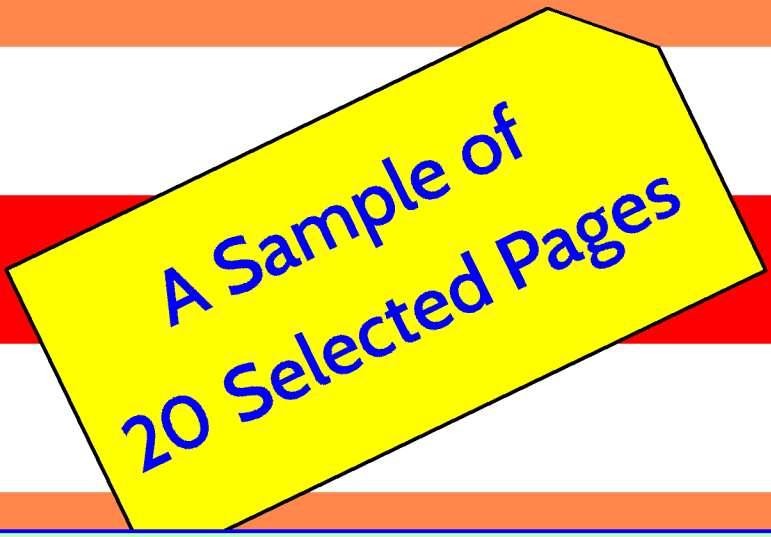
ENGLISH IRREGULAR VERBS



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English Irregular Verbs

–

A Manual for the Motivated

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CHUNK 1

What's an Irregular Verb?

AN IRREGULAR VERB is a verb that breaks the rules.

For example, we say "The goalkeeper *threw* the ball." We might also say "Oh no! He has *thrown* the ball too far."

We don't say "The goalkeeper **throwed* the ball." We don't say "He has **throwed* the ball too far."

To native ears, those last two sentences sound awful. They follow the usual rules, yes, but they're wrong.

Throw doesn't follow the usual rules. It's irregular. □

1.1 In this book, I'll use notes like this one to clarify things, to teach you terminology, and to answer questions I can imagine you asking me if we were in the same room. (I like being asked good questions.) I'll also use them to point you towards topics you might enjoy investigating on your own. And I'll use them to digress to tell you all sorts of other interesting stuff.

1.2 I'll use an asterisk, *, by any kind of usage that's wrong, obsolete, or extremely unlikely to appear in the future. □

CHUNK 2

Irregularity as a Sign of Life

NATIVE ENGLISH SPEAKERS learn English in infancy. At that age, we pick up irregular forms when we hear other people use them. We don't think much about how we talk. We don't memorise lists.

Later, though, as adults, many of us still need to ponder sometimes before we can tell you what past tense forms we use. That's not true for *draw*, *give*, *meet*, or *bring*. But it's often true for verbs such as *spin*, *spring*, *dream*, and *wed*. Ask us and you'll probably hear us try out some examples.

There's confusion too: I've met native speakers who say they *hanged* their washing out, not that they *hung* it out.

Then there's *gotten*. It's commonly thought that native speakers of British English never use this word. But there are contexts in which most of us do.

Even as a native language user, it's enlightening to look carefully at how you use language, and how other people use it.

Study irregular verbs properly and you'll notice more things. You'll increase your appreciation of the skein of order and disorder that constitutes the English language. You'll gain more power over your use of it.

More generally, irregular verbs are an excellent subject-matter on which to sharpen your skills of observation, definition, concept use, boundary-zone consideration, and analysis. □

2.1 This book is written in British English (BrEng), not United States English (USEng). But the discussion of individual verbs will cover you for both language variants. For an example of how they differ, consider *fit*. In BrEng, this always conjugates regularly: *fit* / *fitted* / *fitted*. But in USEng it conjugates *fit* / *fit* / *fit* in some meanings. "The shirt **fit* me" is wrong in BrEng but standard in USEng. Anthony Burgess wrote that a British reader of USA prose "feels totally at home until he comes to 'fit' as a past tense." □

CHUNK 5

The Forms of a Verb

ALL REGULAR VERBS have four forms. *Paint*, for example, has *paint*, *paints*, *painting*, and *painted*. *Kick* has *kick*, *kicks*, *kicking*, and *kicked*.

The irregular verb *throw* has five: *throw*, *throws*, *throwing*, *threw*, and *thrown*. Other five-form irregular verbs include *drive* and *speak*.

If a verb is regular, it must have four forms. But this doesn't mean that if a verb has four forms, it must be regular. On the contrary, many verbs with four forms are irregular. These include *send*, which has *send*, *sends*, *sending*, and *sent*. Another example is *run*, which has *run*, *runs*, *running*, and *ran*.

