



Noun classes

If you have taken any Old English, you may have learned a little about the various Germanic noun classes. This page explains the Germanic and Old Norse noun classes with the help of copious charts and paradigms.

Germanic nouns are divided into classes on the basis of their inflectional behaviour. It has long been standard practice to subdivide the classes into weak (whose members historically ended in *-n* in several singular and plural forms) and strong (all the rest, which did not). In Modern English, occasional traces of the weak declension survive in the form of *en*-plurals (*oxen*). The *-n* of this class did not survive into Old Norse. However, a critical characteristic of weak nouns is still present in Old Norse forms: their paradigms are comparatively homogeneous, with the consequence that weak nouns are easier to memorize, but convey less grammatical information than strong nouns. For instance, since the Old Norse masculine noun *pái* “peacock” has the form *pá* in all the oblique cases (i.e. in accusative, genitive, and dative) of the singular, it is easily learned but one has to rely on context to find out what syntactic function the word plays in any given clause. Strong nouns are more informative when encountered in the wild, but they take a little extra explanation.

The specific behaviour grammarians look for in a noun is the way it latches onto an inflectional suffix. In most Germanic strong nouns, this is done using a thematic vowel—a sound that separates the word's root (essentially the part that carries semantic information) from its inflectional suffix (the bit that tells you what case and number a noun is). Thus the Proto-Germanic (PG) form **stainaz* “stone” (the asterisk means the word is unattested but has been reconstructed) may be divided into a root (*stain*), a nominative singular suffix (*z*), and a thematic vowel that divides the two (*a*). Root and thematic vowel together form the stem of a word, and it is the stem by which a noun is identified with a certain class. The noun class of **stainaz* is named after its thematic vowel: **stainaz* is described as an *a*-stem noun. So far, things make sense.

Unfortunately, it gets more muddled from there. Noun classes describe stems as they can be reconstructed for Proto-Indo-European (PIE) and Proto-Germanic nouns, but these had changed almost beyond recognition by the time the bulk of early Germanic texts were written down. Thus one would be hard pressed to find the thematic vowel in the singular declensions of that same word in its Old English and Old Norse reflexes *stān* and *steinn*: here, the *a* only appears in some of the plural forms (e.g. nominative plural *stānas*, *steinar*; the nominative plural is usually a good place to look for the thematic vowel in masculine and feminine nouns). What is worse, the *ō* of class 2 nouns appears as *a* as well, so that you could not tell from the nominative plural form *laugar* alone that you are dealing with an *ō*-stem, and therefore with a feminine noun. Indeed, some words can be seen to cross from one class into another as they are assimilated into more common declension-patterns. It may thus seem that learning the noun classes is an impossible and pointless undertaking. However, being able to tell them apart is a great help when reading any Old Germanic (or conservative Modern Germanic) language, because this gives the reader some degree of predictive ability over nominal inflection. The following table lists most of the noun classes found in the Germanic languages. Apart from the weak classes given at the end, the first five of the strong declensions are the most important. In order to give students of Old English a leg up, I have selected examples found in both it and Old Norse where possible. The oblique cases are listed in the order accusative, genitive, dative, because that is the one used in most relevant grammars written in English. Note that *ja*-, *wa*-, *jō*-, and *wō*-stems are really just variants of the *a*- and *ō*-classes rather than noun classes of their own, while all three of the weak types are generally identified with a single declension

called the *n*-stems. The numbering of strong nouns in the first column below follows that of the *Dictionary of Old English*, which is really just the order in which they are treated in all the classical grammars.

