

# Guide to Word Parts (Roots and Affixes)

## key terms

[affixation](#)

[assimilated prefix](#)

[base](#)

[bound](#)

[derivation](#)

[Greek](#)

[intensive \(intensifying\) prefix](#)

[Latin](#)

[loanword](#)

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The process of forming one word from another word is called **derivation**. Wordsmyth's Word Parts information covers the most common kind of derivation, which is **affixation**, or the adding of a prefix or suffix to a word to form a new word. For example, the word *incompatible* is formed by derivation from the word *compatible*: the prefix **in-** is added to *compatible*, which is the base of the derivation.

## Roots

**Roots** are the main units of meaning from which words are formed: *tree*, *bring*, and *true* are roots from Old English, while **fer** and **arch** are roots from Latin and Greek, respectively. Roots can not be broken down into smaller meaningful parts. Unlike prefixes and suffixes, they can appear in any position in a word: *monarch*, *architect*, *anarchy*. A word can contain more than one root.

A root of English origin can be a free-standing, independent word. However, roots from other languages, such as Latin and Greek, are not by themselves words in English. They must be combined with other word parts to form independent words. For example, the Latin root **fer**, which means "carry, bear" only appears in English combined with an affix: *transfer*, *preference*.

## Roots and meaning

Because roots are the main meaning-carrying parts of a word's structure, knowing their meaning and being able to identify them in words is an important tool for vocabulary learning and recall. Learning individual vocabulary words takes time, thought, and practice. Because a single Greek or Latin root may appear in a number of different English words, when you learn to identify one root and know its meaning, you have actually equipped yourself to make an educated guess at the meaning of many new words. For example, **scrib** and **scrip** are two forms of the Latin root meaning "write." Example words containing this root:

*ascribe, ascription, circumscribe, conscript, conscription, describe, description, descriptive, escriptoire, imprescriptible, indescribable, inscribe, inscription, manuscript, nondescript, oversubscribe, postscript, prescribe, prescript, prescriptible, prescription, prescriptive, proscribe, proscription, rescript, scribal, scribble, scribbler, scribe, scrip, script, scriptorium, scriptural, Scripture, scrivener, subscribe, subscript, subscription, superscribe, superscript, transcribe, transcript, transcriptase, typescript*

For a number of these words, knowing the meaning of word parts gives us clues to the meaning of the whole word. For example, *inscribe* is composed of the prefix **in-<sup>1</sup>** ("in, into, on") + **scrib(e)** (write). It can be inferred that *inscribe* is a verb from its similarity to a more familiar verb, *describe*. So, a rough meaning of *inscribe* may be "to write in, into, or on." The dictionary definition of *inscribe* is "to write or impress (words or the like)," as in "They inscribed my cat's name on the little gravestone."

Not all words containing **scrib**, **scrip** have such a clear relationship to the meaning of the root. *Conscription*, for example, means "compulsory enrollment in the military." The history or etymology of the word reveals that the word originally referred to the writing of a list of names for enrollment. But the present-day definitions of *conscription* no longer explicitly contain the concept of writing.

The relationship between word part meaning and word meaning can range from transparent to bafflingly (or intriguingly) opaque. It is important to remember that, in the end, the senses of a word are the result of an ongoing history of usage, often over the course of centuries.

### Recognizing roots

Roots often have more than one form (or spelling), the form depending partly on where the root appears in a word and on what letters surround it. For example, the Latin root that means "take or catch" can take any of these forms:

**cap<sup>1</sup>, cip, capt, cept, -ceive, -ceit**

Often one form of a root will have a clearer relationship to the root's meaning and can be used as the representative. In the group above, **capt**, as in the word **capture**, "is probably the form that will help us most easily remember the root's meaning. However, it may be that the word family of **receive**, whose meaning we can mentally associate with "take or catch" fairly easily, will help us remember the most forms of the root: **receive**, **receipt**, **reception**, **recipient**. Then, once we know a representative word family, we will be able to recognize (and produce) the same pattern of change for other word families: for example, the verb **conceive** has a derived noun **conception**.

