The rules for long s
Andrew West

Abstract
This article describes the rules for the long s (ſ) in English, French, Italian, and Spanish. It appeared first online in the BabelStone blog in 2006, with subsequent updates.

The online PDF contains links to facsimile scans of many of the cited books, many of which are accessible via Google Book.

1 Introduction
In a post in my blog about the grand old trade of basket-making I included several extracts from some 18th century books, in which I preserved the long s (ſ) as used in the original printed texts. This got me thinking about when to use long s and when not. Like most readers of this blog I realized that long s was used initially and medially, whereas short s was used finally (mirroring Greek practice with regards to final lowercase sigma ς and non-final lowercase sigma σ), although there were, I thought, some exceptions. But what exactly were the rules?

Turning first to my 1785 copy of Thomas Dyche’s bestselling A Guide to the English Tongue (first published in 1709, or 1707 according to some, and reprinted innumerable times over the century) for some help from a contemporary grammarian, I was confounded by his advice that:

The long ſ must never be used at the End of a Word, nor immediately after the short s.

Well, I already knew that long s was never used at the end of a word, but why warn against using long s after short s when short s should only occur at the end of a word?

The 1756 edition of Nathan Bailey’s An Universal Etymological English Dictionary also gives some advice on the use of long s (although this advice does not seem to appear in the 1737 or 1753 editions):

A long f must never be placed at the end of a word, as maintainď, nor a short s in the middle of a word, as conspires.

Similarly vague advice is given in James Barclay’s A Complete and Universal English Dictionary (London, 1792):

All the small Consonants retain their form, the long f and the short s only excepted. The former is for the most part made use of at the beginning, and in the middle of words; and the last only at their terminations.

Editor’s note: Werner Lemberg transformed the original blog post (with minor modifications) into this paper.

124: THE BLIND BEGGAR

BESSY.
Think on the situation I am in; think on my father. Can I leave him, blind and helpless, to struggle with infirmity and want, when it is in my power to make his old age comfortable and happy?

SONG.
The faithful friar beheld,
A dutous wing prepare,
It’s fire, grown weak and old,
To feed with constant care.
Should I my father leave,
Grown old, and weak, and blind,
To think on friars, would grieve
And blame my wocker mind.

Figure 1: The Blind Beggar of Bethnal Green in Robert Dodoley’s Trifles (London, 1745). In roman typefaces f and Ɦ are very similar but are easily distinguished by the horizontal bar, which goes all the way through the vertical stem of the letter ‘f’ but only extends to the left of the vertical stem of the long s, and in italic typefaces long s is even more clearly distinguished from the letter ‘f’ as it usually has no horizontal bar at all.

I felt sure that John Smith’s compendious Printer’s Grammar (London, 1787) would enumerate the rules for the letter ‘s’, but I was disappointed to find that although it gives the rules for R Rotunda, the rules for long s are not given, save for one obscure rule (see ‘Short st ligature after g’ below) which does not seem to be much used in practice.

So, all in all, none of these contemporary sources are much help with the finer details of how to use long s. The Internet turns up a couple of useful documents: Instructions for the proper setting of Blackletter Typefaces discusses the rules for German Fraktur typesetting; whilst 18th Century Ligatures and Fonts by David Manthey specifically discusses 18th century English typographic practice. According to Manthey long s is not used at the end of the word or before an apostrophe, before or after the letter ‘f’, or before the letters ‘b’ and ‘k’, although he notes that some books do use a long s before the letter ‘k’. This is clearly not the entire story, because long s does commonly occur before both ‘b’ and ‘k’ in 18th century books on my bookshelves, including, for example, Thomas Dyche’s Guide to the English Tongue.

To get the bottom of this I have enlisted the help of Google Book Search (see ‘Note on methodology’ at the end of this article) to empirically check what the usage rules for long s and short s were in printed books from the 16th through 18th centuries. It transpires that the
rules are quite complicated, with various exceptions, and vary subtly from country to country as well as over time. I have summarised below my current understanding of the rules as used in roman and italic typography in various different countries, and as I do more research I will expand the rules to cover other countries. At present I do not cover the rules for the use of long s in blackletter or fraktur typography, but plan to do so in the future.

