Weak Verbs Overview

Weak verbs are the largest category of Old English verbs. They are considered grammatically weak as they form their preterite by adding a dental suffix (**-d** or **-t**) to the stem of the word. Weak verbs are subdivided into three subclasses.

Class I Weak Verbs

Class I weak verbs have an infinitive ending in **-an** or **-rian**, for example *sendan* and *nerian*. When conjugated, the third-person present singular ends in **-eþ**, and present plural ends in **-aþ**, while the past is formed by adding **-d**, or **-t** to the stem.

While the endings of Class I verbs are the same, there are slight modifications to the end of the stem which occur depending on if the stem has a double consonant, a long vowel, or a short vowel. These conjugation patterns are exemplified by *fremman - to do, nerian - to save* and *hieran - to hear.*

Fremman - to do	Nerian - to save	Hieran - to hear
Ic fremme/fremede	Ic nerie/nerede	Ic hiere/hierde
Þu fremest/fremede	Þu nerest/neredest	Þu hierst/hierdest
He/Hit/Heo fremeþ/fremede	He/Hit/heo nereþ/nerede	He/Hit/heo hierþ/hierdon
We/Ge/Hie fremmaþ/fremedon	We/Ge/Hie neriaþ/neredon	We/Ge/Hie hierþ/hierdon

The reasons for the changes in the stem can be explained as follows:
- Verbs with a short vowel and a double consonant, like *cnyssan* or *trymman*, conjugate like *fremman.*
- Verbs which end in an -**rian**, like *derian* or *werian*, conjugate like *nerian*.
- Verbs with a long vowel and a single consonant, like *deman* or *feran,* conjugate like *hieran*.

It should be noted that verbs with a short vowel and two consonants (which are not the same), such as *sendan* conjugate like *hieran,* though the '**dd**' which would appear in the preterite is simplified to '**d**'. See **A note on double d's** below for more information.

Weak Verbs I Glossary

Cnyssan - to knock	Lettan - to hinder/obstruct
Deman - to judge	Læran - to teach
Derian - to injure	Metan - to meet
Feran - to go	Nerian - to save
Fremman - to do	Sendan - to send
Gretan - to greet	Spendan - to spend
Hatian - to hate	Todælan - to divide
Hieran - to hear	Tæcan - to show/guide
Lædan - to lead/bring	Werian - to wear/clothe

A note on double consonants

Sometimes conjugation produces consonant groups that are hard to pronounce. Obviously, if a word is difficult to pronounce, simplifications occur to make it easier to say. For example, if a **d** comes after **f**, **h**, **p**, **s**, or **t**, it becomes a **t**. You see this in the present and past 1st person singular of *lettan - to hinder* and *metan - to meet*. If the unvoiced consonant is a **c**, it will become an h. For example, in t*æce - to instruct* or *feccan - to fetch.*

	Metan - to meet		Lettan - to hinder		Tæce - to instruct	
1st	Mete	Mette	Lette	Lette	Tæce	Tæhte
2nd	Metest	Mettest	Letest	Lettest	Tæcst	Tæhtest
3rd	Meteþ	Mette	Leteþ	Lette	Tæcþ	Tæhte
plural	Metaþ	Metton	Lettaþ	Letton	Tæcaþ	Tæcahton

A note on double d's

While double consonants are fairly common, for example *lædde (the past tense of lædan)*, if another consonant would precede the double, the double consonant is reduced to a single. For example, the past tense of *sendan* is not *sendde* but *sende*. These simplifications can obscure the consonant difference between the present and past singular, so tense sometimes needs to be inferred by context.

	Sendan - to send		Scieldan - to shield		Wendan - to turn/go	
1st	Sende	Sende	Scielde	Scielde	Wende	Wende
2nd	Sendest	Sendest	Scieldst	Scieldest	Wendest	Wendest
3rd	Sendeþ	Sende	Scieldþ	Scielde	Wendeþ	Wende
plural	Sendaþ	Sendon	Scieldaþ	Scieldon	Wendaþ	Wendon

Class II Weak Verbs

Class II weak verbs have an infinitive ending in **-ian** (except when preceded by 'r' as **-rian** verbs are generally Class I, like *nerian*). There are three **-rian** verbs which conjugate like *lufian* instead of *nerian*. These are *andswarian - to answer, gadrian - to gather,* and *timbrian - to build.*

The main difference between class I and class II verbs are the present plurals end in **-iaþ** and the preterite suffix is preceded by an **-o**.

Lufian - To Love				
	Present Tense	**Past Tense**	**Present**	**Past**
1st Person Singular	Ic lufie	Ic lufode	-ie	-ode
2nd Person Singular	Þu lufast	Þu lufodest	-ast	-odest
3rd Person Singular	He/Hit/Heo lufaþ	He/Hit/Heo lufode	-aþ	-ode
1st Person Plural	We lufiaþ	We lufodon	-iaþ	-odon
2nd Person Plural	Ge lufiaþ	Ge lufodon	-iaþ	-odon
3rd Person Plural	Hie lufiaþ	Hie lufodon	-iaþ	-odon

Comparing Class II verbs to Class I verbs, you'll notice the **i** disappears in the 2nd and 3rd singular present. This is the same place where *fremman* drops its second **m**, *nerian* its **i**, and hieran its **e**.

Weak Verbs II Glossary

Andswarian - to answer	Huntian - to hunt
Bodian - to announce/preach	Lufian - to love
Feccan - to fetch/seek	Locian - to look
Fultumian - to help	Mearcian - to mark
Gadrian - to gather	Ricsian - to reign
Grapian - to grope/feel	Timbrian - to build

Class III Weak Verbs

Class III weak verbs have an infinitive ending in **-an** and no vowel before the dental suffix. They are more unpredictable in their conjugation and often combine features of the first two weak classes. There are only four Class III verbs: *habban - to have, libban - to live, secgan - to say* and *hycgan - to think/intend*. How they conjugate is irregular so they just have to be learned individually.

Habban - To have	Libban - To live	Secgan - To say	Hycgan - To think
Ic hæbbe / hæfde	Ic libbe / lifde	Ic secge / secgde	Ic hycge / hogde
Þu hæfst / hæfdest	Þu leofast / lifdest	Þu sægst / sægdest	Þu hygst / hogdest
He/Hit/Heo hæfþ / hæfde	He/Hit/Heo leofaþ / hifde	He/Hit/Heo sægþ / sægde	He/Hit/Heo hygþ / hogde
We/Ge/Hie habbaþ / hæfdon	We/Ge/Hie libbaþ / lifdon	We/Ge/Hie secgaþ / sægdon	We/Ge/Hie hycgaþ / hogdon

Understanding which suffix goes with which person, number or tense is vital for understanding which subject a verb is connected to in a sentence. Old English does not rely on word order as strictly as modern English, so the subject can come after the verb, or sometimes even be dropped from a long sentence. Always remember that in Old English, verbs agree with their subject, so even if a word comes slightly earlier or later in a sentence than you might expect, it can generally be paired to the correct noun by comparing the endings.