class	stem	gender	PG	OE	oblique cases	ON	oblique cases	MnE (trans.)
1	a	m	*stainaz	stān	stān, stānes, stāne	steinn	stein, steins, steini	stone
1	a	m	*dagaz	dæg	dæg, dægēs, dæge	dagr	dag, dags, degi	day
1	a	n	*skipa ⁿ	scip	scip, scipes, scipe	skip	skip, skips, skipi	ship
1	ja	m	*andijaz	ende	ende, endes, ende	endir	endi, endis, endi	end
1	ja	n	*kunja ⁿ	cynn	cynn, cynnes, cynne	kyn	kyn, kyns, kyni	kin
1	wa	m	*saiwiz	sæ	sæ, sæs, sæ(we)	sær	sæ, sævar, sæ(vi)	sea
1	wa	n	*melwā	melu	melu, melwes, melwe	mjöl	mjöl, mjöls, mjölvi	meal (flour)
2	ō	f	*giftiz	giefu	giefe, giefe, giefe	gjǫf	gjǫf, gjafar, gjǫf	gift
2	jō	f	*agjō	ecg	ecge, ecge, ecge	egg	egg, eggjar, eggju	edge
2	wō	f	*badwō	beadu	beadwe, beadwe, beadwe	bǫð	bǫð, bǫðvar, bǫð(u)	(battle)
3	i	m	*winiz	wine	wine, wines, wine	vinr	vin, vinar, vin	(friend)
3	i	f	*naudiz	nīed	nīed, nīede, nīede	nauðr	nauð, nauðar, nauð	need
3	i	n	*speru	spere	spere, speres, spere	--	--	spear
4	u	m	*felþuz	feld	feld, felda, felda	vǫllr	vǫll, vallar, velli	field
4	u	f	*handuz	hand	hand, handa, handa	--	--	hand
5	cons.	m	*fōts	fōt	fōt, fōtes, fēt	fótr	fót, fótar, foeti	foot
5	cons.	f	*bōks	bōc	bōc, bēc, bēc	bók	bók, bækr/bókar, bók	book
6	r	m	*fadēr	fæder	fæder, fæder/ fæderes, fæder/ fædere	faðir	fǫður/feðr, fǫður/ feðr, fǫður/feðr	father
6	r	f	*mōdēr	mōdor	mōdor, mōdor/ mēder, mēder	móðir	móður/mœðr, móður/mœðr, móður/mœðr	mother
7	nd	m	*frijōndz	frēond	frēond, frēondes, frīend/ frēonde	frændi	frænda, frænda, frænda	friend

8	es	n	*kalbiz	cealf	cealf, cealfes, cealfe	--	--	calf
9	dental	m	*halip	hæle	hæle, *hælep, *hælep	--	--	(warrior)
wk	an	m	*gumō	guma	guman, guman, guman	gumi	guma, guma, guma	(man)
wk	an	n	*augan	ēage	ēagan, ēagan, ēagan	auga	auga, auga, auga	eye
wk	ōn	f	*tungō	tunge	tungan, tungan, tunga	tunga	tungu, tungu, tungu	tongue
wk	īn	f	*hauhi	hēahþu	hēahþu, hēahþu, hēahþu	[frœði]	[frœði, frœði, frœði]	height [learning]

For more on the history of Germanic morphology, see Ringe (PIE to PG), Bammesberger (cross-Germanic nominal inflection), Prokosch (a comparative grammar of the Old Germanic languages), and Lass (an Old English perspective).

Now that you have an insight into the origins of the Old Norse noun classes and their Old English counterparts, it is time to look at some full paradigms. Since the remainder of this page will discuss a great many classes in considerable detail, this is probably a good place to point out that you don't want to stare yourself blind on the seemingly endless mutations and variations on the basic patterns. If you know the declensions for weak nouns and the *a*-, *ō*-, and *i*-stems, you can deal with most of the nouns that will come your way. Accordingly, one recent grammar forgoes mention of the stems altogether and speaks instead of “basic patterns” for each gender. Alaric Hall's *Magic Sheet* takes a middle route, distinguishing between stems only where the difference is still visible in the Norse and using modified class names such as “*ar*-plural” and “*ir*-plural”. Either of these methods will help you learn the patterns to expect, and indeed what follows may seem overkill if you're coming at this with no prior knowledge. If you are keen to get to the bottom of things, however, read on; when you're ready to test your knowledge, make your way to the flashcards.

Strong nouns

1a. Pure *a*-stems

<i>hestr</i> m. “horse”		
	<i>sg.</i>	<i>pl.</i>
<i>nom.</i>	hestr	hestar
<i>acc.</i>	hest	hesta
<i>gen.</i>	hests	hesta
<i>dat.</i>	hesti	hestum

a-stems divide into masculines and neuters. You may think of *hestr* “horse” as the standard paradigm for strong masculine nouns. Characteristic of the *a*-stems (including its subvarieties the *ja*- and *wa*-stems) is that masculines have nominative plurals in *-ar*, while both masculines and neuters generally have a genitive singular in *-s*. Remember, the *-a* in the nominative plural of masculines of this class is in fact the thematic vowel.

The *-r* at the end of the word's lexical form is the nominative singular suffix, corresponding to *-us* in Latin *dominus*. It disappears in the accusative, so if we were to construct the shocking headline “horse eats horse” it would read “hestr etr hest”. The genitive ending is *-s*, just as it is in Modern English, though there

we spell it with a preceding apostrophe: *horse's*. The dative singular for this class of noun ends in *-i*. It may be noted that these singular forms are like the Old English forms of the same class except for the

nominative singular suffix *-r*, the loss of the *e* in the genitive (compare *stānes*) and a very slight difference in the dative form, which in Old English is *-e*.

