Building Words with Prefixes Worksheet

pre-  un-  il-  mis-
re-  mis-
anti-  prefixes
ir-  in-  dis-  im-

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Knowing how words are built with prefixes is a really important strategy to help you improve your spelling, reading and vocabulary.

Prefixes are little words we add to the beginning of root words to make the word negative or the opposite meaning:

- \( un + \) happy = unhappy = not happy = sad
- re + paint = repaint = paint again
- under + cooked = undercooked = not cooked enough
- \( un + \) comfortable = uncomfortable = not comfortable
- in + correct = incorrect = wrong = not correct, not right
- dis + like = dislike = don’t like

There are hundreds of prefixes, some of the most popular are:

- \( in-, \) ir-, il-, im-, un-, dis-, pre-, ex-, anti-, uni-, bi-
  - happy - unhappy = not happy/sad
  - legal - illegal = not legal
  - like - dislike = don’t like
  - patient - impatient = not patient
  - usual - unusual = not usual
  - correct - incorrect = not correct or wrong or not right
  - complete - incomplete = not complete
Notice the double letters in the following words. We add the prefix to the root word so we sometimes get double letters:

- dis + satisfied = dis\text{atisfied}
- mis + spell = misspell
- un + necessary = unnecessary
- im + mature = immature
- ir + responsible = irresponsible

Prefix rules
Can you see the rules in these words?
- illogical, illegal, illegible
- irregular, irresponsible
- immature, immortal, immigrant, impossible, imperfect, impatient, imbalance

But there are exceptions so always use a good dictionary if you’re not sure. Add these rules and exceptions to your personal dictionary, especially words you like, use and need for your life and work.
Prefix rules and exceptions

*Use 'il' before words starting with 'l'
legible - illegible, illegal, illuminate
(But - unlawful, unlearn, unless...)

Use 'ir' before words starting with 'r'
relevant - irrelevant irreconcilable, irregular, irradiate
(But - unreliable, unreal, unrated...)

Use 'im' before words stating with 'm', 'p', 'b' mature-immature, immigrant, immortal, immaculate, possible- impossible, perfect - imperfect, impair, impact
(But we have unpack, unpick, unpaid... unmarked, unmarried, unmask)

balance - imbalance, imbecile, imbibe, imbue
(But inbox, inbound, inbuilt...)

Let's look at some common prefixes with their meanings (some mean different things with different words).
un, in, il, im, ir, dis, non... - these make nouns, verbs, adjectives into the negative, opposite meaning and mean 'not'.
unfair, untidy not fair not tidy incomplete, informal illegal, illegitimate immature, impatient irregular, irrational dishonest, dislike non-smoker, non-toxic

de, dis, un, re these indicate reversal of verb's actions - reverse, back, again
defrost, debug
untie, unwrap, undo
repaint, retry, redo
disconnect
return, retell, regain

over, under, sub, mis means something is wrong or bad, under, lowly
oversleep, overpopulated (= too much sleep too many people, excessive)
undervalued, undercooked (= not valued enough, not cooked enough)
substandard, subspecies (= well below standard, not enough, lowly)
misunderstand, miscalculate (= bad) - to not understand, to not calculate right/to calculate badly
**hyper, mega, super, ultra, micro, mini** - to indicate size **very big, very small, too much**

- hypermarket, hyperactive
- megastore, megabyte
- supermarket, supermodel
- ultrasound, ultra-modern
- microwave, microchip
- miniskirt, minibus

**mono, uni, bi, tri, multi, semi** - to indicate **number, frequency, shape**

- monorail, monologue = one
- universal, unisex = one, or the same
- bilingual, bicycle = two
- triangle, tripod = three
- semicircle, semicolon = half
- multinational, multi-storey/multistorey = many

**Hyphens (-)**

- e-book or ebook, e-mail or email, multi-storey or multistorey,
- anticlockwise or anti-clockwise? Which is right?

Both are right. **Use a good dictionary to check the latest spellings with hyphens**

Hyphens come and go. When it’s a new word it usually starts with a hyphen so as not to confuse people then soon the hyphen is dropped (e-mail now email) - this has been going on for centuries!

- You must use an hyphen when the prefix comes before a capital letter, anti-British, pro-European, because a capital letter can’t appear inside a word **proEuropean**. mid-July, pro-European, post-Vietnam, un-American, pro-Canadian, anti-Reagan, off-Broadway, ex-Foreign Secretary...
- Sometimes if there are two vowel together and causes confusion - re-align.
  - In British English: co-operate, co-operation, co-ordinate
  - In American no hyphen: cooperate, cooperation, cooperative, coordinate
- If a word looks the same as another - re-cover (cover something again) not recover from a illness.
Prefixes such as re-, co-, pre, anti-, self- sometimes have hyphens when added to words sometimes they don’t.

- co-owner / coexist
- pre-war / preview
- anti-hero / antibiotic
- self-assured / selfsame
- sub-branch / subcontinent
- up-market / upbeat
- off-Broadway / offbeat

For single letter prefixes most have hyphens:
- X-ray, X-rated, X-certificate, A-list, T-shirt, T-junction/T-intersection,
- T-bone, Y-chromosome, U-turn... Notice the single letter is a capital.

But these newer, internet-related words have lowercase single letters. The 'e' stands for electronic:
- e-book/ebook, e-mail/email, e-commerce, e-cash (the hyphen will probably be dropped soon).
Exercise 1

Make the following words opposite

1. happy ___________________
2. like ___________________
3. legal ___________________
4. kind ___________________
5. patient ___________________
6. mature ___________________
7. understanding ___________________
8. practical ___________________
Exercise 1 Answers

Make the following words opposite

1. happy - unhappy
2. like - dislike
3. legal - illegal
4. kind - unkind
5. patient - impatient
6. mature - immature
7. understanding - misunderstanding
8. practical - impractical
Exercise 2

Add a prefix to these words:

For example: not comfortable = uncomfortable

1. not regular = ______________
2. not correct = ______________
3. not personal = ______________
4. not mobile = ______________
5. not patient = ______________
6. not logical = ______________
7. not possible = ______________
8. not responsible = ______________
9. not proper = ______________
Exercise 2 Answers

Add a prefix to these words:

For example:

1. not regular = irregular
2. not correct = incorrect
3. not personal = impersonal
4. not mobile = immobile
5. not patient = impatient
6. not logical = illogical
7. not possible = impossible
8. not responsible = irresponsible
9. not proper = improper
Exercise 3

Prefixes can be used to give adjectives a negative or opposite meaning.

Add a prefix to these words:

1. ___convenient  2. ___comfortable  3. ___loyal
4. ___patient  5. ___regular  6. ___polite
7. ___adequate  8. ___possible  9. ___legal

Prefixes can also be used in verbs:
Add a prefix to these verbs:

10. appear  11. dress  12. like  13. zip
Exercise 3 Answers

1. inconvenient  2. uncomfortable  3. disloyal
4. impatient  5. irregular  6. impolite
7. inadequate  8. impossible  9. illegal
10. disappear 11. undress 11. dislike  11. unzip