

# English Alphabet Reform (İnglīsh Alfəbət Reform)

## A humorous proposal for a phonetic alphabet

by Dr. Dan Bishop, 2016

English is an amazing language, due in part to the multitude of past languages it has incorporated throughout its relatively short history. The many examples of spelling variations and inconsistencies in English attest to these multifaceted origins. It's not uncommon for words or parts of words that have the same sound to have quite different spellings, and for parts of words with identical spellings to be pronounced very differently. These vagaries are in no small part responsible for the reputation our language has as being very difficult to learn.

Consider, for example, the words "stuff" and "muff" on the one hand, and "rough", "tough" and "enough" on the other. Then there is the "rough" group of words to contrast with words like "bough", "trough", and "through", four instances of the same spelling with different pronunciations. Of course, these make for interesting spelling contests that are popular among the grade school set, but they cause no end of consternation to adults who are trying to learn English as a second language. Spanish, by contrast, is a very phonetically stable language. If you can pronounce a Spanish word correctly, you can probably spell it correctly as well.

It is well known that languages evolve over time. Compare Olde English with modern-day American English and the differences are obvious. What is less known is that alphabets also change over the centuries. Old German writings are almost indecipherable to modern German readers. The Russian Cyrillic alphabet also underwent some major changes during the Bolshevik revolution in 1917. The premise behind this essay is that English is a prime candidate for an alphabet overhaul that will place written English on a par with Spanish as a phonetically driven language.

There is also a positive economic benefit to adopting the changes suggested in this essay. Simply removing double letters and silent letters (both rare in Spanish) will result in fewer printed characters in books and documents, with savings in both ink and paper. For digital documents, less computer memory will be needed to store information. With the adoption of the phonetic-based alphabet described in this essay, an actual 11% reduction in print can be achieved. This is illustrated at the end of this piece with a side-by-side comparison of the Gettysburg address. That comes to 11 trees saved out of every 100 now required.

Of course, a change of this magnitude that affects every facet of our English-speaking culture must be carefully thought out and implemented sparingly and in small increments over time. The first changes should be the simplest and most easily and readily adopted. As these become widely used, other more radical changes can be introduced. Ultimately, a few additional letters will need to be introduced into the English alphabet, particularly for the variety of vowel sounds now represented by the five vowels and several uniquely pronounced diphthongs.

As an aside it should be noted that with the advent of computer technology, it is easy to add new symbols without changing the standard "qwerty" typewriter keyboard. For example, I have programmed Microsoft Word to allow me to type the complete Russian alphabet by using the "Alt" key on my laptop keyboard:

А Б В Г Д Е Ж З И К Л М Н О П Р С Т У Ф Х Ц Ч Ш Щ Ъ Ы Ь Э Ю Я

In addition, I have also programmed the special characters and accented vowels that are used in Spanish and French to appear when I use the "Ctrl" key. So an explosion of new characters is readily available, just waiting to be called into service. The world is at our fingertips!

There is, however, one drawback to using a strict phonetically based spelling in English. We have many words that sound alike but have different meanings. Under the current system, oral presentation requires that the listener use context to determine which word is meant by the speaker, while the different spellings obviate this problem in writing. For example, reign and rain, pain and pane, sail and sale, hale and hail, pale and pail, tail and tale, pair and pear. At the end of this exercise, each of these pairings will have identical spellings, requiring context to determine which word is meant. On the other hand, there are cases with today's spellings where confusion occurs because two words have the same spelling but different pronunciations: tear can be a rending of a sheet of paper or a drop of liquid spilling from your eye. With a phonetic spelling system, these two words would be spelled differently.

### Creating a phonetic based English spelling system

Let's begin with the most useless letters in the English alphabet, the letters "c", "q" and "w". There are three sounds that "c" represents: "k" as in "cat", "s" as in "city", and "ch" as in "chat". (We'll deal with "Chicago" later). Since "k" and "s" sounds already have their own dedicated letters, we can relieve "c" of these duties. From **hense** forward, we shall **kall** the letter "c" "chay", and it will represent only one sound, "ch". The letter "k" **kan** also take the **plase** of "q", allowing us to set "q" aside and **kall** on it later to fill an entirely different role.