In the plural, the nominative and accusative endings differ from the Old English, though not terribly much. The *-ar* of the nominative is actually just the North Germanic reflex of the Proto-Germanic *az*-ending that turned into *-as* in West Germanic. If you think about it, /z/ and /r/ are very similar sounds (both are alveolar consonants, but /z/ is a fricative and /r/ a trill). The *-r* has gone missing from the accusative plural, however, making it identical to the genitive plural. In Old Norse as in Old English, there are two certainties in nominal life: genitive plural ends in *-a*, dative plural in *-(u)m*. Old Norse knows exceptions to this rule (cf. *kné* below), but it still pays off to pretend.

<i>hǫfundr</i> m. “chieftain”		
	<i>sg.</i>	<i>pl.</i>
<i>nom.</i>	<i>hǫfundr</i>	<i>hǫfundar</i>
<i>acc.</i>	<i>hǫfund</i>	<i>hǫfunda</i>
<i>gen.</i>	<i>hǫfundar</i>	<i>hǫfunda</i>
<i>dat.</i>	<i>hǫfundi</i>	<i>hǫfundum</i>

The paradigm for *hǫfundr* “chieftain” is identical to that of *hestr* except in one particular: it substitutes *-ar* for the genitive singular ending *-s*. A range of common and proper nouns will do this, and many can take either form.

<i>harmr</i> m. “sorrow”		
	<i>sg.</i>	<i>pl.</i>
<i>nom.</i>	<i>harmr</i>	<i>harmar</i>
<i>acc.</i>	<i>harm</i>	<i>harma</i>
<i>gen.</i>	<i>harms</i>	<i>harma</i>
<i>dat.</i>	<i>harmi</i>	<i>hǫrmum</i>

Harmr “sorrow” does exactly the same thing as *hestr* as far as stems are concerned, but it illustrates one additional sound law known as labial mutation. This law operates in all parts of speech and states that an *a* preceding a syllable that has a *u* or *w* in it is rounded to *ǫ*. This is because both /u/ and /w/ are pronounced with liprounding. (They are, in fact, bilabial sounds, produced with both lips; hence the term “labial mutation”.) The letter *w*, however, is not normally used in the Old Norse or any other Scandinavian alphabet; it was replaced by the not-quite-so-round *v*, but by the time the sound became unrounded the mutation had already taken place. Thus in the dative plural, the *um*-ending triggers anticipatory liprounding, turning *a* into *ǫ*, **harmum* into *hǫrmum*. The rule also applies to a few other sounds, such as *á*

and *e*, but *a > ǫ* is the one you will actually encounter. Unfortunately, labial mutation also takes place in words in which the *u* or *w* that caused it has since been lost, so that students may want to memorize where in the paradigms the phenomenon is to be expected. In any case, its workings are perfectly transparent in *harmr*.

<i>himinn</i> m. “heaven”		
	<i>sg.</i>	<i>pl.</i>
<i>nom.</i>	himinn	himnar
<i>acc.</i>	himin	himna
<i>gen.</i>	himins	himna
<i>dat.</i>	himni	himnum

Himinn “heaven” displays two further variations on the same declension pattern. The first is in the nominative singular ending. Originally, this would have been *-r* as in the other masculine paradigms of this class: **himinr*. However, as is elsewhere demonstrated by the development from **mannr* to *maðr*, early speakers of North Germanic found the *nr*-cluster difficult to pronounce, and so the *-r* of **himinr* was assimilated to the preceding *n*, yielding *himinn*. In the same way, the cluster *-lr* became *-ll* (*ketill*) and *-sr* became *-ss* (*íss*).

The other variation is a process called syncope, or loss of a medial vowel. Dissyllables (two-syllable words, alternatively described as disyllables or bisyllables) resist adding a third syllable when possible, so the second vowel will typically drop out if an inflectional ending containing a third vowel is added. This was possible because stress was primary, so the second syllable was already pronounced weak; adding a further syllable was just the excuse needed to ignore the vowel—and therefore the syllable—altogether: **himini* > *himni*. With the exception of these mutations, however, *himinn* still inflects in exactly the same way as *hest*. No vowel is lost if the word's first syllable is long or if the vowel in question is followed by two consonants (e.g. in the adjectival dative singular feminine form *gamalli*).

