

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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ absent ▪ abscond 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ not to be present, away ▪ abscond – to run away
ad, a, ac, af, ag, an, ar, at, as	to, toward	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ adapt ▪ adhere ▪ annex ▪ attract 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ to fit into ▪ to stick to ▪ to add or join ▪ to draw near
anti	against	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ antifreeze ▪ antisocial 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ a substance to prevent freezing ▪ refers to someone who's not social
bi, bis	two	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ bicycle ▪ biannual ▪ biennial 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ two wheeled cycle ▪ twice each year ▪ every two years
circum, cir	around	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ circumscribe ▪ circle 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ to draw around ▪ a figure that goes all around
com, con, co, col	with, together	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ combine ▪ contact ▪ collect ▪ co-worker 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ to bring together ▪ to touch together ▪ to bring together ▪ co-worker
de	away from, down, the opposite of	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ depart ▪ decline 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ to go away from ▪ to turn down
dis, dif, di	apart	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ dislike ▪ dishonest ▪ distant 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ not to like ▪ not honest ▪ away
epi	upon, on top of	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ epitaph ▪ epilogue 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ writing upon a tombstone ▪ speech at the end, on top of the rest
equ, equi	equal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ equalize ▪ equitable 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ to make equal ▪ fair, equal
ex, e, ef	out, from	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ exit ▪ eject ▪ exhale 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ to go out ▪ to throw out ▪ to breathe out
in, il, ir, im, en	in, into	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ inject ▪ impose 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ to put into ▪ to force into
in, il, ig, ir, im	not	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ inactive ▪ ignoble ▪ irreversible ▪ irritate 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ not active ▪ not noble ▪ not reversible ▪ to put into discomfort

* This document revised from Gary Gruber's work on increasing children's test scores: *Dr. Gary Gruber's Essential Guide to Test Taking for Kids, Grades 3, 4, & 5.* (1986); *Dr. Gary Gruber's Essential Guide to Test Taking for Kids, Grades 6, 7, 8, & 9.* (1986); and *Gruber's Complete Preparation for the SAT* (9th Edition, 2001) -- all published by Collins, New York City.

Prefix	Meaning	Example words and meanings	
inter	between, among	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ international ▪ interpose 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ among nations ▪ to put between
mal, male	bad, ill, wrong	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ malpractice ▪ malfunction 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ bad practice ▪ fail to function, bad function
mis	wrong, badly	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ mistreat ▪ mistake ▪ misplace 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ to treat badly ▪ to get wrong ▪ to put in wrong place
mono	one, alone, single	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ monopoly ▪ monotone ▪ monologue ▪ monosyllable 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ one ownership ▪ one note ▪ speech by one person ▪ one syllable
non	not, the reverse of	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ nonsense ▪ nonprofit 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ not making sense ▪ not making a profit
ob	in front, against, in front of, in the way of	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ obstacle ▪ obvious ▪ obviate 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ something that stands in the way of ▪ right in front of, apparent ▪ to do away with, make unnecessary
omni	everywhere, all	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ omnipresent ▪ omnipotent 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ always present, everywhere ▪ all powerful
per	through	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ pervade ▪ perceive 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ to pass through, to spread through ▪ to become aware through sight
poly	many	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ polysyllable ▪ polygon 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ many syllables ▪ figure with many sides
post	after	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ postpone ▪ postmortem 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ to do after ▪ after death
pre	before, earlier than	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ preview ▪ prehistoric ▪ preface 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ a viewing earlier than another ▪ before written history ▪ a statement before an article or book
pro	forward, going ahead of, supporting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ proceed ▪ prowar ▪ promote 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ to go forward ▪ supporting the war ▪ to raise or move forward
re	again, back	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ retell ▪ recall ▪ recede 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ to tell again ▪ to call back ▪ to go back
se	apart	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ secede ▪ seclude 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ to withdraw, become apart ▪ to stay apart from others
sub	under, less than	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ submarine ▪ subway ▪ subliminal 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ under water ▪ a path or way to move under ground ▪ below the level of consciousness
super	over, above, greater	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ superstar ▪ superimpose 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ a star greater than other stars ▪ to put over something else
trans	across	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ transcontinental ▪ transverse 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ across the continent ▪ to lie or go across
un, uni	one	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ unidirectional ▪ unanimous ▪ unilateral 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ having one direction ▪ sharing one view ▪ having one side
un	not	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ uninterested ▪ unhelpful ▪ unethical 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ not interested ▪ not helpful ▪ not ethical

