

How to Use Affixes to Learn

English is one of the most flexible and versatile languages in the world. While we think in concepts rather than words, concepts can only develop when the vocabulary is available for the thought. For example, it is very difficult to think of the concept of *tractor* without the word “tractor.” The English language enables us to think about vast numbers of concepts and ideas because it allows us to create new words from the old. The English language gained its flexibility by adopting words or parts of words from other languages. We borrowed freely from the Latin and Greek languages, especially in our development of affixes (which we utilize to develop new words all the time today). Most of us have laughed at the word *antidisestablishmentarianism* without really being conscious that it is created of parts of words strung together to create meaning. The medical profession is a master at combining parts of other words to create new words such as *pneumonoultramicroscopicsilicovolcanoconiosis*, composed completely of prefixes, suffixes, and root words. By utilizing parts of words, we can create untold new words, thereby increasing our ability to develop new concepts.

There are two components to word attack—phonics and structural analysis. Phonics helps us recognize the relationship between sounds and symbols (letters). This helps us decode words by attaching sounds to the letters of a word in order to pronounce them. However, structural analysis deals with morphological units or units that determine meaning. By learning structural units, students can 1) attack unfamiliar words more efficiently because they utilize larger units than simple letters or letter combinations; and 2) attach meaning to those units in the process of analyzing the word. One of the best ways to attack words is by learning affixes—units of meaning attached to words to change the meaning of the word. There are several benefits of learning common affixes:

- When students are already familiar with the pronunciation of a prefix, suffix, or root word, they have a head start in pronouncing new words they may not know. For example, a student will have an easier time pronouncing the word *transcontinental* because *trans-* is a familiar letter grouping.
- Students can determine meaning more easily if they already know the meaning of an affix, such as *anti-* (against) in the word *antiwar*.
- Students will find knowledge of affixes helpful when spelling. While some affixes have variations in spelling (*ant-*, *ent-*), knowing affixes will provide clues to spelling words such as *anterior*.

Roots and Affixes

Affixes are composed of two segments—prefixes and suffixes—which are added to root (or base) words to create new meaning. Below are definitions of root words, prefixes, and suffixes.

Root words are the central portions of words that carry the basic meaning. Roots such as *act* (to do), *alter* (other or change), or *bene* (good) enable readers to add other elements (affixes) to them to make new words such as *active*, *alteration*, and *beneficent*. Root words represent two types of meaning units. The first is a base word, which can stand alone without affixes attached to it (*dial*, *just*, *able*). The other is a combining root, which cannot stand alone without a suffix or prefix to complete the meaning (*spec*, *urb*, *tempor*).

Prefixes are parts of words that appear before root words and change the meaning of the word. For example, a prefix like *un-* (not), can change the meaning of words such as *happy*, *tie*, and *aware*. Four major prefixes account for 58% of all prefixed words in elementary school materials: *un-*, *re-*, *dis-*, and *im-* (or *in-*). It is important to note that 87% of all words that have prefixes will also have suffixes.

Suffixes are parts of words added to the end of root words and they perform three functions:

1. Suffixes can change the tense of the word. Suffixes such as *-s*, *-es*, *-ed*, and *-ing* (known as inflectional endings) change the tense of a word such as *please*, *pleases*, *pleased*, and *pleasing*. These four suffixes account for 62% of all suffixed words.
2. Suffixes can change the part of speech. Suffixes such as *-ure*, *-ant*, *-ly*, *-able*, and *-ness* can change a word such as *please* into *pleasure* (noun), *pleasant* (adjective), *pleasantly* (adverb), *pleasurable* (adjective), or *pleasurableness* (noun). The suffixes *able* (or *-ible*), *-ness*, and *-ly* make up 27% of all suffixed words.
3. Some suffixes extend the basic meaning of the root word. For example, the suffix *-ology* (study of) added to the basic root *psych* (mind) creates a new word, *psychology*, meaning “study of the mind.” Suffixes that change the part of speech or meaning of a word are called derivational endings.

How to Teach Affixes

The following activities can make learning affixes enjoyable and productive for students:

- It is important for students to believe that what they are learning is useful and applicable to their lives. Begin teaching about affixes by giving the students printed material such as a page from their textbook, a newspaper, or the words from their favorite songs. Ask them to circle every inflectional ending (suffixes that change the tense of the word) they see. Since inflectional endings are the most common suffixes, they are readily found in almost any printed material. Merely doing this activity will make students cognizant of the endings of words so that they are more apt to look for endings as they read. Have students discover for themselves how these endings help change or extend meaning by writing sentences using words with different inflectional endings.

Example:

Jimmy bounced the ball and tackled the runner.
Jimmy is bouncing the ball and tackling the runner.
Jimmy bounces the ball and tackles the runner.

- Introduce other common suffixes (see the chart on the next page), helping students to discover that certain endings form certain parts of speech. You will want to introduce each suffix at a time, reinforce the meaning, and apply it before moving on to another one. Again, it is wise to begin with the most frequently used suffixes as these will prove most useful to students. Include activities that demonstrate how knowing some suffixes can change the way students can identify word parts when writing (close, closeness, closed, closer, closet, closure).