Some of the changes in the form of a root are caused by English sound and spelling rules. Other changes have as much to do with the grammar and spelling of the source language as with English linguistics. For example, **ponere** and **positus** are two forms of the same Latin verb meaning "put, place." Hence, the root forms include **pon** and **pos**, and also the word-terminal forms **-pose**, **-pone**, and **-pound**.

To identify word parts we also need to be able to distinguish between very similar or even identical items. These can be homographs of a root or affix, such as **cap<sup>1</sup>** ("take, catch") and **cap<sup>2</sup>** ("head"), or simply a string of letters that happens to be identical to a root or affix. For example, the letters **un** do not play the same role in any of these words:

*uncle*  
*unclean*  
*untie*  
*unify*

Much of our morphological knowledge is automatic or unconscious. For example, native English speakers know at some level that the the word *uncle* is not formed by attaching the negative prefix **un-** to a (non-existent) root **cle**. When we start studying Latin and Greek roots and endings, we build on what we automatically perceive in words with a more deliberate kind of analysis.

## Prefixes

A **prefix** is an affix added to the beginning of a root or word to form a another word: **disappoint, redo, foretell, unhappy, overjoyed, impossible, incident, perfect**. Prefixes always appear at the beginning of a word unless they follow another prefix: in the word *imperfect*, both **im-** and **per-** are prefixes. **im-** is a negative prefix attached to the word *perfect*. **per-** is a prefix attached to the Latin root **fect** to form the word *perfect*.

### Prefixes and meaning

Most prefixes fall into one of these semantic categories: position, number and measurement, negation, and direction. Prefixes often have meanings similar to that of prepositions and adverbs such as *to, away, without, again, not*. In fact, prefixes of Latin and Greek origin often were also prepositions or adverbs in those languages . For example, in Latin, **ad** is a preposition meaning "to, towards" and also a verb prefix, as in the verb **advenire**, meaning "to come to, or arrive."

As with roots, the relation of prefix meaning to word meaning can be obvious, obscure, or somewhere in between. Furthermore, a number of common Latin prefixes, including **de-, ex-,** and **re-**, can sometimes act as "intensive" (intensifying) prefixes. For example, **re-** can add the meaning of "again" or "in turn" to a verb (*reread, respond*), but can also simply serve to convey a greater or higher level of the base verb, as in *revere* and *research*. **de-** is intensive in *desiccate*. When a prefix is intensive, it can be taken to mean "thoroughly."

### Recognizing prefixes

As with roots, some prefixes have multiple forms making them trickier to recognize. Assimilated prefixes make up the vast majority of these variant spellings. An **assimilated prefix** is a prefix whose spelling differs from the primary form in order to make pronunciation of a word easier. In assimilated prefixes, the last letter of the prefix changes depending on the first letter sound of the base. For example, all the following words are formed from the same prefix, **ad-**, plus a Latin base: **adapt, affect, attract, arrest,** and **assimilate**. The last letter of the prefix's primary form, **ad-**, assimilates to, or changes in order to be more like, the first letter of the base.

**dis-** is another prefix that assimilates to the root. Contrast saying "*difficult*" and "*disficult*." Assimilated prefixes make words easier to say but more difficult to spell, because assimilation often produces double consonants. However, if we learn how these prefixes work, we will understand the logic behind the correct spelling of a word like *commemorate* (**com-** + **memor** + **-ate**).