Table 2: 27 Roots

Root	Meaning	Example words & meanings	
act, ag	to do, to act	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Agent ▪ Activity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ One who acts as a representative ▪ Action
apert	open	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Aperture 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ An opening
bas	low	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Basement ▪ Basement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Something that is low, at the bottom ▪ A room that is low
cap, capt, cip, cept, ceive	to take, to hold, to seize	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Captive ▪ Receive ▪ Capable ▪ Recipient 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ One who is held ▪ To take ▪ Able to take hold of things ▪ One who takes hold or receives
ced, cede, ceed, cess	to go, to give in	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Precede ▪ Access ▪ Proceed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ To go before ▪ Means of going to ▪ To go forward
cred, credit	to believe	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Credible ▪ Incredible ▪ Credit 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Believable ▪ Not believable ▪ Belief, trust
curr, curs, cours	to run	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Current ▪ Precursory ▪ Recourse 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Now in progress, running ▪ Running (going) before ▪ To run for aid
dic, dict	to say	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Dictionary ▪ Indict ▪ Indicate 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ A book explaining words (sayings) ▪ To say or make an accusation ▪ To point out or say by demonstrating
duc, duct	to lead	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Induce ▪ Conduct ▪ Aqueduct 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ To lead to action ▪ To lead or guide ▪ Pipe that leads water somewhere
equ	equal, even	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Equality ▪ Equanimity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Equal in social, political rights ▪ Evenness of mind, tranquility
fac, fact, fic, fect, fy	to make, to do	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Facile ▪ Fiction ▪ Factory ▪ Affect 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Easy to do ▪ Something that is made up ▪ Place that makes things ▪ To make a change in
fer, ferr	to carry, bring	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Defer ▪ Referral 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ To carry away ▪ Bring a source for help/information
graph	write	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Monograph ▪ Graphite 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ A writing on a particular subject ▪ A form of carbon used for writing
mit, mis	to send	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Admit ▪ Missile 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ To send in ▪ Something sent through the air
par	equal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Parity ▪ Disparate 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Equality ▪ No equal, not alike
plic	to fold, to bend, to turn	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Complicate ▪ Implicate 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ To fold (mix) together ▪ To fold in, to involve
pon, pos, posit, pose	to place	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Component ▪ Transpose ▪ Compose ▪ Deposit 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ A part placed together with others ▪ A place across ▪ To put many parts into place ▪ To place for safekeeping
scrib, script	to write	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Describe ▪ Transcript ▪ Subscription 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ To write about or tell about ▪ A written copy ▪ A written signature or document
sequ, secu	to follow	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Sequence ▪ Sequel ▪ Consecutive 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ In following order ▪ A second, following, book ▪ One that follows another
spec, spect, spic	to appear, to look, to see	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Specimen ▪ Aspect 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ An example to look at ▪ One way to see something
sta, stat, sist,	to stand, or make stand	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Constant 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Standing with

Root	Meaning	Example words & meanings	
stit, sisto		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Status ▪ Stable ▪ Desist 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Social standing ▪ Steady (standing) ▪ To stand away from
tact	to touch	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Contact ▪ Tactile 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ To touch together ▪ To be able to be touched
ten, tent, tain	to hold	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Tenable ▪ Retentive ▪ Maintain 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Able to be held, holding ▪ Holding ▪ To keep or hold up
tend, tens, tent	to stretch	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Extend ▪ Tension 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ To stretch or draw out ▪ Stretched
tract	to draw	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Attract ▪ Contract 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ To draw together ▪ An agreement drawn up
ven, vent	to come	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Convene ▪ Advent 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ To come together ▪ A coming
ver, vert, vers	to turn	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Avert ▪ Revert ▪ Reverse 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ To turn away ▪ To turn back ▪ To turn around

Table 3: 23 Suffixes

Suffix	Meaning	Example words & meanings	
able, ible, ble	able to	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Edible ▪ Salable 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Able to be eaten ▪ Able to be sold
acious, cous, al	like, having the quality of	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Nocturnal ▪ Vivacious 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Of the night ▪ Having the quality of being lively
ance, ancy	the act of, a state of being	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Performance ▪ Truancy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The act of performing ▪ The act of being truant
ant, ent, er, or	one who	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Occupant ▪ Respondent ▪ Teacher ▪ Creator 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ One who occupies ▪ One who responds or answers ▪ One who teaches ▪ One who creates
ar, ary	connected with, related to	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Ocular ▪ Beneficiary 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Related to the eye ▪ Connected with one who receives benefits
ence	quality of, act of	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Existence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The act of existing or being
ful	full of	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Fearful 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Full of fear
ic, ac, il, ile	of, like, pertaining to	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Cardiac ▪ Civil ▪ Infantile ▪ Acidic 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Pertaining to the heart ▪ Pertaining to citizens ▪ Pertaining to infants ▪ Like acid
ion	the act or condition of	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Correction 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The act of correcting
ism	the practice of, support of	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Patriotism 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Support of one's country
ist	one who makes, does	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Artist 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ One who creates art
ity, ty, y	the state of, character of	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Unity ▪ Shifty ▪ Showy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The state of being one ▪ State of shifting around ▪ State of always showing oneself
ive	having the nature of	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Active 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Having the nature of acting or moving
less	lacking, without	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Heartless 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Without a heart
logy	the study of	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Biology 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The study of life processes
ment	the act of, the state of	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Retirement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ State of being retired
ness	the quality of	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Eagerness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The quality of being eager
ory	having the nature of, a place or thing for	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Laboratory 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ A place where work is done

Suffix	Meaning	Example words & meanings	
ous, ose	full of, having	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Dangerous ▪ Verbose 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Full of danger ▪ Full of words, or wordy
ship	the art or skill of, the ability to	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Leadership 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The ability to lead
some	full of, like	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Troublesome 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Full of trouble
tude	the state of quality of, the ability to	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Aptitude 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The ability to do
y	Full of, somewhat, somewhat like	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Musty ▪ Chilly ▪ Willowy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Having a stale oror ▪ Somewhat cold ▪ Like a willow

Table 4: Taking words apart

Word	Prefix	Root	Suffix	Meaning
Concurrence	con: with	curr: run	ence: act of	Act of running with, happening at same time
Exaggerate	ex: out	ag: to do, act	---	To act out
Irreversible	ir: not	vers: turning	ible: able to	Not able to turn back
	re: again			
Malediction	male: bad	dict: to say	---	To say bad things, a negative statement
Precursor	pre: before	curs: to run	or: one who	Something that comes before
Unity	uni: one	---	ty: state of	State of being one, a single thing or being
Untenable	un: not	ten: holding	able: able to	Not able to hold on