2 Rules for long s in English

The following rules for the use of long s and short s are applicable to books in English, Welsh and other languages published in England, Wales, Scotland, Ireland and other English-speaking countries during the 17th and 18th centuries.

- short s is used at the end of a word (e.g. his, complains, successes)
- short s is used before an apostrophe (e.g. clos’d, us’d)
- short s is used before the letter ‘f’ (e.g. satisfaction, misfortune, transfuse, transfix, transfer, successful)
- short s is used after the letter ‘f’ (e.g. offset), although not if the word is hyphenated (e.g. off-fet)
- short s is used before the letter ‘b’ in books published during the 17th century and the first half of the 18th century (e.g. husband, Shaftsbury), but long s is used in books published during the second half of the 18th century (e.g. hufband, Shaftbury)
- short s is used before the letter ‘k’ in books published during the 17th century and the first half of the 18th century (e.g. skin, ask, risk, masked), but long s is used in books published during the second half of the 18th century (e.g. fkin, afk, rifik, maskfked)
- Compound words with the first element ending in double s and the second element beginning with s are normally and correctly written with a dividing hyphen (e.g. Crofs-fitch, Crofs-ftaff), but very occasionally may be written as a single word, in which case the middle letter ‘s’ is written short (e.g. Crofsftitch, crofsstaff).
- long s is used initially and medially except for the exceptions noted above (e.g. long, ufe, prefs, fubfitu-
tute)
- long s is used before a hyphen at a line break (e.g. neceʃ-fary, pleaf-ed), even when it would normally be a short s (e.g. Shaft-furry and huf-band in a book where Shaftsbury and husband are normal), although exceptions do occur (e.g. Mans-field)
- short s is used before a hyphen in compound words with the first element ending in the letter ‘s’ (e.g. crofs-piece, crofs-examination, Prefs-work, bird’s-neʃ)
- long s is maintained in abbreviations such as f. for substantiative, and Genef. for Genefis (this rule means that it is practically impossible to implement fully correct automatic contextual substitution of long s at the font level)

Usage in 16th and early 17th century books may be somewhat different — see ‘Rules for long s in early printed books’ below for details.

3 Rules for long s in French

The rules for the use of long s in books published in France and other French-speaking countries during the 17th and 18th centuries are much the same as those used in English typography, but with some significant differences, notably that short s was used before the letter ‘h’.

- short s is used at the end of a word (e.g. ils, homemes)
- short s is used before an apostrophe (e.g. s’il and s’eʃt)
- short s is used before the letter ‘f’ (e.g. satisfaction, toutesfois)
- short s is used before the letter ‘b’ (e.g. presbyter)
- short s is used before the letter ‘h’ (e.g. déshabiller, déshonnète)
- long s is used initially and medially except for the exceptions noted above (e.g. fans, eʃt, subʃtiter)
- long s is normally used before a hyphen at a line break (e.g. lef-quals, paf-fer, déf-honneur), although I have seen some books where short s is used (e.g. les-quals, pas-fer, dés-honneur)
- short s is normally used before a hyphen in compound words (e.g. tres-bien), although I have seen long s used in 16th century French books (e.g. tref-
bien)
- long s is maintained in abbreviations such as Genef. for Genefis

4 Rules for long s in Italian

The rules for the use of long s in books published in Italy seem to be basically the same as those used in French typography:

- short s is used at the end of a word
- short s is used before an apostrophe (e.g. s’infor-
maffer, fuʃfelʃ)
- short s is used before an accented vowel (e.g. paʃʃo, ricusò, su, si, cosi), but not an unaccented letter (e.g. paʃʃo, fi)

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2 Epitome of the Art of Navigation (1770), p. 262.
3 The Spectator, No. 377 (13th May 1712), in Harrison’s British Classicks (1786), p. 760.
4 The new and complete dictionary of the English language (1795), entry for Jacobstaff.
• short s is used before the letter ‘i’ (e.g. foddisfare, foddisfazione, trasfigurazione, sfogo, sfarzo)
• short s is used before the letter ‘b’ (e.g. sbaglio, sbagliato)
• long s is used initially and medially except for the exceptions noted above
• long s is used before a hyphen in both hyphenated words and at a line break (e.g. reflaf-fero)

The most interesting peculiarity of Italian practice is the use of short s before an accented vowel, which is a typographic feature that I have not noticed in French books.

