This article is an extensive survey of the history of word length studies. In addition to being the first survey of this kind ever written, the text serves as an introduction into the whole volume. Primarily focusing on methodological questions, a complete history of theoretical approaches to modelling word length frequencies is offered. The development of different ideas is traced back to the underlying roots, and interpreted from a contemporary point of view. Starting with 19th century ideas, the article continues with attempts to find formal models in the mid-twentieth century. It is shown how the first attempts were characterized by local ad hoc solutions, whereas later attempts tried to find general laws, valid not only for one language. It is also demonstrated how the idea of one overall valid model came to be questioned, until most recently, when different filiations from an overall model have been developed from a synergetic perspective. Examples from many different languages are analyzed. Much previously unknown material has been found and is discussed in this long paper, which contains an important list of references.