

Prefixes

What are prefixes?

Prefixes are groups of letters added before a word, which then creates new words. For example:

biannual - "bi" means twice, so the new meaning is "twice a year"

distrust - "dis" means not, so the new meaning is "not to trust"

submarine - "sub" means under, so the new meaning is "under water"

There are many prefixes in English, some of which are quite common and some of which are used less frequently. In some cases, the same prefix may have more than one meaning, too. If you learn prefixes, your ability to comprehend new words will greatly improve. Unfortunately, it comes down to memorization.

Here's a list of many prefixes. The ones marked with the following symbol (O) are more often used, and should perhaps be studied first.

anti-

against; opposite from/to

anti-aging anti-bacterial anti-viral

Some anti-aging skin creams can get quite pricey.

bi-

twice; to

biannual biplane bipolar

The top sales reps have a biannual meeting in sunny Puerto Rico.

circum-

around; round about

circumlocution circumnavigate

It's always been a dream of mine to circumnavigate the globe in a sailboat.

de-

opposite; reverse

decompose defrag demystify

The news program really demystified the race for the US Presidency.

O dis-

not; opposite from/of

disagree disappear disconnect

As the stock market tumbled, my savings disappeared!

en- or em-

into; make into; put into; within

entitled embed empower

Bob felt empowered the day of his promotion, and strutted around the office.

ex-

former

ex-boss ex-colleague ex-wife

My ex-boss couldn't didn't have a clue. He was incompetent!

fore-

before; front; in front of

forefront forerunner foretell

The old lady could foretell when and where a person would die.

O il- or ir-

not; opposite from/of; without

illogical irresponsible irretrievable

Drinking and driving is pretty irresponsible, don't you think?

in- or im-

in; into

import impale imperil

I had to pay an import tax on some of my presents that I bought in Guam!

O in- or im-

not; opposite from/of; without

immortal immovable intolerable

The current work environment has become completely intolerable.

inter-

among; between; in the midst of

interact international interstate

My younger brother has trouble interacting with people.

mid-

middle

midlife midseason midterm

I had my first midlife crisis when I was in my early forties.

O mis-

bad; failure; wrong

misdirect misspell mistake

There are a few words I always seem to misspell.

mono-

alone; one; single

monochrome monologue monorail

Seattle's public transportation system includes a monorail.

O non-

absence; lack of; not

nonexistent nonsense nonsmoker

The speech given by the professor seemed like a lot of nonsense to me.

O over-

excessive; too much

overachiever overdo overreact

My boss completely overreacted when I said the report would be late.

post-

after; later

postgame postmortem posttest

There is a posttest at the end of every chapter in the textbook.

pre-

before; earlier; prior to

premade preorder preview

I love watching the previews at the theater before the movie begins.

O re-

again

reassess reemploy reinvigorate

After the initial data was analyzed, we needed to reassess our initial project deadline.

semi-

half; partially

semicircle semidarkness semipro

It was difficult to see in the semidarkness of dusk.

O sub-

below; under

submarine subpar substandard

My philosopher is you get what you pay for, as a cheap product is often substandard.

super-

above or beyond normal

supernatural superpower super-size

I've often dreamed that I was a comic book hero with superpowers.

tri-

three

triangle tricolor tricycle

I bought my daughter, who just turned two last week, a tricycle for her birthday.

trans-

across; on the other side

transatlantic transcontinental transoceanic

It used to be quite difficult to make transatlantic phone calls.

O un-

not; opposite from/of

unaware unsure unused

Because I left China as a child, I'm pretty unused to speaking Chinese all day.

under-

beneath or below in position

underachiever underpass underwear

My son seems to be an underachiever, as he is quite happy to get Cs and Ds in his classes.

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