## Suffixes

A **suffix** is an affix added to the end of a word or word root to alter the meaning or grammatical role of the base. Suffixes can be divided into two types: inflectional suffixes, such

as the **-s** that forms plural nouns and the **-ed** that forms the past tense of verbs, and derivational suffixes. Wordsmyth Word Parts data includes only derivational suffixes. Derivational suffixes determine the part of speech of the word and produce a new word: *careless*, *washable*, *squarely*, *realize*, *direction*. Suffixes usually change the part of speech of the base. For example, **-ment** is a suffix that forms nouns from verbs, as in *enjoyment* from *enjoy* and *amusement* from *amuse*. In the Wordsmyth Word Parts entries, every suffix is labeled as **verb-forming suffix**, **adjective-forming suffix**, **noun-forming suffix**, **adverb-forming suffix**, or **noun- and verb-forming suffix**.

Suffixes always appear at the end of a word unless they are followed by another suffix: in the word **realization**, both **-ize** and **-ation** (itself a compound suffix of **-ate** + **-ion**) are suffixes. **-ize** is a verb suffix attached to the adjective **real** to form the verb *realize*. **-ation** is a noun suffix attached to the verb *realize* to form the noun *realization*.

**real + -ize = realize**  
**realize + -ation = realization**

### Suffixes and meaning

Suffixes primarily convey grammatical information about words, such as what part of speech a word is. For example, **-ness** is an Old English suffix that forms nouns from adjectives, such as *kindness* from *kind*, *darkness* from *dark*, and *loveliness* from *lovely*. **-ness** and **-ion** are both noun-forming suffixes, but one attaches to adjective bases and the other to verb bases. The definition of each of these suffixes is intertwined with their grammatical function. **-ion** is "the act, process, or result of [the action denoted by the base], the meaning of **-ness**, "the state or quality of [the quality denoted by the adjective]." However there are suffixes that carry more semantic information about the words they form. For example, **-arian** (*librarian*, *vegetarian*) and **-ist** (*scientist*, *dentist*, *cyclist*) are noun-forming suffixes that denote people. The noun-forming suffix **-ess** adds a female gender to the base, often forming words that come to mean something quite different from the male counterpart (*governor*, *governess*).

### Origin

Wordsmyth Word Parts entries identify the language in which a word part originated: **Latin**, **Greek**, or the predecessors of modern English: **Old English** and **Middle English**.

**Latin** refers to the language of the ancient Romans--in particular, the formal written language used during the Roman Empire, which existed from (roughly) the 1st century B.C. to the 5th century A.D. After the empire fell, Latin developed into five distinct languages: Italian, French, Spanish, Portuguese, and Romanian. Although Latin was no longer the language of a people, it lived on for centuries as the formal written language of Western scholars and in Roman Catholic liturgy. Latin has been a significant influence on English vocabulary at every stage of the formation of British English. More than half of English words derive ultimately from Latin. The greatest influx of Latin-based words into English occurred during the Renaissance.

**Greek** refers to the language of ancient Greece from around the 9th century B.C. to the 4th century A.D. Most Greek words and word parts entered English during the Renaissance, as scholars discovered, studied, and translated ancient Greek works. Many specialized terms in

law, science, and other academic disciplines come from Greek, and new scientific and technological terms are still often formed from ancient Greek roots.

**Old English** was the Anglo-Saxon language spoken in Britain from c.450-1150.

**Middle English** succeeded Old English and was the dominant language in use in Britain from 1150-1500. Middle English developed after the French-speaking Normans invaded and conquered Britain in 1066. Many French and Latin words entered the language during this period.

Affixes from Old and Middle English include the adjective-forming suffixes **-en** (as in *golden* and *earthen*), **-ish**, and **-less**, and the prefixes **under-** and **over-** (as in *undercook* and *overcook*).

After becoming familiar with some Latin and Greek word parts, one begins to recognize words as Latin or Greek in origin. Knowing the origin of a word can help us spell it. When Scripps spelling bee contestants ask for the origin of a word--and a definition-- before they attempt to spell it, they are drawing on their knowledge of word part meaning and origin.

