sæt** ‘sat,’ **fæt** ‘vat, vessel,’ or the first syllable in **ufan** ‘from above,’ **fæder** ‘father,’ **fæger** ‘fair, beautiful,’ **fæste** ‘fast,’ **guma** ‘man,’ **sunu** ‘son.’