The handy OE grammar

Based on Alaric Hall's ON grammar (www.**alarichall**.org.uk/teaching/**Alaric's**%20**magic**%20**sheet**.pdf)

Nouns

	Basic paradigms						Useful strong. masc.
	Strong			Weak			
	Masc.	Neuter	Femin.	Masc.	Neuter	Femin.	
N sg.	stān	scip	giefu	nama	ēage	tunge	mann
A	stān	scip	giefe	naman	ēage	tungan	mann
G	stānes	scipes	giefe	naman	ēagan	tungan	mannes
D	stāne	scipe	giefe	naman	ēagan	tungan	menn
N pl.	stānas	scipu	giefa, -e	naman	ēagan	tungan	menn
A	stānas	scipu	giefa, -e	naman	ēagan	tungan	menn
G	stāna	scipa	giefa, -ena	namena	ēagena	tungena	manna
D	stānum	scipum	giefum	namum	ēagum	tungum	mannum

Glossary: *stān* 'stone'; *scip* 'ship'; *giefu* 'gift'; *nama* 'name'; *ēage* 'eye'; *tunge* 'tongue'; *mann* 'human being, person'

Adjectives

	Strong			Weak		
	Masc.	Neuter	Femin.	Masc.	Neuter	Femin.
N sg.	dol	dol	dolu	dola	dole	dole
A	dolne	dol	dole	dolan	dole	dolan
G	doles	doles	dolre	dolan	dolan	dolan
D	dolum	dole	dolre	dolan	dolan	dolan
N pl.	dole	dolu	dola, -e	dolan	dolan	dolan
A	dole	dolu	dola, -e	dolan	dolan	dolan
G	dolra	dolra	dolra	dolena	dolena	dolena
D	dolum	dolum	dolum	dolum	dolum	dolum

Glossary: *dol* 'foolish'

Personal pronouns

	1st Person			2nd Person			3rd Person			
							Singular			Pl.
	Sing.	Pl.	Dual	Sing.	Pl.	Dual	Masc.	Neut.	Femin.	
N	ic	wē	wit	ðū	gē	git	hē	hit	hēo	hīe, hī
A	mē	ūs	unc	ðē	ēow	inc	hine	hit	hīe, hī	hīe, hī
G	mīn	ūre	uncer	ðīn	ēower	incer	his	his	hire	hira
D	mē	ūs	unc	ðē	ēow	inc	him	him	hire	him

Demonstrative pronouns

	'That, those; the'				'This, these'			
	Singular			Plural	Singular			Plural
	Masc.	Neuter	Femin.		Masc.	Neuter	Femin.	
N	se	ðæt	sēo	ðā	ðes	ðis	ðēos	ðās
A	ðone	ðæt	ðā	ðā	ðisne	ðis	ðās	ðās
G	ðæs	ðæs	ðære	ðæra	ðis(s)es	ðis(s)es	ðisse	ði(s)sa
D	ðǣm	ðǣm	ðǣre	ðǣm	ðis(s)um	ðis(s)um	ðisse	ði(s)um

Verbs

	Weak verb			Strong verb			Irregular verb						Preterite-present verbs				
	Dēman 'to judge'			*Singan* 'to sing'			*Bēon–wesan* 'to be'						*Sculan* 'must'		*Witan* 'to know'		
							Wesan			Bēon							
	Indicat.	Subj.	Imperat.	Indicat.	Subj.	Imperat.	Indicat.	Subj.	Imperat.	Indicat.	Subj.	Imperat.	Indicat.	Subj.	Indic.	Subj.	Imperat.
	Present			Present			Present			Present			Present			Present	
1st sg.	dēme	dēme		singe	singe		eom	sīe		bēo	bēo		sceal	scyle	wāt	wite	
2nd sg.	dēmest	dēme	dēm	sing(e)st	singe	sing	eart	sīe	wes	bist	bēo	bēo	scealt	scyle	wāst	wite	wite
3rd sg.	dēmeð	dēme		sing(e)ð	singe		is	sīe		bið	bēo		sceal	scyle	wāt	wite	
Pl.	dēmað	dēmen	dēmað	singað	singen	singað	sindon	sīen	wesað	bēoð	bēon	bēoð	sculon	scylen	witon	witen	witað
	Past			Past			Past			Past			Past			Past	
1st sg.	dēmde	dēmde		sang	sunge		wæs	wǣre	In the past this verb only has one set of forms: those presented under *wesan*				sc(e)olde	sc(e)olde	wiste	wiste	
2nd sg.	dēmdest	dēmde		sunge	sunge		wǣre	wǣre					sc(e)oldest	sc(e)olde	wistest	wiste	
3rd sg.	dēmde	dēmde		sang	sunge		wæs	wǣre					sc(e)olde	sc(e)olde	wiste	wiste	
Pl.	dēmdon	dēmden		sungon	sungen		wǣron	wǣren					sc(e)oldom	sc(e)olden	wiston	wisten	
Ps ppl	dēmend			singend			wesende								witende		
Pt ppl	(ge)dēmed			(ge)sungen			(ge)bēon								(ge)witen		

Extra help with OE grammar

What is case? Cases are the different forms that nouns, pronouns and adjectives take in some languages when their grammatical function changes. In English, nouns don't really have cases (except for 's or just ', which represent possession; < OE -es), but pronouns do. Take an English sentence, substitute the third person masculine pronoun for a noun phrase, and you'll find yourself automatically changing the case of the pronoun, depending on whether it's a subject, object or possessive!

