Origins of English

Early English

Most of our much-used shorter words can be traced back to when English was first heard in Britain. Many of these words have ‘cousins’ in modern German, for it was from the continent that the English language first came, spoken by the immigrant Anglo-Saxons.

English	German
house	**Haus**
book	**Buch**
fresh	**frisch**
hand	**Hund**
night	**Nacht**
swim	**schwimmen**
light	**Licht**
twelve	**zwölf**
shoe	**Schuh**

Small ‘function’ words like **and**, **the** and **with** are among these Anglo-Saxon survivors, and appear in almost every expression.

So too are suffixes such as **-wards** (**homewards**, **towards**), and **-wise** (**otherwise**)

Anglo-Saxon nouns tend to describe things which you can picture quite easily, solid objects with concrete characteristics, like **boat**, **road**, **food**, **house**, **milk**.

Verbs similarly deal with straightforward activities, like **eat**, **spend**, **help**, **ride**, **kiss**, **swim**.

Adjectives are likewise ‘down-to-earth’, e.g. **long**, **short**, **good**, **wise**, **sweet**, **new**, **ill**.

These ancient words, despite their age, remain at the heart of English today.

The Vikings

The Vikings attacked Britain in the eighth and ninth centuries, and some of their inevitably violent words ended up in our language: **die**, **drown**, **gasp**, **hit**, **knife**, **ransack**, **rotten**, **rugged**, **scare**, **scream** and **ugly**. But there were more peaceable ones too – **law** among them: **birth**, **call**, **egg**, **fellow**, **get**, **give**, **glitter**, **guess**, **happy**, **husband**, **ill**, **law**, **leg**, **lift**, **link**, **loan**, **low**, **meek**, **odd**, **root**, **scrap**, **skin**, **thrive**, **tight**, **want**, **weak** and **window.** Some Viking words survived alongside the English cousins, gradually developing different meanings.

Anglo-Saxon	Viking
shirt	**skirt**
shatter	**scatter**
shell	**skull**

French

The Norman conquest of 1066 started a flow of French words into English which continued for many centuries.

pre-1066	French arrivals
bliss	**pleasure**
board	**table**
happiness	**joy**
shire	**county**
blossom	**flower**
wealth	**riches**

French remained the language of government for over three hundred years. Words to do with power and authority are mostly from French:

army, bondage, command, court, crown, majesty, master, mayor, mistress, obey, parliament, peasant, prison, rent, servant, slave, subject, tax

Latin & Greek

From the 1500s on, a resurgent interest in the classical languages, Latin and Greek, caused a number of new creations in English.

Latin
agile, computer, interpret, judicious, juvenile, optimum, ridiculous, splendid, virus

Greek
agony, ballistic, biology, cinema, democracy, idea, idiot, philosophy, sympathy, theatre

Some classical words arrived as French words (French is an evolved form of Latin). When scholars started to coin new words based on the classical languages, some Latin words developed two forms in English, which in time have developed different nuances.

Direct from Latin	Latin via French
compute	**count**
discus	**dish**
secure	**sure**
radius	**ray**
fantasy	**fancy**
fragile	**frail**
capture	**catch**

Variety ...

At the roots of English you will find a Germanic language that mixed with French and brushed up with Latin. Along the way it absorbed words of the Vikings, of more French, of Spanish and Italian, of Dutch and others before it spread around the globe via British traderoutes where in turn it reaped a rich intake of words from other languages and cultures – and continues to do so, though the traderoutes are now principally American.

Choice of words

The best use of English takes advantage of all its sources of vocabulary, from the easy, supple Anglo-Saxon words to the more sophisticated or technical ones from the classical languages. We say 'sophisticated' – be cautious of overuse. The age-old precept is never use a longer word if a shorter word will do. This is not easy in a specialist presentation, with its business-specific language. But the point remains. If you have technical or business-specific words on the slide, use different words in the talk. The mix is stimulating, makes sure they've got the point, and puts you more in control. Think of another way of saying the same thing. Use different words from the text on display.

Ex-Latin words come very readily to French and Spanish people, for the good reason that Latin is their parent language. English has Latin words too, less directly. They were fashioned or imported to create a more formal idiom or to supply a name for a new concept or definition. Some of these ex-Latin words filled gaps in the existing idiom and settled quickly and now we couldn't manage without them (*computer*, *virus*, *deviate*, *certify*). They can be clinical and precise; but should not be overused. It's the older non-Latin words, by and large, that keeps an English audience from nodding off.