Some irregular verbs have only three forms. For example, *cut* has *cut*, *cuts*, and *cutting*. Similarly, *spread* has *spread*, *spreads*, and *spreading*.

If we're going to get a grip on how English verbs conjugate, clearly we need a high-quality handle. □

5.1 *Be* has eight forms: *be*, *am*, *is*, *are*, *being*, *was*, *were*, and *been*.

5.2 A verb *conjugates* when it changes to express tense (past, present, or future), number (singular or plural), person (1st, 2nd, or 3rd), etc. Nouns can change too, although in English they only do this to express number. Nouns are said to *decline*. Conjugation and declension are the two types of *inflection*.

5.3 The truth of the statement "If a verb is regular, it has four forms" (X) does not imply the truth of the statement "If a verb has four forms, it's regular." The second statement is called X's *converse*, and here it's false. But the truth of X does imply the truth of the statement "If a verb doesn't have four forms, it's irregular." This is called X's *contrapositive*. Here are the formal definitions: the statement "P implies Q" has the converse "Q implies P" and the contrapositive "not-P implies not-Q". □

CHUNK 6

The Three Key Forms

WE CAN FULLY CONJUGATE almost every verb if we know only three of its forms. I call these its key forms. (Traditionally they were known as its principal parts.)

The first is its simple form, e.g. *throw*.

The second is what it uses for its past simple tense, e.g. *threw*.

The third is what it uses when it's in the perfect aspect, e.g. *thrown*.

Students learn these in the form of triples such as *throw / threw / thrown* and *hold / held / held*.

I'll call these K1 / K2 / K3, and I'll call a complete set a K.

I'll give full definitions in Tutorials 3-5. But we can start using the terminology right away. We can note that for all regular verbs, and for irregular verbs such as *send*, K2 and K3 are the same. For other irregular verbs, such as *throw* and *drive*, they're different.

A verb's K is a toolbox. Given *throw* / *threw* / *thrown*, we can deduce any form we need. For example, we can get "I *throw*" (present tense), "she *throws*" (add *-s* for the 3rd person singular), *throwing* (progressive aspect), "I *threw*" (past simple), "I have *thrown*" (present perfect), "It is *thrown*" (present passive), and "the *thrown* ball" (verbal adjective). □

6.1 *Aspect* conveys time flavour in a more textured way than tense. The *perfect* aspect conveys priorness to, and continued relevance to, circumstances that exist later. I'll say much more about aspect in Tutorial 4.

6.2 Some verbs have alternative key forms in the same slot. These aside, the exceptions to conjugation being deducible from a K are the past tense of *be* and the present tenses of *be*, *have*, and a few defective verbs. *Defective* verbs, e.g. *can*, *may*, *must*, and *ought*, lack certain forms (including *-s*, *-ing*, and a *to* form) and functions (infinitives, participles, imperatives, future tense, progressive and perfect aspects). If a verb isn't defective, it's *normal*. □

CHUNK 7

What's in this book?

IN THIS BOOK, I'll show you all 191 simple irregular verbs that I'm aware of, giving examples of each one's usage.

I'll also show you 171 compounds. A compound irregular verb consists of one or more prefixes, followed by a base form that's usually (or always) similarly conjugating. Examples include *arise* and *upset*. (An irregular verb that isn't compound is called *simple*.)

But first, I'll help you organise irregular verbs in your mind. I'll advise you on what to notice and appreciate. I'll help you build some concepts, conceptual tools, and analytical skills.

My classification of irregular verbs into groups is tight. Only three verbs fall outside it. Meet an irregular verb and if you've read this book you'll know exactly how to categorise it. In this sense, the book is akin to a field guide to trees, birds, or mushrooms.

Towards the end, I'll group 100 of the most common irregular verbs, together with 20 of their compounds, into batches, organised in roughly decreasing order of frequency. These lists will be useful when you want to test your knowledge.

Then I'll give you two big alphabetical lists: the simple verbs first, followed by the compounds. □

7.1 A good natural history field guide helps you distinguish between species that look similar in the field. Read on to ensure that you don't confuse *bide* and *bid*, *choose* and *chose*, *lay* and *lie*, *lead* and *led*, *lose* and *loose*, or *melted* and *molten*.

7.2 A *prefix* is a morpheme put on at the beginning of a word, e.g. *de-*, *in-*, *re-*, *over-*, or *under-*. A *morpheme* is a word part that has its own meaning and can't be divided into smaller parts that have meaning.

