

CHAPTER
3.7

Prefixes and suffixes



Prefixes and suffixes are the first and last parts of certain words. Understanding the meaning of prefixes and suffixes can help you work out the meaning of a word, and is particularly useful when you meet specialist new vocabulary.

1 How prefixes and suffixes work

'Unsustainable' is an example of a word containing a prefix and suffix. Words like this are much easier to understand if you know how prefixes and suffixes affect word meaning.



Prefixes change or give the meaning.

Suffixes show the meaning or the word class (e.g. noun, verb).

Prefix	Meaning	STEM	Suffix	Word class/Meaning
un-	negative	sustain	-able	adjective/ability

The rate of growth was **unsustainable**. (*i.e. could not be continued*)

2 Prefixes

- (a) Negative prefixes: UN-, IN-, MIS- and DIS- often give adjectives and verbs a negative meaning: **unclear**, **incapable**, **mishear**, **disagree**
- (b) A wide variety of prefixes define meaning e.g. PRE- usually means 'before', hence **prefer**, **prehistory** and, of course, **prefix**!

Common prefixes of meaning

- Find the meaning(s) of each prefix (NB. some prefixes have more than one meaning).

Prefix	Example	Example sentence
auto	automatically	Over-18s automatically have the right to vote.
co	co-ordinator	The co-ordinator invited them to a meeting.
ex	ex-president	The ex-president gave a lecture on climate change.
ex	exclusive	It is difficult to join such an exclusive club.
macro	macroeconomics	Keynes focused on macroeconomics .
micro	microscope	She examined the tiny animals with a microscope .
multi	multinational	Ford is a multinational motor company.
over	oversleep	He missed the lecture as he overslept .
post	postpone	The meeting is postponed until next Monday.
re	retrain	The firm retrained the staff to use the new software.
sub	subtitle	Chinese films often have subtitles in the West.
under	undergraduate	Most undergraduate courses last three years.
under	undercook	Eating undercooked meat can be dangerous.

3 Practice A

Prefixes allow new words to be created.

- Suggest possible meanings for the recently developed words in bold.

- (a) Criminal activity seems to be very common among the **underclass**.
- (b) The passengers found the plane was **overbooked** and had to wait for the next flight.
- (c) The **microclimate** in this district allows early vegetables to be grown.
- (d) It is claimed that computers have created a **post-industrial** economy.
- (f) Most film stars have **ex-directory** phone numbers.
- (g) The class was **underwhelmed** by the quality of the lecture.

4 Suffixes

- (a) Some suffixes like -ION, -IVE or -LY help the reader find the word class e.g. noun, verb or adjective.
- (b) Other suffixes add to meaning, e.g. -FUL or -LESS after an adjective have a positive or negative effect (thoughtful/ careless).

5 Word class suffixes

Nouns	-ER often indicates a person: <i>teacher, gardener</i> -EE can show a person who is the subject: <i>employee, trainee</i> -ISM and -IST are often used with belief systems and their supporters: <i>socialism/ socialist</i> -NESS converts an adjective into a noun: <i>sad/ sadness</i> -ION changes a verb to a noun: <i>convert/ conversion</i>
Adjectives	-IVE <i>effective, constructive</i> -AL <i>commercial, agricultural</i> -IOUS <i>precious, serious</i>
Verbs	-ISE / -IZE to form verbs from adjectives: <i>private/ privatise</i> NB. In the USA only -ize spelling is used, but both forms are accepted in the UK
Adverbs	-LY most (but not all) adverbs have this suffix: <i>happily</i>

6 Meaning suffixes

A few suffixes contribute to the meaning of the word:

-ABLE has the meaning of 'ability': a **watchable** film, **changeable** weather

-WARDS means 'in the direction of': the ship sailed **northwards**

-FUL and -LESS: **hopeful** news, a **leaderless** team

7 Practice B

■ Give the word class and suggest possible meanings for:

- | | |
|----------------------|-------------------|
| (a) cancellation | (f) unpredictable |
| (b) coincidental | (g) saleable |
| (c) unco-operatively | (h) interviewee |
| (d) evolutionary | (i) consumerism |
| (e) protester | (j) symbolically |

8 Practice C

■ Study each sentence and find the meaning of the words underlined.

- The film is a French-Italian co-production made by a subsidiary company.
- When the car crashed she screamed involuntarily but was unharmed.
- Using rechargeable batteries has undoubted benefits for the environment.
- The unavailability of the product is due to the exceptional weather.
- There is a theoretical possibility of the machine disintegrating.

▶ See Unit 3.2 Academic vocabulary