Case	function	modern English examples	Old English examples
nominative	the subject (the thing that does the verb)	**I** ate a fish, **Wulfstān** ate a fish. **Wulfstān** and **a dog** ate a fish.	**Ic** ǣt fisc. **Wulfstān** ǣt fisc. **Wulfstān** and **hund** ǣton fisc.
accusative	the object (the thing affected by the action of the verb)	The fish ate **him.** Wulfstān ate a **fish.** Wulfstān ate **a fish** and **a dog.**	Se fisc ǣt **hine.** Wulfstān ǣt **fisc.** Wulfstān ǣt **fisc** and **hund.**
genitive	indicates possession	**His** sword was big. He ate **the dog's** fish.	Sweord **his** wæs micel. Hē ǣt fisc **hundes.**
dative	various things, principally: indirect objects, words after a preposition, words taking the role of a preposition.	**I** gave **him** a name. He came to **the country**	Ic geaf naman **him.** Hē com tō **lande.**

Other useful grammatical terms

Strong / weak nouns: a noun can only be weak or strong, depending on its declensional pattern. While strong nouns have different endings for the different cases, numbers and genders, weak nouns are characterised by the presence of –an throughout most of the paradigm.

Strong / weak adjectives: adjectives can be declined with weak or strong forms. The choice of form depends on the context: where the noun phrase has a demonstrative pronoun (e.g. this big man), the adjective has a weak form; when the noun phrase does not have a demonstrative pronoun (e.g. small children) or the adjective has a predicative function (i.e. refers to the noun through a verb: e.g. he is tall), the adjective has a strong form.

Strong / weak verbs: verbs, like nouns, can only be weak or strong, not both. Strong verbs form the past and past participle (pt ppl) by changing the root vowel (think of *drink, drank, drunk* in MnE), while weak verbs form the past and past participle by adding a dental suffix (*t* or *d*; think of *play, played, played* in MnE).

Infinitive, past / present participle: these are the so-called impersonal forms of the verb, because they do not agree with the subject in person and number. In MnE the infinitive is preceded by *to* (e.g. *to sing*). In MnE the past participle is the form which appears after a form of *to have* to form the present perfect or pluperfect (e.g. I *have gone*), while the present participle ends in –*ing* and it is used to form the continuous verbal tenses (e.g. *I was singing*). The participles can act as adjectives (e.g. *the broken chair; the annoying woman*).

How should I put sentences together? There are basically two strategies for translating Old English into English:

1. Translate each word as it comes without worrying about its grammatical function, and, if necessary, shuffle them about afterwards until they seem to make sense. Sometimes this will produce a correct translation, because word order is somewhat similar in Old and Modern English.

2. Work out the grammatical function of each word and build the translation up from there.

Both methods have their place, but the second is much more reliable:

* *Fiscas ǣt Wulfstān* looks at first sight like it should mean '(Some) fishes ate Wulfstan'. But *fiscas* is a plural form and cannot agree with a singular verb, so it must mean 'Wulfstan ate fishes'.

* *Hine slōh dēor* looks like it should mean 'he killed a wild beast/ wild beasts'; however, *hine* is an accusative form and,

therefore, it cannot be the subject of the sentence. Given that the verb has a 3rd pers. sing. form, we need a singular subject. OE *dēor* could be singular or plural (strong neuter nouns with a long root vowel do not have an ending in the nom. / acc. pl.), so the sentence probably means 'a wild animal killed him'

* *Langne hundas ǣton fisc* looks like it should mean 'a long dog ate a fish'. But *langne* is accusative singular, so it must agree with *fisc* (acc. sing.), not *hundas* (nom. pl.). So the sentence means 'Dogs ate a long fish'.

When reading grammatically, try following this checklist. It looks complicated, but soon becomes automatic:

1. Find the main verb (i.e. a verb which is not an infinitive). Is it singular or plural?
   a. If the verb is first or second person, you automatically know that the subject must be 'I/we' or 'you' respectively. Bonus!

2. Find a noun or pronoun, of the same number as the verb, which could be a nominative. Hopefully, there's only one! This is the subject.

2a. Two singular subjects require a plural verb, although it may be the case that only one of them agrees with the verb (e.g. *gerǣdde se cyng and ealle his witan þæt...*)
2b. If you can't find a nominative noun or pronoun, look for a nominative adjective: these can stand in for nouns, as in *The sick should be sent home.*
2c. If there isn't a subject at all, add in a pronoun corresponding in number and person to the verb. The context should help you establish the subject in that case.

3. If the sense of the verb allows it to have an object (e.g. 'I killed **him**; contrast with 'I died'), look for nouns and pronouns in the accusative.
3a. Very occasionally, verbs require their direct object to be in the genitive or dative case, rather than the accusative. If so, the glossary/dictionary will tell you, and you should look for one of these instead of an accusative.

4. If there are any adjectives around, match them up with nouns or pronouns of the same number, gender and case.

5. You've now got the core of the sentence in place. Slotting in prepositions, indirect objects, and adverbs ought now to be pretty easy (hopefully!).