Ex-Latin words are used to in all sorts of affected ways. People who call their house a 'residence' or a 'domicile' are putting on more airs than those who use the more native 'household' or 'home'. Calling someone 'friendly' suggests you like them more than if they were 'amicable'. Some people 'take the blame' for something they've done wrong; others might say they are 'culpable': which of the two appears more sincere? Sincerity comes over far better with the older native words. The thing is to find the right balance. A discussion of financial forecasts or of micro-chip technology will always be framed in its own lexis. But a different way of saying the same thing will feel fresh and have greater impact.

Match the English words derived from Latin with their more native English equivalents:

vicinity	hinder
deteriorate	shorten
defective	get worse
conceal	neighbourhood
impede	make the most of
irate	end
accumulate	start
comprehend	hide
initiate	angry
abbreviate	gather
cooperate	faulty
speculate	understand
optimize	lend a hand
terminate	guess

Creating words

In its day the young language was vibrant and supple, quick to absorb foreign words, clever at fashioning new ones and equipped with a subtle inflexional system that has since been almost entirely lost. An inflexion is the ending of a word, and what it adds to the meaning. An 's' added to a noun, for example, usually means a plural; '-ed' at the end of a verb tells you it's describing something in the past (jumped instead of jump).

Anglo-Saxons fashioned a number of words by joining two existing words together. This practice continued with the influx of foreign and classical words, and is still alive and well in North America, from where we have words like **strip-tease**, **hangover** and **know-how**. The origin of **answer** accounts for its strange spelling: an Anglo-Saxon judge would turn to the defendant and before hearing a response to the charge would ask for the oath: ‘and swear’.

Anglo-Saxons made use of suffixes such as -**wise**, -**bouts** and -**wards**. See how simple -**wise** can be : ‘Job-wise she's very settled’ (i.e. ‘with respect to her job, she's very settled’).

The habit of creating verbs from nouns (he **binned** his computer) is more than a thousand years old. Anglo-Saxons once made **tell** from **tale**, and **sell** from **sale**. Like **to bin** from **a bin**, we have **to bill** from **a bill** (i.e. invoice), **to market** from **a market**, and **to shop** from **a shop**.

Nouns are also made from verbs.

Identify the nouns below that elsewhere could be a verb:

a pleasant walk
a nice try
an invite to the party
a long run
the hard sell
a good buy
a tough ask

When French and English were both spoken in Britain after the Norman conquest, a number of phrases came into use which were two words linked by ‘and’. The double-expression was to make sure that both French and English listeners understood the meaning, particularly in matters of law. Many others have since been created, and some are very popular with their easy natural rhythm.

happiness and joy	peace and quiet
will and testament	touch and go
son and heir	hit and miss
law and order	house and home
null and void	life and soul
breaking and entering	up and running
assault and battery	now and then
bits and pieces	give and take
board and lodging	here and there
safe and sound	drunk and disorderly
done and dusted	time and again

What meaning do these prefixes add to a word?

anti (anti-EC, anti-racism)
post (post-vacation)
de (devalue, derail)
pre (pre-Christmas party)
sub (subzero, subhuman)
re (revisit, recharge)

Join words to create other words (some hundreds of years old, some more recent):

down	sight
over	out
fall	lasting
high	noon
law	date
after	fall
ever	stand
under	abiding
up	brow

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Where English words come from

be
bite
blow
break
bring
buy
climb
come
deal
do
dread
drink
drive
earn
eat
fall
feed
fill
float
fly
follow
gather
go
greet
grow
have
heal
hear
help
hold
kiss
know
lead
leap
learn
leave
let
lie
live
look
love
meet
ride
rise
say
see
seek
sell
send
set
shake
shine
sit
sleep
speak
spend
stand
steal
swim
tell
think
wake
wash
weep
win

arm
beech
boat
body
bone
butter
cow
door
earth
eye
field
fish
floor
food
foot
hand
head
heart
hedge
hen
hill
home
horse
house
land
mast
meadow
milk
oak
road
shepherd
ship
stool
wood
yard

bad
bitter
black
broad
busy
dark
deep
few
glad
good
greedy
high
light
little
long
many
merry
much
narrow
new
old
small
sorry
sound
sweet
swift
white
wide
wise
young

English is the language of the immigrant Anglo-Saxons 'ANGLE-LAND' and shares a common root with GERMAN

5th-6th centuries

USA

blues
glitch
graveyard
highbrow
loaded
mail
movie
nipple
overcoat
striptease
stunt

VIKINGS

9th-10th centuries

birth
egg
happy
law
loan
skirt
ugly

DUTCH

14th-17th centuries

skipper
deck
loiter
buoy
booze

NORMAN FRENCH

11th century

table
rent
prison

FRENCH

2nd millennium AD

letter
music
flair
sugar
bullet
delicate
cannon
chef
library
flower
parliament
file
perfume
satin
money
march
minion
palace
moustache
liberty
cadet
paper

INDIAN SUBCONTINENT

1600 onwards

bangle
bungalow
chutney
cot
curry
dinghy
gymkhana
jungle
pyjamas
shampoo
thug
yoga

SPANISH

1400 onwards

armada
bravado
mosquito
potato
sherry
vanilla

ITALIAN

Renaissance and later

fresco
opera
vendetta
stiletto
fiasco

LATIN

acute
amicable
annual
bonus
collaborate
computer
conceal
data
decapitate
demonstrate
homicide
intend
invincible
irate
judicious
summit
superior
suspend
terror
vacation
vigilant
virile

ANCIENT GREEK

anthropology
ballistic
basis
biology
critic
ecstasy
idiosyncratic
philosophy
psychiatrist

Most Latin and Greek words were taken in the second half of the 2nd millennium. A few had already arrived with the Saxons, and most of the French words that arrived after 1066 had Latin roots.

Identify the four European languages from which these words were taken:

a) armada, bravado, cigar, mosquito, potato, sherry, vanilla

b) fresco, opera, stiletto, fiasco, vendetta, bank

c) file, document, page, chair, palace, flair, embarrass, march

d) landscape, cruise, easel, dock, skipper, yacht, hustle, loiter, smuggle, wagon, booze

The adjectives on the right were all created from Latin words and relate to the early English nouns on the left.

body	domestic
mother	solar
cattle	equestrian
hand	naval
home	bovine
sun	manual
ship	corporal
horse	maternal
kitchen	culinary

American words have been entering British English all through the 20th century. **Airport**, **loaded** (rich), **lot** (piece of land), **mail** (post), **mean** (nasty), **shades** (sunglasses) and **stunt** have long been at home on this side of the Atlantic. In America the old Anglo-Saxon habit of putting two words together to make a fresh one is thriving, and we have been quick to absorb them in the UK: **hangover**, **high-brow**, **hindsight**, **know-how**, **law-abiding**, **overtake**, **striptease and uptight.** The French helped America during the war for independence, and some of their words slipped into American English: there you will walk down a **boulevard**, and go up an **elevator** to get to your apartment. American words are often concrete expressions of abstract ideas, for example **bug** for **irritate**, **cut** for **reduction**, **blues** for **gloom**, and **fix** for **arrange**.

Some American words have a longer history than our own. The early settlers from Britain took a number of words that have since died out in the mother-country. The American **I guess** in the sense of 'I think' was used by the 14th century poet, Chaucer.

There are differences in spelling: America prefers **center** to British **centre**, **theater** to **theatre** and **defense** to **defence**, and drops the 'u' from **colour**, **honour** and **labour**. They spell the noun **licence** with an ‘s’ like the verb **license** (UK officials seem to have adopted this now – either to be consistent or because they can’t spell). America has **program** and **catalog** for **programme** and **catalogue**, they cash **checks** not **cheques**, buy **jewelry** not **jewellery** and in bed wear **pajamas** not **pyjamas**.

British words are on the left:

flat	apartment
lawyer	attorney
dressing gown	bathrobe
cupboard	closet
biscuit	cookie
receptionist	desk clerk
lift	elevator
autumn	fall
ground floor	first floor
petrol station	filling station
motorway	freeway
problem	glitch
stock	inventory
undertaker	mortician
film	movie
journalist	newsman
trousers	pants
road	pavement
prison	penitentiary
full stop	period
district	precinct
lay-by	pull-off
handbag	purse
railway	railroad
pavement	sidewalk
motorway	speedway