Finally, when you think about it, "w" always has an "oo" sound, as in "moon". For example, **pronounse** "when" and "weather" slowly and you hear it: "oo-en" and "oo-eather". So another of the first **canges** will be to rename "double-u" to "ooh", eliminate any "h" that follows "w", and make "w" our first new vowel, giving us **mwn, twn, gwn, swn, ets**. Note that "w" does not substitute for the "oo" in words like "foot" and "soot". We'll need another vowel for this sound.

The letter "g" has a dual role similar to "c", as exemplified in the word "garage". The soft "g" sounds like a "j", so if we **restrikt** "g" to the hard "g" sound, rename it "gay", and use "j" wherever the soft sound **okkurs**, we will have eliminated another **dikotomy**. Thus we now have "**garaje**" and "**jigantik**".

The letter "f" **okkasionally** has a "v" sound as in the word "of", so we should **akkomodate** this **eksentrivity** and simply use the "v" in these kases: "**ov**". Similarly, when the letter "s" has a "z" sound, we will use a "z", **az** in "**raize**", "**rayz**", and "**dayz**".

The letter "h" **iz** most **certainly overuzed**. We have already removed it from old "ch" and "wh" **kombinationz**. We **kan** now address other **instansez** where the "h" **iz uzed**, with the goal **ov** making it represent only the single aspirated sound we find in the word "hospital". "Ph" **iz eazily** eliminated totally, substituting "f" in its **plase**, giving us "**filosofy**" and "**telefone**". "Sh" and "th" are more **problematik**, in that the **kurrent alfabet haz** no **direkt** single-letter substitute for **theze soundz**. However, the Greek monks who invented the **Syrrilik alfabet** for the **Russianz** have done us the favor **ov** inventing ω and Ω ("shah") to **reprezent** "sh" **soundz**, **would** we **dezire** to make this **wift**, and we **kan uze** the Greek letter theta, θ and Θ, to **reprezent** hard "th" **soundz az** in "the" and "that", giving us "**θe**" and "**θat**" and "**feaθer**". In fakt, if we rename **θis letter "θe, or the" we kan even uze just θe single letter to represent θe word θe!** Now for θ soft "th" sound heard in "thin", why not enlist θ now idle letter "q", allowing us to write "**θere is a qin feaθer beneaq θ qeater staje.**" We **kan** rename "q" to "thay" (az in Cathay).

If θ word "**okkurs**" **boθered** you in θ **paragraf** above, it **would** be obvious by now **θat** in pursuing our goal to simplify **Engliw** spelling, we **would konvert** all **okkurensez** of double **leterz** to single **leterz**. And we **wouldn't** stop **θere**. Silent **leterz** **would** be **totaly** eliminated **az wel**. Over **θ kours** of a long **dokument** or novel, **θ savingz** in **typ** and ink and paper **kould** be substantial.

By removing **doubl leterz** and silent **leterz** we **hav** kreated a minor problem. **θes paternz uzualy diktat weθer** a vowel **haz** a long or a **wort** sound. For **exempl**, θ old **wordz** "hat" and "hate" and

“hatter” and “hater” clearly demonstrat boθ situationz. In order to overcome θez problemz and to met our gol ov atributing only one sound to ec leter, we ned to creat several mor vowelz to klarify how θey ar to be pronoused. We wal also hav to del wiθ difgongz, θoze pesky two-vowel kombinacionz.

θ eziest vowel asinments mak ec old vowel represent θ long vowel sound. θus “a” soundz lik θ “a” in θ old word “mate”; “e” soundz lik θ “e” in θ old word “beat”; “i” soundz lik θ “i” in θ old word “site”; “o” soundz lik θ “o” in θ old word “rote”; and “u” soundz lik θ “u” in θ old word “put” and θ “oo” in θ old word “foot”.

For θ wort vowel soundz, we koud ywz diakritikal marks over θ vowelz, but θat aproc bekomz tedious. A betor idea iz tw kom up wiθ klen karakterz for ec sound. Tri θez on for siz:

Шort “a” az in “hat”: Λ, λ (θ Grek leter “lambda”), giving hΛt. Nam it “ab” az in kat.

Шort “e” Λz in “bet”: Э, э (θis iz θ Russian leter “eborotnoye”), giving bət. Nam it “eb”.