In some Italian books I have occasionally seen double s before the letter ‘i’ written as long s followed by short s (e.g. utilisfisma, but on the same page as compreffioni, profisma, etc.). And in some 16th century Italian books double s before the letter ‘i’ may be written as a short s followed by a long s. See ‘Rules for long s in early printed books’ below for details.

5 Rules for long s in Spanish

It has been a little more difficult to ascertain the rules for long s in books published in Spain as Google Book Search does not return many 18th century Spanish books (and even fewer Portuguese books), but I have tried to determine the basic rules from the following three books:

• Estragos de la Luxuria (Barcelona, 1736), see figure 2
• Autos sacramentales alegoricos, y historiales del Phenix de los Poetas el Espanol (Madrid, 1760)
• Memorias de las reynas catholicas (Madrid, 1770)

From these three books it appears that the rules for Spanish books are similar to those for French books, but with the important difference that (in both roman and italic type) the sequence fs (not a ligature) is used before the letter ‘i’, whereas the sequence ff is used before all other letters (e.g. illusfrisimos but confesfiores):

In summary, the rules for Spanish books are:

• short s may be used before an accented vowel (e.g. sí, sí, sé, sè, Apoftasia, Apoftasia, abrasó, pasó), but not an unaccented letter (e.g. fi, fe, pasó)
• short s is used before the letter ‘i’ (e.g. transformando, transfigura, fatisfaccion)
• short s is used before the letter ‘b’ (e.g. presbytero)
• short s is used before the letter ‘h’ (e.g. deshoneftos, dishoneftidad)
• short s is used after a long s and before the letter ‘i’ (e.g. illusfrisimo, pasfiion, confesfion, possible)

• long s is used initially and medially except for the exceptions noted above
• long s is used before a hyphen in both hyphenated words and at a line break, even when it would normally be a short s (e.g. transf-formados, copiofif-fimo)

As with Italian books, Spanish books usually use a short s before an accented vowel, although from the three books that I have examined closely it is not quite clear what the exact rule is. For example, Memorias de las reynas catholicas consistently uses short s before an accented letter ‘i’ (e.g. sí), but consistently uses a long s before an accented letter ‘o’ (e.g. pasó, café, pre-cisó, Cafóle); whereas Estragos de la Luxuria uses short s before both an accented letter ‘i’ (e.g. si) and an accented letter ‘o’ (e.g. abrasó, paso).

6 Rules for long s in other languages

Other languages may use rules different from those used in English and French typography. For example, my only early Dutch book, Simon Stevin’s Het Burgerlyk Leven [Vita Politica] (Amsterdam, 1684) follows the German practice of using short s medially at the end of the elements of a compound word (e.g. misverftants, Rechtsgeleerden, wisconfige, Straatsburg, Godsdienflen, misgaan, boosheyt, dusdonig and misbruyk).

7 Rules for long s in early printed books

In 16th century and early 17th century books printed in roman or italic typefaces (as opposed to blackletter) the rules for the use of long s may be slightly different to those enumerated above. For example, in italic text it was common to use a ligature of long s and short s ( envision) for double-s, whereas a double long s ligature was normally used in roman text. This can be seen in figure 3 which shows an extract from an English pamphlet published in 1586, which has the words witnefle, afturung, thankfulnefle, goodnefle and blefings. But in that part of the same pamphlet that is set in roman typeface
the words 'bleffings' and 'goodneffe' are written with a double long s ligature, as shown in figure 4.

Figure 5 shows a French book published in 1615 which has Confeßions in italic type, but 'confeßion' in roman type.

This ligature is still occasionally met with in a word-final position in italic text late into the 17th century, for example in this page from Hooke’s Micrographia (figure 6), which has this example of the word Addreß, although unligatured long s and short s are used elsewhere at the end of a word (e.g.ſmalneſs) as well as occasionally in the middle of a word (e.g. aſſiſted, alongside aſſiſtances) in italic text.