Common derivational suffixes

Part of Speech	Suffix	Meaning	Example
nouns	–ance, –ancy	act or state of	acceptance, truancy
	–ence	act; state or quality	dependence
	–er	one who; that which	teacher
	–ion, –tion	act or condition of	fusion, connection
	–ism	belief or practice	commercialism
	–ity, –ty	character or state of being	purity, subtlety
	–ment	act or state of	punishment
	–ness	act or quality of	lightness
	–ure	forming	closure
adjectives	–able, –ible	able or capable	acceptable, horrible
	–al	of; like; suitable for	seasonal
	–ful	filled with	fanciful
	–ic	of; like	heroic
	–ive	related to; tending to	connective
	–ous, –ious	full of; having	famous, spacious
	–y	full of; like	dirty
verbs	–ify, –ize	to produce a state or quality	beautify, criticize
adverbs	–ly	in the manner of	heartily

- Introduce common prefixes that can be added to words students have already produced or those they already know. Begin by asking the students to give you words that describe something. Then put *un-* in front of the words and allow the students to discover what the *un-* prefix does to the words. Repeat this activity with our frequent prefixes (*re-*, *dis-*, *im-*, *in-*). Using prefixes also allows you to introduce the usefulness of the dictionary. By locating a prefix in the dictionary, students can see how important the prefix is by the number of words in the dictionary that begin with that prefix. Start by having students look up the prefix *im-*.

40 prefixes to unlock 100,000 words

Prefix	Meaning	Example
a-	not	apart, atypical
anti-	against	antisocial
auto-	self-acting	automobile
co-, con-, cor-	together	copilot, converge, correlation
de-, dis-	to do the opposite	defrost, disappear
dys-	to be the opposite	dysfunctional
epi-	upon	epicenter
il-, im-, in-, ir-	not	illegal, impossible, invisible, irresponsible
inter-	between; among	international
mis-	wrong or badly	misshape
mono-	one	monolingual
non-	not	nonsense
over-	above	overcharge
pre-	before	preview
pro-	forward; in favor of	proclaim
semi-	half; partly	semicircle, semiconscious
sub-	under	submarine
super-	more than	supersonic
trans-	over or across	transatlantic
un-	not	unprepared

- Introduce some basic root words to which students can add their newly learned suffixes and prefixes, letting the students create as many words as they can. Even if they produce nonsense words, encourage them to be creative and to provide definitions for their new words. Provide students with a chart of roots, prefixes, and suffixes for their notebooks so students have a convenient way to look up word parts while reading and writing. You may wish to introduce some competition among small groups by seeing which team can find the most words made of the root “*tend*,” for example, or play a relay race where team members write suffixes for a root on the board.

Common roots

Root	Other spellings	Meaning
tain	ten, tim	to have or hold
mitt	miss, mis, mit	to send
cept	cap, capt, ceiv, ceit, cip	to take or seize
fer	let, lay	to bear or carry
sist	sta	to stand, endure, or persist
graft		to write
log	ology	speech; science
spect	spec, spi, spy	to look
plic	play, plex, ploy, ply	to fold, bend, twist, or interweave
tend	tens, tent	to stretch
duct	duc, duit, duk	to lead, make, shape, or fashion
pos	pound, pon, post	to put or place
fac	fac, fact, fash, feat	to make or do
scribe	script, scriv	to write

Instructional Notes

- When students are learning new concepts and information, about 15% of instructional time should be spent introducing the new material, and 85% of the time should be spent reinforcing and extending the material. While there will be a tendency to rush through affixes because there are so many of them, it would be far better for students to learn 10 of them well rather than to be introduced to 100 of them and retain nothing. Repetition is the key to learning, so ample time must be provided for that to occur. A unit on affixes might last an entire semester or even a year as the varying affixes are introduced and practiced.
- Remember that distributed practice is more effective than mass practice. Reinforcing a prefix or suffix can be a 5-minute exercise at the beginning of the lesson or a homework assignment that provides practice and pleasure. For example, give the students a word and ask them to add as many prefixes and/or suffixes as they can.

en-		-er
de-		-en
re-	light	-ing
retro-		-ment
super-		-able
un-		-ful
trans-		-ness
		-ly

- Affixed words need to be introduced in context as well as isolation. When introducing a new word in science, social studies, or even physical education, use that opportunity to point out the affixes so students can begin to recognize them automatically in their daily reading. Adding affixes to a class dictionary or word board will help students to recall words and inspire them to use these words when writing.
- Skills and concepts are learned when information is presented in multi-modal fashion. Students need to see, hear, read, and write the affixed words in order to recall them later. Make a point of including writing experiences that are pleasurable or challenging and that will provide both practice (re-doing the same task) and rehearsal (doing the same task in slightly different ways). For example, ask students to create short paragraphs of words that contain the same affix.

Example:

Mischief was a terrible assistant. He would misread instructions, misfile forms, mistype letters, misspell names, misplace important documents, miswrite messages, misunderstand directions, misdial the phone, mistake Friday for Saturday, and misbehave in the office.

- Learning is very much influenced by emotion and the amount of socialization that occurs with it. The more pleasant the learning experience and the more students can interact with their peers, the more involved and committed they will be to learning. Provide positive opportunities for learning such as:
 - Play card games such as *Memory*, *Old Maid*, or *Go Fish*, with cards that contain affixes. Ask students to match the prefix or suffix with its meaning or the prefix or suffix with the appropriate root.
 - Have students make a “book” of four words that all share the same prefix, suffix or root.
 - Give extra credit to students who use affixes appropriately when writing their papers.
 - Have students underline affixes in sentences on their homework assignments or on consumable activity sheets.
 - Play games in which students must create words with squares that have prefixes, suffixes, and roots on them. Points can be given for how many squares are used or for the difficulty of the words and affixes used.

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- Let students “play with the language” by creating new words. For example, present the suffix *-phobia* and ask students to create new fears from it like raphobia, cyclephobia, etc.
- Play *Hangman* using words with affixes to reinforce recognition and spelling.