Many Greek-based words are recognizable from their spelling. The spelling and pronunciation of Greek roots and affixes have certain characteristics: use of "ph" as an "f" sound (in *telephone* and *photograph*) and "ch" as a hard "c" (as in *chorus* and *architect*), the starting of a word with "ps," "pn," "mn," and "gn" (all pronounced with a silent first consonant), and the use of "y" between consonants (*mystery*, *rhythm*) are some of the most common features of English words of Greek origin.

## "More About This Word Part"

Some Word Parts entries, particularly suffixes, have additional information under **More About This Word Part**. Topics covered include 1) rules of word formation, i.e., the kind of base to which a particular suffix can be attached. The relevant characteristics of a base might its part of speech, whether it is a root or an independent word, its language of origin, etc.; 2) the particulars of prefix assimilation; 3) compound suffixes (suffix combination); 4) patterns of word change, and 5) productivity (i.e., whether an affix is productive, or can presently be used by speakers and writers to form new words).

It is worth mentioning terms used in these notes which may not be familiar to the general reader. We use the term **base** to mean the root or word to which affixes are attached to form derivations or new words. For example, the derived noun *tenderness* is formed by adding the noun suffix **-ness** to the base, which is the adjective *tender*. The verb *contain* is formed by adding the prefix **con-** to the base **tain**, a Latin root. And the word *container* is formed by adding the suffix **-er** to the base *contain*. In the "More about this word part" section of prefix and suffix word part entries, there is information about the kind or kinds of base to which the affix can be attached. Characteristics of the base include its part of speech, its origin (Latin, Greek, English), and whether it is an independent word or a root. Note that a word is considered a base only in the context of a particular word formation. For example, the base of *washable* is *wash*, whereas the base of *unwashed* is *washed*. The base of *unimportance* is *unimportant*, whose base is *important*, whose base is *import*, whose base is the root **port**.

A **loanword** is a whole word that one language has "borrowed" or adopted from another and at least partly naturalized. Many English words were loanwords from Latin. Our common verb *prepare*, for example, is a loanword from Latin. The Latin verb is **preparare**. The Latin word is made up of a prefix, **pre-**, a root, **par**, and a Latin inflectional suffix which in **preparare** is the infinitive suffix **-are** (which is not a suffix used in English). Naturalization, the modification of the word to fit English sound, spelling, and grammar rules, produced the English word *prepare*.

A word part (technically, a morpheme) is considered **bound**, as opposed to "free," if it can not stand alone as a complete word and must be attached to one or more additional word parts. Prefixes and suffixes are always bound: e.g., **pre-** and **-ity** can not stand alone as independent words. Latin and Greek roots are also bound word parts: **bibl** (book), **chron** (time), and **compl** (fill up) must be combined with another word part to form words. "More About This Word Part" notes frequently distinguish bases that are bound roots from bases that are independent words.

And finally, a **morpheme** is the smallest unit of meaning in a language. Prefixes, suffixes, and roots are all morphemes. All words are made up of at least one morpheme. Latin and Greek roots and affixes are, for our practical purposes, considered morphemes having meaning in English, even if linguists disagree over whether, say, **chron** or **-cide** are English morphemes or Greek and Latin morphemes, respectively.

## Common Core

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.5.4 Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases based on grade 5 reading and content, choosing flexibly from a range of strategies.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.5.4a Use context (e.g., cause/effect relationships and comparisons in text) as a clue to the meaning of a word or phrase.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.5.4b Use common, grade-appropriate Greek and Latin affixes and roots as clues to the meaning of a word (e.g., *photograph*, *photosynthesis*).

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.5.4c Consult reference materials (e.g., dictionaries, glossaries, thesauruses), both print and digital, to find the pronunciation and determine or clarify the precise meaning of key words and phrases.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.9-10.4b Identify and correctly use patterns of word changes that indicate different meanings or parts of speech (e.g., *analyze*, *analysis*, *analytical*; *advocate*, *advocacy*).