<i>barn</i> n. “child”		
	<i>sg.</i>	<i>pl.</i>
<i>nom.</i>	barn	børn
<i>acc.</i>	barn	børn
<i>gen.</i>	barns	barna
<i>dat.</i>	barni	børnum

Barn “child” is our first neuter, and it introduces three further complications compared to the base-pattern. The first is an Indo-European given, namely that neuter nominative and accusative forms are always identical within the same number: thus for both cases we have *barn* in the singular, *børn* in the plural.

But those nominative and accusative plural forms strike the eye for two additional reasons. Firstly, neither has an ending. This should come as no surprise to students of Old English, who will remember that some *a*-stem neuters in that language have no plural endings for these cases either (namely long stems like *word* and some dissyllables), while others (like *scip*) end in *-u*. In Old Norse, all neuter *a*-stems, which is to say all strong neuters, have

endingless nominative and accusative plural forms.

As in Old English, however, *-u* is the historically antecedent nominative and accusative plural ending for neuter *a*-stems. (We will see below that this ending still occurs in weak neuters.) Accordingly, in *barn* we have our first example of labial mutation (specifically u-mutation) occurring where the sound that gave rise to it no longer survives.

1b. *ja*-stems

<i>niðr</i> m. “kinsman”			<i>hirðir</i> m. “shepherd”			<i>kyn</i> n. “kin”			<i>ríki</i> n. “power”			If you
	sg.	pl.		sg.	pl.		sg.	pl.		sg.	pl.	
nom.	niðr	niðjar	nom.	hirðir	hirðar	nom.	kyn	kyn	nom.	ríki	ríki	
acc.	nið	niðja	acc.	hirði	hirða	acc.	kyn	kyn	acc.	ríki	ríki	
gen.	niðs	niðja	gen.	hirðis	hirða	gen.	kyns	kynja	gen.	ríkis	ríkja	
dat.	nið	niðjum	dat.	hirði	hirðum	dat.	kyni	kynjum	dat.	ríki	ríkjum	

have taken Old English, you will vaguely recall a great deal of fuss over the concept of stem length. It is time now to revisit it ever so briefly. The four paradigms in this section demonstrate two variants of the same *ja*-declension for each of two genders (remember, there are no feminines among the *a*-stems). While all four follow their gender-respective version of the basic *a*-stem pattern, the short stems (those whose root syllables have a short monophthong vowel followed by no more than one consonant, *or* a long vowel or diphthong followed by no consonants at all, i.e. *niðr* and *kyn* among the paradigms here provided) have a *-j-* intervening between the root and ending wherever a back vowel (*a* or *u*) follows, i.e. in all plural forms for masculine nouns, and just the genitive and dative for neuters. Long stems of both genders (i.e. stems with a short vowel plus two or more consonants *or* a long vowel or diphthong followed by a consonant) have an *-j-* across the cases of the singular (including the genitive). Some grammars here speak of a separate subclass: the *īa*-stems; we will refer to them as long *ja*-stems. The disappearance of *-j-* from the genitive and dative plural of long-stemmed *hirðir* “shepherd” but not *ríki* “power” is due to the fact that squeezed in between a long syllable and a back vowel or *ę* (representing short /æ/, a phoneme that merged with *e* in the early literary period), medial *-j-* disappeared (as in *hirða*, *hirðum*) unless immediately preceded by *g* or *k* (as in *ríkja*, *ríkjum*).

Almost no other word declines like *niðr* “son, kinsman”, as most masculines of this sort had assimilated to the *i*-declension by the time they were written down. Like *ríki* are a fair number of neuter nouns in *-i*. Because *-i* is also the dative singular ending, this paradigm comes closest of any strong group of nouns to being indeclinable altogether. Cf. weak type (c) below, whose members also end in *-i* but have fully indeclinable singular forms and are exclusively feminine.

1c. *wa*-stems

<i>sær</i> m. “sea”			<i>høgg</i> n. “blow”		
	sg.	pl.		sg.	pl.
nom.	sær	sævar	nom.	høgg	høgg
acc.	sæ	sæva	acc.	høgg	høgg
gen.	sævar	sæva	gen.	høggs	høggva
dat.	sæ(vi)	sæ(v)um	dat.	høggvi	høggum

wa-stems are simply *a*-stems that originally ended in *-w*. In Old Norse, the *-w* turned into a *-v-*, but it disappeared except where **both** followed by *a* or *i* **and** preceded by a short stem (*sær*) or *g* (*sǫngr*, *høgg*) or *k*. In some places, the *-v-* was reintroduced by analogy; hence dative plural *sævum*. Where the original *-w* immediately followed a vowel (and hence where the surviving *v* follows a vowel), the

genitive singular ending of the word is usually -ar rather than -s; however, there is some contamination between the forms, so that *sæs* is also attested.