Шort “i” Λz in “fit”: Ї, ї giving fit (sīns “i”z ar dotəd ənewa, making yws ov θ kupt breve sin semz tw be a nΛturul coes. Nam θis wun “ib” Λz in “fib”).

Шort “o” Λz in “hot spot”: Я, я (θis iz θ Russian lēter “yah”) gīvīng hət sprət. Nam it “yah”.

Шort “u” Λz in “run”: У, у gīvīng rən . θis lētər wīl also be ywzd wənəvər Λn “uh” sound iz rekward, Λz in old wərdz θΛt ənd in “-er”, “-tion”, “-ture”, əts.. (θəs pΛnθər, stΛwən, and stΛcər (for “panther”, “station”, and “stature”). Nam θis leter “uhb”

θ leter “y” wīl ofen be replasd wiθ an “e”, partikularle wen it iz found at an ending. “y” wīl stīl be ywzd wen neded befor a vowel, az in ywsfəl (useful). θis helps dīfərənseat betwen bywte Λnd bwte (beauty and booty) or yws Λnd əs (use and us).

We now hΛv onle a few mor soundz tw del wīθ.

θ “a” in θ old wərd “father” hΛz θ sam sound Λz θ “o” in pət, so we kΛn ywz θ leter “yah”, or “я”, θΛt we hΛv яrəde defind, giving əs “fяθər”.

θ “zh” sound (rar in inglīš) kΛn ədʒət θ Rəwən “жж” (zhay) ywzd for θis sam sound. θer яr oкажənz, ywжwale wer Λn “s” iz fяlod bi a vowel, wən θis lētər wīl kəm in hΛnde.

4 dīfqrəngz wīl be ywzd tw rəprezənt 4 dəbl vowel kяmbīnəwənz θΛt kΛn be brokən down ĩntw tw səpərət soundz:

θ old wərdz “ear” Λnd “pier” kΛn be spəld ĩər and pĩər in θ nw Λfəbət. “here” bekəmz hĩər.

θ “oi” dīfqrəng kΛn be spəld ywżīng “oyə”, θ onle kas in wĩc we replas tw lētərz wīθ qre.

θ “ou” sound in θ old wərdz “out”, “bough”, “crowd” kΛn яl ywz “яw” (“ah-oo”) so we hΛv: яwt, бяw, Λnd кряwd.

θ vяwəl sяwnd in θ old wərdz “air” Λnd “there” brak dяwn ĩntw “əə” so we hΛv əər and θəər.

## The new English alphabet with 34 letters and their names:

### Θ nw ɪŋglɪʃ ʌlfəbət wɪθ 34 lətərz ʌnd θəər namz:

A a (ay)	Λ ʌ (ab as in cat)	B b (bee)	C c (chay)	D d (dee)	E e (ee)
Ə ə (eb as in bet)	F f (eff)	G g (gay)	H h (hah)	I i (ay as in kite)	İ ĩ (ib, as in sit)
J j (jay)	K k (kay)	L l (el)	M m (em)	N n (en)	O o (oh)
Я я (yah as in yonder)	P p (pee)	R r (ar)	S s (es)	Ш ш (shah)	T t (tee)
Θ θ (the, th as in that)	Q q (thay, th as in thin)	U u (you)	Ə ə (ub as in mutt)	V v (vee)	
W w (oo as in moon)	X x (eks)	Y y (wye)	Ж ж (zhay)	Z z (zee)	

### Summary of written phonetic rules and their corresponding alphabetic characters:

1. Silent letters are eliminated. Double letters are replaced with a single letter.

#### Changes for old consonants:

2. C,c (chay) → “ch” only. The other two sounds formerly represented by “c” are now handled with “k” and “s”.
3. G,g (gay) → hard “g” as in “gay” only. Soft “g” is now represented by “j”.
4. Q,q (thay) → soft “th” as in “thin”; The old “q” sound is represented with “k”.
5. W,w (oo) → “oo” sound as in “moon” (but not “foot”). So “qu” is now represented by “kw” as in “kwen” (queen).
6. S,s → “s” only. Anytime a “z” sound occurs, it is represented by “z”, as in “dəz” (does), “fadz” (fades).
7. Ph → Never occurs. Now represented by “f”.
8. Gh → Never occurs. Simply eliminated it if silent (bough); represent it with “f” when not, as in “kʌf” (cough)

#### Newly added consonants:

9. Ш,ш (shah) → “sh”; Θ,θ (the) → “th” as in “thoz” (those); Ж,ж → “zh” as in “əkaʒən” (occasion)

#### Changes for old vowels:

10. Y,y → “yuh” sound only, as in “yəs”. A “y” that sounds like an “ee” is represented with an “e”: “stəde” (study).
11. All 5 old vowels represent only their long vowel sounds, as in “hay”, “keep”, “bite”, “hope” and “put”.