Another peculiarity that is seen in some 16th century Italian books is the use of short s before long s medially before the letter ‘i’, but double long s before any other letter; see figure 7.

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This typographic feature can also be seen in some later books (as shown in figure 8), though I am not yet sure how widespread it was.

8 Short s before and after f

In 17th and 18th century English and French typography the main exceptions to the rule that short s is not used at the start of a word or in the middle of a word is that short s is used next to a letter 'f' instead of the expected long s (so misfortune and offset, but never miffortune or offset). The reason for this must be related to the fact that the two letters f and f are extremely similar, although the combination of the two letters does not cause any more confusion to the reader than any other combination of long s and another letter (the combinations fl and fl are far more confusable) it does not really explain why long s should be avoided before or after a letter 'f', other than perhaps for aesthetic reasons. In all probability the rule is inherited from blackletter usage, as is evidenced by the 1604 pamphlet shown in figure 9 about a mermaid that was sighted in Wales, which has fatisfaction.

Whatever the reasons, this is an absolute rule, and Google Book Search only finds a handful of exceptions from the 17th and 18th century, most probably typographical errors (or in the case of the Swedish-English dictionary due to unfamiliarity with English rules):

- misfortune in Anglorum Speculum (London, 1684) [but misfortune elsewhere]
- fatisifie and fatisified in The Decisions of the Lords of Council and Session (Edinburgh, 1698)
- misfortune in The annals of the Church (London, 1712) [but misfortune elsewhere]
- misfortune in An Historical Essay Upon the Loyalty of Presbyterians (1713) [but misfortune elsewhere]
- fatisfaction in An Enquiry Into the Time of the Coming of the Messiah (London, 1751) [but on the same page as fatisfied]
- misfortune in Svenskt och engelskt lexicon (1788)

Similarly, Google Book Search finds 628 French books published between 1700 and 1799 with fatisfaction but only two books with fatisfaction.

9 Short s before b and k

As a general rule English books published in the 17th century and the first half of the 18th century have a short s before the letters 'b' and 'k' (so husband and ask), whereas books published during the second half of the 18th century have a long s (so hufband and aſk). This is not a hard and fast rule, as it is possible to find examples of books from the 17th and early 18th century that show hufband and aſk, but they are few and far between. For example, whereas Google Book Search finds 138 books published between 1600 and 1720 with husband, Google Book Search only finds nine genuine books from this period that have hufband (excluding false positives and hyphenated huf-band), and in almost all cases hufband is not used exclusively:

- The Dutch Courtezan (London, 1605) [mostly hufband but a couple of instances of hufband]
- The breast-plate of faith and love (London, 1651) [mostly hufband but one instance of hufband]
- Tryon's Letters, Domestick and Foreign, to Several Persons of Quality (London, 1700)
- The Present State of Trinity College in Cambridge (London, 1710) [mostly husband but one instance of hufband]
- Dialogue between Timothy and Philatheus (London, 1711) [one instance each of husband and hufband]
- The Universal Library; Or, Compleat Summary of Science (1712) [two instances of hufband]
- The Works of Petronius Arbiter (London, 1714) [mixture of both husband and hufband]
- Letters Writ by a Turkish Spy (London, 1718) [mostly husband but a couple of instances of hufband]
- An Historical Essay Concerning Witchcraft (London, 1718) [mostly husband but one instance of hufband]

Likewise, it is possible to find books from the late 18th century that use long s but show husband and ask.
but these are relatively few in number. For example, whereas Google Book Search finds 444 books published between 1760 and 1780 that have *husband*, it only finds 60 that have *husband* (excluding false positives on *HUSBAND*).

The results of Google Book Search searches on the two spellings of *husband* and *ask* (as well as *presbyter(e)* in French books) from 1640 to 1799 are shown in table 1 in ten-year segments (matches for *HUSBAND* and *ASK* have been discounted, but otherwise figures have not been adjusted for false positives such as *huf-band*).