<i>kné</i> n. "knee"		
	<i>sg.</i>	<i>pl.</i>
<i>nom.</i>	kné	kné
<i>acc.</i>	kné	kné
<i>gen.</i>	knés	knjá
<i>dat.</i>	knjé	knjám/knjóm

Kné "knee" is really an intruder among the *wa*-stems, as it derives from an Indo-European *u*-stem (cf. the Latin cognate *genu*). It was made to conform to the pattern of inflection of the *wa*-stems in the Germanic languages, but by the time it was written down in Old Norse only the genitive singular ending suggests a connection with the *a*-stems at all, let alone the *wa*-variant (but cf. Old English *cnēow*). The word for tree, whose Norse reflex is *tré* (Old English *trēow*), underwent the same process, and there are one or two words that behave in the same way, but really the pattern is very rare. The student had best shrug and move on.

2a. *ō*-stems

<i>þǫrf</i> f. "need"		
	<i>sg.</i>	<i>pl.</i>
<i>nom.</i>	þǫrf	þarfar
<i>acc.</i>	þǫrf	þarfar
<i>gen.</i>	þarfar	þarfa
<i>dat.</i>	þǫrf	þǫrfum

<i>dróttning</i> f. "queen"		
	<i>sg.</i>	<i>pl.</i>
<i>nom.</i>	dróttning	dróttningar
<i>acc.</i>	dróttning	dróttningar
<i>gen.</i>	dróttningar	dróttninga
<i>dat.</i>	dróttningu	dróttningum

The *ō*-stems correspond to the PIE *ā*-stems seen in the Latin class one nouns (*vita*), and they are all feminines. In this they contrast with the corresponding class in PIE, which had some masculines (cf. *agricola*), and they form a perfect complement to the Germanic *a*-class, which has no feminines. This class is characterized by a zero (i.e. endless) nominative singular; a genitive singular as well as a nominative and accusative plural

in -ar; and *u*-mutation in the nominative singular in stems whose vowel is eligible for labial mutation.

That instance of *u*-mutation occurs because in an earlier stage of the language these nouns had a nominative singular in *-u* (like Old English *giefu*): **þarfu* > **þǫrfu* > *þǫrf*. The accusative singular vowel was rounded by analogy with the nominative, and the rounded vowel of the dative derives from a one-time *u*-ending there as well. Only in the dative plural is the cause of the mutation still visible. The phenomenon never spread to the other forms, where an *a* always follows the root, discouraging liprounding in adjacent vowels if no *v* (from /w/) intervenes (cf. genitive singular *ðoggvar*). The paradigm thus contains an equal number of mutated and nonmutated forms, in which the genitive singular and the dative plural stand out in their respective number. It is also worth observing that the genitive singular, nominative plural, and accusative plural forms of this class are identical in form. The difference between the two paradigms is the dative singular in *-u*, which occurs in many dissyllables in *-ing* or *-ung* as well as a variety of other nouns of this class, including *hlíð* "slope", *laug* "bath", and *mjöll* "freshly-fallen snow". Of these, all except the words in *-ing* or *-ung* could also be conjugated like *þǫrf*.

á f. “river”		
	sg.	pl.
nom.	á	ár
acc.	á	ár
gen.	ár	á
dat.	á	ám

Á “river” shows no evidence of *u*-mutation. Although the sound represented by *á* was subject to labial mutation into *ǫ*, the two sounds merged in the early literary period, after which they both surfaced with the spelling *á*.

2b. *jō*-stems

ben f. “wound”		
	sg.	pl.
nom.	ben	benjar
acc.	ben	benjar
gen.	benjar	benja
dat.	ben	benjum

ey f. “island”		
	sg.	pl.
nom.	ey	eyjar
acc.	ey	eyjar
gen.	eyjar	eyja
dat.	eyju	eyjum

heiðr f. “heath”		
	sg.	pl.
nom.	heiðr	heiðar
acc.	heiði	heiðar
gen.	heiðar	heiða
dat.	heiði	heiðum

As with the *ja*-stems, so also in the *jō*-stems *-j-* remains in full only following short stems, while in long stems it survives as *-i-* wherever the expected *ō*-behaviour is to have no ending, i.e. in the accusative and dative singular. Take note of the variation in the

dative singular of short stems (*-ju* versus no ending). Most short stems decline like *ben*, but some, including *egg* “edge” and *hel* “hell” decline like *ey*, as do many personal names (indeed, *hel* itself started out as a personal name).