7.3 If you think you've found a 192nd simple irregular verb in current usage, please write and let me know about it. Now take a break before you start the next tutorial. It's tough. Enjoy! □

CHUNK 8

The Ending: Its Spelling

EVERY REGULAR ENGLISH VERB has a K2 that's the same as its K3 in both speech and writing. So how is it formed?

Let's break this question down. We need to look at both speech and writing. We also need to look at both the stem and the ending. This is progress already: we've broken the question into four parts.

How should we continue? It seems to me that the most convenient place to start is the spelling of the ending. Let's try that.

Here are 38 examples: *abetted, added, bedded, benefited, bouqueted, boxed, bused, buzzed, capped, carried, channelled, corralled, crocheted, dashed, dimmed, exited, formatted, freed, heated, loved, mewled, milked, minded, nodded, offered, oiled, painted, passed, pinned, potted, précised, preferred, pulled, quizzed, rioted, sashayed, shied, toyed.*

As you can see, the K2 and K3 always end in *-ed.*

So the ending of the written form is straightforward. □

8.1 *Bouquet*, *crochet* and *précis* are *loanwords* from French. A *loanword* is a word that has been adopted into one language from another, with little or no alteration. Others include *ballet*, *café*, and *pizza*.

8.2 WHILE I'M HERE: looking at subject-matter from a small number of different angles, dividing it from each angle into sections, and then deciding which section seems best for us to focus our attention on first, is a superb example of a method of active study. It's also a problem-solving technique. Here we tackle verbal regularity by considering both speech and writing, we break words into stems and endings, and we decide that the written form of the ending is a good place to start. With tougher subject-matter and harder problems, each of the three stages may require a lot of thought (or a flash of intuition). And sometimes when we view the subject-matter or problem from different angles, we may find that we get sections that (unlike here) are of surprisingly different types. □

CHUNK 60

Suppletion: When Multiple Verbs Merge

FOR MOST VERBS, all the forms look fairly similar, e.g. *break* and *broke*, *drive* and *drove*, *creep* and *crept*.

But some forms of the verb *be* (N31) don't look anything like some of the others. The K2 *was*, for example, isn't at all similar to the K1 *be*. Nor is *is*. This is because the forms used in the conjugation of *be* descend from three different verbs in Proto-Indo-European.

Be, *being*, and *been* descend from a PIE verb that meant to appear, become, or grow. *Is*, *am*, and *are* descend from another verb, which meant to exist. And *was* and *were* derive from a third, which meant to reside.

So nowadays *be*, perhaps the weirdest English verb, comes with a ragbag of meanings covering appearance, existence, and residence.

The use in a single conjugation (or declension) of words that don't all descend from the same *etymon* (ancestor form) as the headword is called *suppletion*.

Another suppletive verb is *go* (N53), for which the K2 *went* derives from the verb *wend*.

Apart from *b*e and *go*, I know of two other suppletive verbs in the English language: *load* (N46) and *wreak* (H09). □

60.1 The meanings expressed by *be*'s three distinct ancestor verbs nowadays stretch all over the verb's conjugation. Consider the following sentences: "He *is* over there" (appearance), "There certainly *is*" (existence), and "She *is* in London" (residence).

60.2 Having donated its K2 to the verb *be*, the verb *wend* is now itself conjugated only regularly. Today it's almost always encountered in the phrase "*wend* one's way", but it still occasionally makes other appearances.

60.3 Suppletion doesn't only happen with verbs. *Good* and *better*, for example, descend from two different etymons, as do *bad* and *worse*. □

Tutorial 13

Near the Boundary: Some Case Studies

CHUNK 61

Disconnected Forms

SOME WORDS that originally served as K3 forms have become *disconnected*.

By this I mean that when a native speaker uses such a form adjectivally, they don't typically have in mind an action that they would describe using the K1.

One example is *sodden*, meaning "soaked". This used to be a K3 of *seethe*, when that verb conjugated *seethe* / **sod* / **sodden*. But I don't think anyone who nowadays describes a cloth or a field as *sodden* has in mind a spell of *seething* that brought it to its current state.

In today's English, *sodden* means soaking wet. To *seethe* means to be boiling, or to be in a similar condition involving bubbling or turbulence. Since *sodden* no longer denotes the result of *seething*, I don't consider *seethe* to be an irregular verb.

A second example is *kempt*, meaning tidy and looked after. This was once the K2 and K3 of **kemb*, a verb that was replaced by *comb*.

The question is whether *kempt* functions as a K3 of *comb*. When people describe a person's appearance as *kempt*, do they have in mind that the person's hair seems *combed*?

