

Building Vocabulary: Prefixes, Roots, and Suffixes

Many studies show the importance of building children’s vocabulary. One study has shown that a set of 20 prefixes and 14 roots, and knowing how to use them, will unlock the meaning of over 100,000 words. A similar study showed that a set of 29 prefixes and 25 roots will give the meaning to over 125,000 words. Imagine adding suffixes! Below are lists of prefixes, suffixes, and roots – with their meanings and example words.* Reviewing these also can help many ELL students to see relationships between and among languages. Many prefixes have a basis in Latin – also the basis for Spanish, French, and Italian – or Greek. **Table 1: 32 Prefixes**

Prefix	Meaning	Example words and meanings	
a, ab, abs	away from	absent abscond	not to be present, way abscond – to run away
ad, a, ac, af, ag, an, ar, at, as	to, toward	adapt adhere annex attract	to fit into to stick to to add or join to draw near
anti	against	antifreeze antisocial	a substance to prevent freezing refers to someone who’s not social
bi, bis	two	bicycle biannual biennial	two wheeled cycle twice each year every two years
circum, cir	around	circumscribe circle	to draw around a figure that goes all around
com, con, co, col	with, together	combine contact collect co-worker	to bring together to touch together to bring together co-worker
de	away from, down, the opposite of	depart decline	to go away from to turn down
dis, dif, di	apart	dislike dishonest distant	not to like not honest away
epi	upon, on top of	epitaph epilogue	writing upon a tombstone speech at the end, on top of the rest
equ, equi	equal	equalize equitable	to make equal fair, equal

ex, e, ef	out, from	exit eject exhale	to go out to throw out to breathe out
in, il, ir, im, en	in, into	inject impose	to put into to force into
in, il, ig, ir, im	not	inactive ignoble irreversible irritate	not active not noble not reversible to put into discomfort
inter	between, among	international interpose	among nations to put between
mal, male	bad, ill, wrong	malpractice malfunction	bad practice fail to function, bad function
mis	wrong, badly	mistreat mistake misplace	to treat badly to get wrong to put in wrong place
mono	one, alone, single	monopoly monotone monologue monosyllable	one ownership one note speech by one person one syllable
non	not, the reverse of	nonsense nonprofit	not making sense not making a profit
ob	in front, against, in front of, in the way of	obstacle obvious obviate	something that stands in the way of right in front of, apparent to do away with, make unnecessary
omni	everywhere, all	omnipresent omnipotent	always present, everywhere all powerful
per	through	pervade perceive	to pass through, to spread through to become aware through sight
poly	many	polysyllable polygon	many syllables figure with many sides
post	after	postpone postmortem	to do after after death

pre	before, earlier than	preview prehistoric preface	a viewing earlier than another before written history a statement before an article or book
pro	forward, going ahead of, supporting	proceed prowar promote	to go forward supporting the war to raise or move forward
re	again, back	retell recall recede	to tell again to call back to go back
se	apart	secede seclude	to withdraw, become apart to stay apart from others
sub	under, less than	submarine subway subliminal	under water a path or way to move under ground below the level of consciousness
super	over, above, greater	superstar superimpose	a star greater than other stars to put over something else
trans	across	transcontinental transverse	across the continent to lie or go across
un, uni	one	unidirectional unanimous unilateral	having one direction sharing one view having one side
un	not	uninterested unhelpful unethical	not interested not helpful not ethical