2c. *wō*-stems

dǫgg f. “dew”		
	sg.	pl.
nom.	dǫgg	dǫggvar
acc.	dǫgg	dǫggvar
gen.	dǫggvar	dǫggva
dat.	dǫgg(u)	dǫggum

Other than the paradigm *dǫgg* “dew”, the only common words of the *wō*-stems are *þrǫng* “pressure” and *ǫr* “arrow”; the poetic term *brǫð* “battle” also belongs here. The optional *-u* of the dative singular is comparatively rare.

3. *i*-stems

<i>gestr</i> m. “guest”		
	sg.	pl.
nom.	gestr	gestir
acc.	gest	gesti
gen.	gests	gesta
dat.	gest	gestum

<i>staðr</i> m. “place”		
	sg.	pl.
nom.	staðr	staðir
acc.	stað	staði
gen.	staðar	staða
dat.	stað	staðum

<i>bekkr</i> m. “bench”		
	sg.	pl.
nom.	bekkr	bekkir
acc.	bekk	bekki
gen.	bekks/bekkjjar	bekka
dat.	bekk	bekkjum

i-stems divide into masculines and feminines, which largely share the same endings except in the accusative plural, which for masculines

<i>ǫxl</i> f. “shoulder”		
	sg.	pl.
nom.	ǫxl	axlir
acc.	ǫxl	axlir
gen.	axlar	axla
dat.	ǫxl	ǫxlum

<i>rǫst</i> f. “sea-current”		
	sg.	pl.
nom.	rǫst	rastir
acc.	rǫst	rastir
gen.	rastar	rasta
dat.	rǫstu	rǫstum

ends in *-i*, while feminines end in *-ir*. In effect, verbs of this class behave like *a*- and *ō*-stems but show a different thematic vowel in the nominative and accusative plural, and normally with a zero dative singular ending even in masculines. However, note the following:

- There is variation in the genitive singular ending of masculine nouns between *-s* (*gests*) and *-ar* (*staðar*);

- there is some contamination from the *a*-stem ending *-i* in the dative singular of masculines, yielding forms like *gesti*, while feminines occasionally take a *-u* in the dative singular (*rǫstu*).

Other than that, patterns are largely as we have by now come to expect, including *u*-umlaut where applicable, namely always in the dative plural where the stem vowel is *a*, and with feminines also in the nominative, accusative, and dative singular.

4. *u*-stems

<i>skjǫldr</i> m. “shield”		
	sg.	pl.
nom.	skjǫldr	skildir
acc.	skjǫld	skjǫldu
gen.	skjaldar	skjalda
dat.	skildi	skjǫldum

<i>vǫllr</i> m. “field”		
	sg.	pl.
nom.	vǫllr	vellir
acc.	vǫll	vǫllu
gen.	vallar	valla
dat.	velli	vǫllum

Unlike in Old English, the *u*-stems in Old Norse are all masculine. They exhibit three notable sound changes:

- Breaking, triggered when a Proto-Norse (PN) stem with *e* as its vowel is followed by a syllable with either *a* (*a*-breaking) or *u* (*u*-breaking). Before *a*, *e* broke into *ea* by anticipation, which in turn became *ja*, as in the genitive forms *skjaldar* and *skjalda*. Where the combination was *e+u* in an earlier

stage of the language, the *e* appears as *jǫ* in literary times: **skeldur* > **skjǫldur* > *skjǫldr*. Neither type of breaking occurs if the stem vowel is preceded by *l*, *r*, or *v*.

- *u*-mutation, also seen in other classes and described for the *a*-stems above, compounds breaking in the *u*-stems. In fact, breaking before *u* seems initially to have resulted in *ja* just as it did before *a*,

but later, when *u*-mutation occurred, that *ja* turned into *jǫ*. Since both phenomena are triggered by a following *u*, the resulting *jǫ* incorporates both the breaking and the liprounding. Where breaking did not occur (namely because the original root vowel was *a* not *e*, as in *vǫllr* “field” or *fǫgnuðr* “joy”), the vowel would still be *ǫ* courtesy of *u*-mutation.