Sometimes, yes. But I'd argue that the hair state is in mind not as the embodiment of kemptness, but rather as an example of it. It's true that hair on its own can be described as *kempt*, but so can clothing. Uncombed hair can also be *kempt*. Combed hair can be *unkempt*. *Kempt* simply doesn't mean *combed*. □

61.1 My focus in this book is on contemporary language usage. Language usage includes how a language user understands their use of language. If nobody who uses *sodden*, *pent*, *bereft*, *riven* (see the next chunk) or *kempt* thinks of it as part of the conjugation of the verb it originally came from (*seethe*, *pen, bereave*, **rive*), or the verb that has now replaced that verb (*comb*), then as far as I am concerned it isn't. □

CHUNK 62

Forms that Came Closest to Inclusion

ANOTHER DISCONNECTED FORM is *pent*. This was once a K3 of both *pen* (to confine in a small space) and *pend* (an obsolete verb with the same meaning).

But today when native speakers refer for example to "*pent-up* frustration" they are unlikely to have in mind the result of a *penning up* that they themselves would describe using that verb.

This is surprising, given that neither *pen up* nor *pent-up* is an obscure phrase. But such is the strangeness of language.

Then there is *bereft*. This used to be a K3 of *bereave*, which meant to deprive someone of something.

Today *bereave* has a more specific meaning. After a person has died, close family members are said to be *bereaved*. They have been deprived of the deceased person's presence.

But *bereft* retains a wider range of meaning. It still means deprived of something, but the "something" might be hope, or sense, or humour. It's unlikely to be the presence of a person who has died.

Bereft can also mean solitary. So you might say that being *bereaved* has caused someone to feel *bereft*. But you wouldn't say that being *bereft* of the person who has died has caused them to feel alone. *Bereft* has become disconnected from *bereave*.

It's a close thing. Of all the words I decided not to include as irregular verbs, *pen* and *bereave* came nearest to inclusion. □

62.1 I don't count *beholden*, which means in a state of obligation, as a K3 of *behold* in contemporary English. *Behold* means to see or observe something impressive. When people use *beholden* as an adjective they don't have in mind an action that they would denote by *behold*.

62.2 The obsolete verb **rive*, which meant to split apart, has left us its K3 *riven* (divided), its progressive participle (a *riving knife* is a saw attachment that keeps a sawn object nicely divided), and the noun *rift* (a division). □

CHUNK 63

Obsolete Forms

A WORD CAN BE OBSOLETE even if it's widely known.

A native language user reading a novel set in the year 1800 might encounter the sentence "He **durst* not reveal the secret to his brother." She would understand the meaning. But **durst* is obsolete nonetheless.

Or take **shapen*. This still appears as a part-word, but it's no longer used as a K3 of *shape*. When native speakers use it as part of *misshapen*, say, we don't have an occurrence of (poor-quality) *shaping* high in our minds.

Other obsolete forms are less widely known but have meanings that most native language users could work out. Examples include **chid*, used as the K2 and K3 of the verb *chide*, meaning to rebuke or tell off, and **chidden* as an alternative K3.

Another example is **reft*. If asked, a native speaker might say they didn't know this word, but many could work out its meaning from a combination of context and its similarity to the cognate form *bereft*. **Reft* was used as the K2 and K3 of the obsolete verb **reave*, meaning to deprive forcibly of something.

On the other hand, a little-known verb that sounds archaic isn't necessarily obsolete. *Shrive*, for example, which conjugates *shrive* / *shrove* / *shriven* and means to take a person's confession, impose penance, and give them absolution, is still in use. □

63.1 WHILE I'M HERE: "he doesn't *dare*" and "he *dare* not" are both in common usage, both in BrEng and USEng. In the latter construction, *dare* is defective. Compare with "he *cannot*."

63.2 Words are *cognate* with each other if they share an etymon.

63.3 **Reft* appears five times in plays by William Shakespeare. Contexts include the following: "**reft* the fishers of their prey", and "**reft* me so much of friends." □

CHUNK 64

Forms that Came Closest to Exclusion

SOME FORMS are almost obsolete. They are *obsolescent*.

Consider the sentence "The bush has *thriven* in my garden." As a K3 of *thrive*, *thriven* is highly uncommon. But it hasn't quite fallen out of usage. So I have included *thrive* (N60) as an irregular verb.

The same is true of *heave* (V14), which has the irregular K2 and K3 *hove*. Although *hove* isn't used when *heave* means to lift a heavy object, it's common in nautical contexts. It also appears in metaphors of maritime origin, such as "He *hove* into view."

Two other verbs came even closer to being excluded.