The change in the usage of *short s* to *long s* before ‘b’ and ‘k’ appears even more dramatic if these figures are plotted on a graph, as displayed in figures 10 and 11.

But for French books, no change in rule occurred in the middle of the century, and *short s* continued to be used in front of the letter ‘b’ throughout the 18th century, as can be seen from the distribution of the words *presbyter(e)* and * prefbyter(e)* in figure 12.

So why then did the change in rule for ‘s’ before ‘b’ and ‘k’ happen in England during the 1740s and 1750s? According to John Smith’s *Printer’s Grammar*, p. 45, the Dutch type that was most commonly used in England before the advent of the home-grown typefaces of William Caslon did not have ‘fb’ or ‘fk’ ligatures, and that it was Caslon who first cast ‘fb’ and ‘fk’ ligatures. So with the growth in popularity of Caslon’s typefaces ligatured ‘fb’ and ‘fk’ took the place of ‘sb’ and ‘sk’ — but further research is required to confirm to this hypothesis.

As to why this rule (as well as the French rule of *short s* before ‘h’) developed in the first place, I suspect that it goes back to *blackletter* usage, but that is something for future investigation (all I can say at present is that *Caxton’s Chaucer* (1476, 1483) seems to use *long s* before the letters ‘f’, ‘b’ and ‘k’). It is perhaps significant that the letters ‘b’, ‘k’ and ‘h’ all have the same initial vertical stroke, but quite what the significance of this is I am not sure.

### 10 Short s before h

French and English typographic practice differs in one important respect: French (and also Spanish) typography uses a *short s* before the letter ‘h’, whereas English typography uses a *long s*.

For example, Google Book Search finds 86 books with *déshabiller* or its various grammatical forms (*dés- habilé, déshabillé, désabelle, désabelles, désableille*)
or déshabillent) during the period 1700–1799, but only a single book that uses long s: défahabilé occurs three times in Appel a l’impartiale postérité, par la citoyenne Roland (Paris, 1795).

On the other hand, for the period 1640–1799 Google Books finds 54 books with dishonour and 196 books with dishonour, but closer inspection shows that almost every single example of dishonour in pre-1790 books is in fact dishonour or DISHONOUR in the actual text. Similar results were obtained when comparing the occurrences of worship and worship. Thus it seems that short s was not used before the letter ‘h’ in English typography.

11 Short st ligature after g

According to John Smith’s The Printer’s Grammar, first published in 1755, there is a particular rule for italic text only: that a short st-ligature is used after the letter ‘g’ in place of a long st-ligature (p. 23–24):

In the mean time, and as I have before declared; Italic discovers a particular delicacy, and flew a mathematical judgement in the Letter-cutter, to keep the Slopings of that tender-faced Letter within such degrees as are required for each Body, and as do not detriment its individuals. But this precaution is not always used: for we may observe that in some Italics the lower-case g will not admit another g to stand after it, without putting a Hair-space between them, to prevent their prefling against each other: neither will it give way to f and the ligature β; and therefore a round st is call to some Italic Founts, to be used after the letter g; but where the round st is wanting an st in two pieces might be used without difcredit to the work, rather than to suffer the long ft to cause a gap between the g and the said ligature.

However, I have thus far been unable to find any examples of this rule in practice. For example, Google Book Search finds several examples of Kingston in italic type, but no examples of Kingston in books that use a long s:

• An Universal, Historical, Geographical, Chronological and Poetical Dictionary (London, 1703)
• Athenæ Britannicæ, or, A Critical History of the Oxford and Cambrige Writers and Writings (London, 1716), p. 322
• The History of England (London, 1722), p. 78
• Scanderbeg: Or, Love and Liberty (London, 1747), p. 92
• An Introduction to the Italian Language (London, 1778), p. 109
• A Collection of Treaties (London, 1790), p. 288

12 The demise of the long s

Long s was used in the vast majority of books published in English during the 17th and 18th centuries, but suddenly and dramatically falls out of fashion at the end of the 18th century, reflecting the widespread adoption of new, modern typefaces based on those developed by Bodoni and Didot during the 1790s. In England this movement was spearheaded by the printer William Bulmer, who set the benchmark for the new typographical style with his 1791 edition of The Dramatic Works of Shakspeare, printed using a typeface cut by William Martin. The f-free typeface used by Bulmer can be seen in the Advertisement to his 1795 edition of Poems by Goldsmith and Parnell (figure 13).

Although throughout most of the 1790s the vast majority of English books continued to use long s, during the last two or three years of the century books printed using modern typefaces started to become widespread, and in 1801 short s books overtook long s books. The rise of short s and decline of long s, as measured by the occurrences of the word those compared with thofe in Google Book Search, is charted in table 2 and figure 14.

The death knell for long s was finally sounded on September 10th 1803 when, with no announcement or any of the fuss that accompanied the typographic reform of October 3rd 1932 (see the articles in the issues of Sept. 26th and 27th 1932, The Times newspaper quietly switched to a modern typeface with no long s or old-fashioned ligatures, as shown in figure 16 (this was one of several reforms instituted by John Walter the Second, who became joint proprietor and exclusive manager of The Times at the beginning of 1803).
By the second half of the 19th century long s had entirely died out, except for the occasional deliberate antiquarian usage (for example, my 1894 edition of Coridon's Song and Other Verses uses long s exclusively in a medial position, with short s in both initial and final positions).

As might be expected, the demise of long s in France seems to have occurred a little earlier than in England. Based on the following Google Book Search data for il est and il eft, it seems that short s started to gain popularity from the mid 1780s, and long s had been almost completely displaced by 1793, as shown in table 2 and figure 15 (many of the post-1792 examples of long s are from books published outside France).

### 13 Note on methodology

The statistics given here are based on the results returned from searches of Google Book Search (filtering on the appropriate language and 'Full view only'), which allows me to distinguish between words with long s and words with short s only because the OCR software used by Google Book Search normally recognises long s as the letter 'T', and so, for example, I can find instances of hubband by searching for 'husband'. However, for a number of reasons the results obtained are not 100% accurate.

Firstly, the search engine does not allow case-sensitive searches, so whereas searching for 'hus-band' only matches instances of hubband, searching for 'hus-band' matches instances of both husband and HUSBAND, which skews the results in favour of short s.

Secondly, hyphenated words at a line break may match with the corresponding unhyphenated word, so searching for 'hus-band' may match instances of hub-band, which is not relevant as long s is expected before a hyphen (Google Book Search shows 583 matches for hub-band, but only 3 for hus-band for the period 1700–1799).

Thirdly, long s is sometimes recognised by the OCR software as a short s, especially when typeset in italics.

Fourthly, the publication date given by Google Book Search for some books is wrong (for various reasons which I need not go into here), which I often found was the explanation for an isolated unexpected result.

Fifthly, when Google Book Search returns more than a page’s worth of results, the number of results may go down significantly by the time you get to the last page.

Finally, and to me this is most perplexing, Google Book Search searches in March 2008 gave me over twice as many matches than in May 2008 using the same search criteria, so, for example, I got 438 matches for ‘husband’ and 956 matches for ‘hubband’ for the period 1790–1799 in March, but only 187 and 441 matches re-

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Table 2: those vs. theofe and il est vs. il eft.

Figure 14: those vs. theofe 1780–1810.

Figure 15: il est vs. il eft 1780–1810.
spectively for the same search when redone in May (nevertheless, the figures for March and May showed exactly the same trends for *husband* versus *huﬁband*).

For consistency, the ﬁgures shown for ‘husband/huﬁband’ and ‘ask/aʃk’ are those that I obtained in May 2008. (I may try redoing this experiment in a year’s time — providing Google Book Search does not improve its OCR software to recognise long s in pre-19th century books — and see if the trends for *husband* versus *huﬁband* and *ask* versus *aʃk* are roughly the same or not.)

14 And ﬁnally ...

If you have managed to get this far, you may well be interested in my brief, illustrated history of the long s (*The Long and the Short of the Letter S*), which to most people’s surprise starts in Roman times.

And if the rules of long s are not enough for you, try out my Rules for R Rotunda (a post that I think needs some revision when I have the time).

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