- A third sound change here visible is *i*-mutation. This is the same phenomenon that causes the vowel variation between the Modern English forms *goose* and *geese*, *foot* and *feet*. It specifies that a back vowel followed by an *i* or *j* in the next syllable will be fronted, i.e. turn into a vowel with the same qualities as before except pronounced with the front of the tongue raised where the original vowel was pronounced with an elevated back of the tongue. For more about this, see my write-up on weak verbs. Important to remember here is that it turns the one-time *a* of the dative singular and nominative plural of many *u*-nouns into *e*.

<i>fǫgnuðr</i> m. “joy”		
	<i>sg.</i>	<i>pl.</i>
<i>nom.</i>	<i>fǫgnuðr</i>	<i>fagnaðir</i>
<i>acc.</i>	<i>fǫgnuð</i>	<i>fǫgnuðu</i>
<i>gen.</i>	<i>fagnaðar</i>	<i>fagnaða</i>
<i>dat.</i>	<i>fagnaði</i>	<i>fǫgnuðum</i>

Fǫgnuðr represents common and proper nouns in *-uðr* (*-aðr*): these are not subject to *i*-mutation, so the dative singular and nominative plural retain their back vowels despite the following *-i*.

5. Consonant stems

<i>fótr</i> m. “foot”		
	<i>sg.</i>	<i>pl.</i>
<i>nom.</i>	<i>fótr</i>	<i>fœtr</i>
<i>acc.</i>	<i>fót</i>	<i>fœtr</i>
<i>gen.</i>	<i>fótar</i>	<i>fóta</i>
<i>dat.</i>	<i>fœti</i>	<i>fótum</i>

<i>bókr</i> f. “book”		
	<i>sg.</i>	<i>pl.</i>
<i>nom.</i>	<i>bók</i>	<i>bœkr</i>
<i>acc.</i>	<i>bók</i>	<i>bœkr</i>
<i>gen.</i>	<i>bœkr/bókar</i>	<i>bóka</i>
<i>dat.</i>	<i>bók</i>	<i>bókum</i>

<i>maðr</i> m. “person”		
	<i>sg.</i>	<i>pl.</i>
<i>nom.</i>	<i>maðr</i>	<i>menn</i>
<i>acc.</i>	<i>mann</i>	<i>menn</i>
<i>gen.</i>	<i>manns</i>	<i>manna</i>
<i>dat.</i>	<i>manni</i>	<i>mönnum</i>

Also known as athematic stems (or root-stems), these masculine and feminine nouns have no thematic vowel. Endings are largely as in the *a*, *ō*, or *u*-stems, but the nominative and accusative plural

ending is *-r*. Where stems end in *-l* or *-n*, however, this *-r* has disappeared by assimilation. *i*-mutation occurs in the nominative plural (from PG **-iz*) and the accusative plural (by analogy with the nominative plural). Originally, it also occurred in the dative singular of masculines (as a consequence of the *-i* ending) and the genitive singular of feminines, but these forms had largely given way to nonmutated forms by the literary period, with the dative form *fœti* a rare example of surviving *i*-mutation while the genitive *bœkr* is most commonly found as *bókar* instead. This class is the origin of present-day English gradation-plurals (*foot* : *feet*; *man* : *men*). It is not particularly large, but its members occur very frequently.

6. *r*-stems

bróðir m. “brother”		
	sg.	pl.
nom.	bróðir	bræðr
acc.	bróður	bræðr
gen.	bróður	bræðra
dat.	bræðr	bræðrum

systir f. “sister”		
	sg.	pl.
nom.	systir	systr
acc.	systur	systr
gen.	systur	systra
dat.	systur	systrum

Relational nouns like *father* and *mother* are of course commonly used, which means that their origins can be traced quite closely, but also that they tend towards irregularity. The oblique cases of the singular are particularly variable: *faður*, *fǫður*, and *fǫðr* are all common spellings of the accusative, genitive, and dative forms of *faðir* “father”, especially later in the period of written Old Norse; in the same way, each of the oblique cases of *bróðir* can be either *bræðr* or *bróður*, despite the historically justified simplification in

the paradigm here presented. Although this Indo-European class ultimately derives from agent nouns, only family nouns are found in the Old Norse class. This class comprises *faðir*, *móðir*, *bróðir*, *systir*, and *dóttir*, but not *sonr*, which is a *u*-stem.