One was *hoist* (X03). This descends from the obsolete nautical verb **hoise*, which conjugated both regularly and with the K2 and K3 *hoist*. Today *hoist* is always regular, except when *hoist* is used as a K3 in the single expression "*hoist* by (his) own petard." Let's apply the test: do users of this expression have in mind an action of being forced upwards that they would describe as *hoisting*? In my opinion they do, even if they may not know that a petard is a gunpowder bomb in a box.

The other was *crow* (X01). To *crow* is to make the sound characteristic of a cockerel, or, figuratively, to boast. *Crow* conjugates regularly, except in the little-known phrases "the cock *crew*" and "a cock *crew*."

Of all the words I decided to include as irregular verbs, *hoist* and *crow* came closest to being left out. □

64.1 The suffix *-escent* comes from the Latin *-escens*, the progressive participle of *-esco*, "to become." Stuck on the end of adjectives, *-escens* helps build verbs that mean *to be becoming* what the adjective denotes.

64.2 Words that exist only in single use cases are called *fossils*. Some are regular, such as the verb *bide*, which exists almost only in the expression "to *bide* one's time", *bandy* ("to *bandy* about"), *bate* ("with *bated* breath"), and *eke* ("to *eke* out"). □

N05 prove / proved / proven

USED	MEANING
Sometimes.	To show to be true using logic; of dough, to rise before baking.

EXAMPLES

K1 He wanted either to prove or disprove the allegation.

K2 Eventually he proved it to his satisfaction.

K3 But not everybody agreed it had been fully proven.

NOTES

1. *Proven* serves as the K3 in the law and in other fields that use rigorous logic, such as mathematics and philosophy.
2. Outside these fields the regular K3 *proved* is common in BrEng, but less common in USEng.
3. The verbal adjective *proven* is used before a word such as *fact*.
4. Where *prove* denotes the rising of dough during breadmaking, the K3 is always *proved*.
5. Regular compounds include *approve*, *disapprove*, *improve*, and *reprove*.

SIMILARLY CONJUGATING COMPOUNDS INCLUDE *disprove* (sometimes). □

N16 break / broke / broken

USED
Commonly.

MEANING
To make something unable to function; to divide something into pieces.

EXAMPLES
K1 She will be careful not to break it.
K2 She broke the previous one.
K3 Oh dear! She's broken this one now too!

NOTES
1. *Broke* is used as the K3 verbal adjective when the meaning is penniless.
2. Don't confuse with the regular *brake* (to apply a brake to a wheel, e.g. in a car). □

N17 choose / chose / chosen

USED
Always.

MEANING
To select from a larger number of items or possibilities.

EXAMPLES
K1 What shall I choose?
K2 I chose the lasagne last time.
K3 My guests have already chosen.

NOTE
1. Don't misspell *choose*. "To **chose*" is incorrect. *Choose* rhymes with *lose* but this does not indicate its spelling. □

V44 ring / rang / rung

USED — MEANING

Commonly. — To cause a bell to sound; to call a person on the phone.

EXAMPLES

K1 Let's not ring the bell.

K2 He rang the doorbell and waited.

K3 We have rung him several times.

NOTES

1. The K2 *rung* is rare.
2. There is also the nominal use of *ring* to mean to surround or to put a ring on, when the conjugation is regular: *ring* / *ringed* / *ringed*.
3. Don't confuse with *wring* / *wrung* / *wrung* (V38), which means to squeeze and twist something to remove liquid from it. □

V45 shrink / shrank / shrunk

USED — MEANING

Commonly. — To become smaller.

EXAMPLES

K1 Clothes may shrink if washed in too hot water.

K2 One of the balloons shrank.

K3 The puddle hadn't yet shrunk.

NOTE

1. There is also the K3 verbal adjective *shrunken*.

SIMILARLY CONJUGATING COMPOUNDS INCLUDE *overshrink* (always, without a K3 corresponding to *shrunken*). □

T28 sleep / slept / slept

USED	MEANING
Always.	To be in a state of physical relaxation such as is commonly experienced during the night.

EXAMPLES

K1 That is where they sleep.

K2 I slept soundly last night.

K3 She hasn't slept so long before.

SIMILARLY CONJUGATING COMPOUNDS INCLUDE *oversleep*. □

T29 sweep / swept / swept

USED	MEANING
Always	To clear, for example with a broom; to move freely and grandly along.

EXAMPLES

K1 Every day I sweep the kitchen floor.

K2 He swept dramatically out of the room.

K3 They have swept up all the leaves in their garden. □

CHUNK 94

Definitions

DEFINITIONS OF THE FOLLOWING TERMS can be found in the chunks indicated: