

ENGL 4501:

History of the English Language



Around the year 450, a relatively small group of Northern Germanic people left continental Europe to settle a small, rainy, rather insignificant island in the Atlantic Ocean. Now, the language they began to develop is spoken around the world. How did this happen and what happened along the way? In this class, we'll trace the development of the English language from the Anglo Saxons to the modern English that we speak. We'll look at how English has changed, what influenced those changes, and how our language is continuing to evolve as English spreads around the world. As we do this, we'll consider questions like the following:

- Why do we slaughter a pig/cow/deer but eat pork/beef/venison?
- Likewise, why do Americans sometimes see British English as high-class and refined while American English seems less swanky?
- Why do we just add *-ed* to make some verbs past tense (like *look/looked* or *wait/waited*) but have others that are more complicated (like *swim/swam/swum* or *write/wrote/written*).
- How did we get the modern English alphabet from the Greek alphabet that was all triangles and squares and straight lines?
- How come we don't all (thank goodness!) still talk like Shakespeare?
- How have computers changed the English Language?
- How did English get from the way it was in the time of the Anglo-Saxons to the way it is today?

Along the way, we'll explore how language works, and how that influences the ways that languages change and develop, and how changing English has been documented in texts over time. We'll also consider English's current status as an international language, and how local Englishes diverge from one another.

For this course, students will do readings from the course textbook and from manuscripts from earlier versions of English as well as modern dialects of English. Students will also investigate a variety of modern English (e.g., Singaporean English, Indian English, etc) for the final project.