7. *nd*-stems

gefandi m. “donor”		
	sg.	pl.
nom.	gefandi	gefendr
acc.	gefanda	gefendr
gen.	gefanda	gefanda
dat.	gefanda	gefǫndum

bóndi m. “farmer”		
	sg.	pl.
nom.	bóndi	bœndr
acc.	bónða	bœndr
gen.	bónða	bónða
dat.	bónða	bóndum

This class is populated by masculine present-participle stems: *-nd-* is the marker of the present participle in the older or more conservative Germanic languages (even Modern English *friend* ultimately derives from the present participle of Old English *frēogan* “to love”: a friend is one who loves, a *frēond*). Accordingly, you may want to think of *gefandi* as “giving person, giver” and of *bóndi* (or *búandi*) as “farming person” or “dwelling one”.

Weak nouns

Now that you've got the strong nouns under your belt, you will find that there is not much to the weak nouns. There is only one top-level weak noun declension, known as the *n*-stems, even if it does subdivide into three subclasses. You will find that a great number of masculine and feminine nouns follow the basic *an-* and *ōn-*declensions, and none of the various mutations should present any real difficulty.

a) *an*-stems

<i>bogi</i> m. “bow”		
	<i>sg.</i>	<i>pl.</i>
<i>nom.</i>	bogi	bogar
<i>acc.</i>	boga	boga
<i>gen.</i>	boga	boga
<i>dat.</i>	boga	bogum

<i>hjarta</i> n. “heart”		
	<i>sg.</i>	<i>pl.</i>
<i>nom.</i>	hjarta	hjórtu
<i>acc.</i>	hjarta	hjórtu
<i>gen.</i>	hjarta	hjärtna
<i>dat.</i>	hjarta	hjórtum

an-stems are mostly masculines and some neuters. *Bogi* “bow” demonstrates the default weak masculine declension. Since its plurals are like those of masculine *a*-stems, it is the singular oblique cases that set this type apart from other declensions.

<i>gumi</i> m. “man”		
	<i>sg.</i>	<i>pl.</i>
<i>nom.</i>	gumi	gum(n)ar
<i>acc.</i>	guma	gum(n)a
<i>gen.</i>	guma	gumna
<i>dat.</i>	guma	gum(n)um

<i>bryti</i> m. “steward”		
	<i>sg.</i>	<i>pl.</i>
<i>nom.</i>	bryti	brytjar
<i>acc.</i>	brytja	brytja
<i>gen.</i>	brytja	brytja
<i>dat.</i>	brytja	brytjum

Gumi and *bryti* demonstrate two minor variations. Some plurals show an *-n-* in their ending, which represents an older form of the genitive plural which has been lost in most words (like *bogi*). Where it survived, however, it could spread to other cases (as in *gumi*). The second variation (known also as the *jan*-stems) has a *-j-* in all forms except the nominative singular. The latter phenomenon is limited to stems ending in certain morphemes, of which *-ingi*, *-viri*, and *-virki* are the most common.

b) *ōn*-stems

<i>saga</i> f. “story”		
	<i>sg.</i>	<i>pl.</i>
<i>nom.</i>	saga	sögur
<i>acc.</i>	sögu	sögur
<i>gen.</i>	sögu	sagna
<i>dat.</i>	sögu	sögum

<i>smiðja</i> f. “smithy”		
	<i>sg.</i>	<i>pl.</i>
<i>nom.</i>	smiðja	smiðjur
<i>acc.</i>	smiðju	smiðjur
<i>gen.</i>	smiðju	smiðja
<i>dat.</i>	smiðju	smiðjum

The *ōn*-stems are mostly feminines, with a few masculines. Here, *saga* “story, history” displays the default pattern, with *u*-mutation wherever a *-u* follows. *Smiðja* “smithy” is of the *jōn*-subvariety corresponding to the *jan*-declension found in *bryti* above. It represents nouns in *-ja* in which a non-velar consonant (i.e. anything but *g* or *k*) immediately precedes the *-j-*, as well as words in *-sjá*.

c) *īn*-stems

<i>lygi</i> f. “lie”		
	<i>sg.</i>	<i>pl.</i>
<i>nom.</i>	<i>lygi</i>	<i>lygar</i>
<i>acc.</i>	<i>lygi</i>	<i>lygar</i>
<i>gen.</i>	<i>lygi</i>	<i>lyga</i>
<i>dat.</i>	<i>lygi</i>	<i>lygum</i>

This small class consists of feminines in *-i* only (compare the strong neuter long *ja*-stems as represented by the *ríki* paradigm above). Since most of its members lack a plural and are indeclinable in the singular, you will simply want to know not to be surprised to encounter the occasional feminine noun without the typical feminine bits. Where a plural does exist it follows *ō*-stem declension.