ENHG sound change: Some sample answers, in lieu of a key

1. A remarkable number of German words with a stressed vowel consist of a short vowel followed by more than one consonant or a long vowel (or diphthong) followed by a single consonant. Why is this?

   Open Syllable Lengthening and Closed Syllable Shortening (which especially happens when there is more than one consonant at the end of the word) as well as the exceptions to this rule. These two ideas center around the fact that there are changes in weight and not necessarily changes in sounds.

2. Once you know the above, an odd-looking exception here is that we don't have words with a long vowel or diphthong plus [ŋ], so *lang* or *fangen* but no words like *laung or *fehng. (Some people find those even hard to say.) How could this be the case? Even weirder is that English has this same pattern — how can that be?

   This isn't really an exception, because t [ŋ] still functions phonologically a double consonant [ng] even though it is not (perhaps it used to be) pronounced as two sounds. Therefore this becomes a case of Closed Syllable Shortening, in which a long vowel followed by the two consonants would be "too" heavy, and the vowel would be shortened. Another example of this is MHG *gienc-> ENHG ging*. This example also shows how final fortition in MHG caused the "g" to be spelled and probably pronounced as a separate consonant from the "n". English has many similar vowel change patterns to German (and is Germanic), so it is not surprising that is would also maintain a pattern in which an "ng" is not preceded by a long vowel. Also, the "ng" is simply a pretty hard and weird sound, so it seems logical to me that there would be limitations on its use.

3. Why do so many Germans say *kucken* when we spell it *gucken* or pronounce *doll* when we spell it *toll*?

   The first is an example of fortition in which the initial voiced stop becomes voiceless. The second is lenition: the voiceless stop becomes voiced (k merges with g; p with b; and t with d).

   [This is intended as an example of super-brief but reasonable answer.]

4. We learned that 'umlaut' vowels came from Germanic words with an *i/j* in the syllable following the modern umlaut. Yet sometimes we find such words with no umlaut (*suchen* < *sōkjan) and other times we find umlaut where there was no *i/j* (*schwül* from an earlier form something like *swelen*). What's going on here?

   The Germanic *i/j* triggered primary umlaut, but there were other situations that affected vowels and sometimes incurred umlaut:

- Vowels were unrounded/rounded
- Secondary rounding (things like changing *zwelef* → *zwölf*)
- Raising/lowering vowels

Umlauts didn't really reach completion in every region, either. In Upper German, they had some patterns of umlaut blocking, which are still evident in town names (such as Innsbr<u>u</u>ck vs. Onsabr<u>ü</u>ck) as well as other words like *Stuck* vs. *Stück*. Even *suchen* umlauted in the north (*sööken*).