#### Newly added vowels: Note: “w” is now a vowel (see above).

12. Short vowel sounds: Λ,ʌ (ab) → short “a” as in “kap” (cap); Ə,ə (eb) → short “e” as in “pət” (pet)  
İ,ĩ (ib) → short “i” as in “sīt” (sit); Я,я (yah) → short “o” as in “pət” (pot)  
Ə,ə (ub) → short “u” as in “kət” (cut), but also in “-er” endings: “bətər” (butter) and similar situations.
13. Я, я (yah) → “ah” sound as in “fʌθər” (father), “bʌtəm” (bottom), “kʌf” (cough), “pət” (pot)

#### Diphthongs are represented by combining the new vowels together to mimic the appropriate sounds:

14. Ear, pier, here → use “ɪə”: “ɪər”, “pɪər”, “hɪər”; Air, pear, share → use “əe”: “əər”, “pəər”, “ʃəər”  
Oil → use “oyə”: “oyəl”; Loud, crowd, bough → use “jw”: “lʌwd”, “krʌwd”, “bʌw”

## Θ Gætezbærg Aðræs:

For skor and sævæn yǣrz ægo ƿwr fǣθærz bræt forθ ƿn θīs kƿæntinænt a nƿ nɑshæn, kænsevd in lǣbæte, and dædīkatæd tw θ ƿƿæpozīshæn θæt ƿl mæn ƿr kreatæd ekwæl.

ƿƿw we ƿr ængajd in a græt sīvil ƿor, tæsting ƿæθær θæt nɑshæn o æne nɑshæn so kænsevd and so dædīkatæd kæn lǣng ændyær. We ƿr mæt ƿn a græt bætlfeld æv θæt ƿor. We hæv kæm tw dædīkat a ƿorshæn æv θæt feld, æz a finæl ræsting plas for θoz hw hǣr gav θæær livz θæt θæt nɑshæn mit līv. it iz ƿltwǣgæθær fīting and ƿƿæpær θæt we dƿ θīs.

Bæt in a lǣrjær sæns, we kæn nƿt dædīkat, we kæn nƿt kƿænsækrat, we kæn nƿt hælθ θīs græwnd. Θ bræv mæn, līving and dæd, hw stræglð hǣr, hæv konsækratæd it, ƿr æbæv ƿwr ƿwr ƿƿwr tw æd o detrakkt. Θ ƿærlð ƿil lītl not, nor lǣng remæmbær ƿræt we sa hǣr, bæt it kæn nævær forgæt ƿræt θa dīd hǣr. it iz for æs θ līving, ræθær, tw be dædīkatæd hǣr tw θ ænfīnīshd ƿærk ƿīc θa hw fǣt hǣr hæv θæs ƿræt so noble ædvænsd. It iz ræθær for æs tw be hǣr dædīkatæd tw θ græt tæsk remaņing befor æs - θæt fræm θez ƿnord dæd we tak inkræsd deƿoshæn tw θæt sƿz for ƿīc θa gav θ læst fæl mæjær æv deƿoshæn - θæt we hǣr hīle rezǣlv θæt θez dæd ƿl nƿt hæv dīd in ƿan - θæt θīs nɑshæn, ændær Græd, ƿl hæv a nƿ bærq æv frædæm - and θæt gæværnment æv θ ƿepl, bi θ ƿepl, for θ ƿepl, ƿl nƿt ƿæriš fræm θ ærth.

## The Gettysburg Address

Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.

Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure. We are met on a great battlefield of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field, as a final resting place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this.

But, in a larger sense, we can not dedicate, we can not consecrate, we can not hallow this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it, far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us—that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion—that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain—that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom—and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth. **Note: Three full lines of text out of 18 have been saved (14%).**