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 fram	■ absent	■ not to be present, away	
	away from	abscond	■ abscond – to run away	
ad a ac of		■ adapt	■ to fit into	
ad, a, ac, af,	to, toward	adhere	■ to stick to	
ag, an, ar, at, as	to, toward	■ annex	■ to add or join	
as		attract	■ to draw near	
anti	against	■ antifreeze	■ a substance to prevent freezing	
anu	against	antisocial	refers to someone who's not social	
		■ bicycle	■ two wheeled cycle	
bi, bis	two	■ biannual	■ twice each year	
		biennial	■ every two years	
oirouna oir	araund	■ circumscribe	■ to draw around	
circum, cir	around	■ circle	a figure that goes all around	
		■ combine	■ to bring together	
com, con, co,		■ contact	■ to touch together	
col	with, together	■ collect	■ to bring together	
		■ co-worker	■ co-worker	
مام	away from, down, the	■ depart	■ to go away from	
de	opposite of	■ decline	■ to turn down	
		■ dislike	■ not to like	
dis, dif, di	apart	■ dishonest	■ not honest	
		■ distant	■ away	
:	upon, on top of	■ epitaph	writing upon a tombstone	
epi		■ epilogue	speech at the end, on top of the rest	
	equal	■ equalize	■ to make equal	
equ, equi		■ equitable	■ fair, equal	
	out, from	■ exit	■ to go out	
ex, e, ef		■ eject	■ to throw out	
		■ exhale	to breathe out	
, .	in inte	■ inject	■ to put into	
in, il, ir, im, en	in, into	■ impose	■ to force into	
	not	■ inactive	■ not active	
ومناسات المانية		■ ignoble	■ not noble	
in, il, ig, ir, im		■ irreversible	■ not reversible	
		■ irritate	■ 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.

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Prefix	Meaning	Example words and meanings			
inter	between, among	international			
		■ interpose	■ to put between		
mal, male	had ill wrong	malpractice	■ bad practice		
	bad, ill, wrong	malfunction	■ fail to function, bad function		
		mistreat	■ to treat badly		
mis	wrong, badly	■ mistake	■ to get wrong		
		misplace	to put in wrong place		
		monopoly	■ one ownership		
mono	one, alone, single	monotone	■ one note		
1110110	one, alone, single	monologue	■ speech by one person		
		monosyllable	■ one syllable		
non	not the reverse of	■ nonsense	■ not making sense		
non	not, the reverse of	nonprofit	not making a profit		
	in front, against, in	obstacle	something that stands in the way of		
ob	front of, in the way of	obvious	■ right in front of, apparent		
	Hone of, in the way of	obviate	■ to do away with, make unnecessary		
omni	everywhere, all	■ omnipresent	■ always present, everywhere		
omni	everywhere, an	omnipotent	■ all powerful		
nor	through	■ pervade	to pass through, to spread through		
per	through	perceive	to become aware through sight		
poly	many	polysyllable	■ many syllables		
poly	many	polygon	figure with many sides		
noct	after	■ postpone	■ to do after		
post	arter	postmortem	■ after death		
		■ preview	a viewing earlier than another		
pre	before, earlier than	prehistoric	before written history		
		preface	a statement before an article or book		
	forward, going ahead	■ proceed	■ to go forward		
pro	of, supporting	■ prowar	supporting the war		
	or, supporting	promote	to raise or move forward		
	again, back	■ retell	■ to tell again		
re		■ recall	■ to call back		
		■ recede	■ to go back		
se	apart	■ secede	to withdraw, become apart		
30	арат	■ seclude	to stay apart from others		
	under, less than	submarine	under water		
sub		■ subway	a path or way to move under ground		
		subliminal	below the level of consciousness		
super	over, above, greater	■ superstar	a start greater than other stars		
	over, above, greater	■ superimpose	■ to put over something else		
trans	across	transcontinental	across the continent		
tians	across	■ transverse	■ to lie or go across		
un, uni		unidirectional	having one direction		
un, uni	one	unanimous	sharing one view		
un, uni	one	unanimousunilateral	■ having one side		
un, uni	one		having one sidenot interested		
un, uni un	one	■ unilateral	■ having one side		

Table 2: 27 Roots

Root	Meaning	Example words & meanings		
act, ag	to do, to act	■ Agent ■ One who acts as a representative		
400, 46	10 40, 10 401	Activity	■ Action	
apert	open	■ Aperture ■ An opening		
bas	low	Basement	Something that is low, at the bottom	
bas	IOW	Basement	■ A room that is low	
		Captive	One who is held	
cap, capt, cip,	to take, to hold, to seize	Receive	■ To take	
cept, ceive	to take, to floid, to seize	Capable	Able to take hold of things	
		Recipient	One who takes hold or receives	
and anda		■ Precede	■ To go before	
ced, cede, ceed, cess	to go, to give in	Access	Means of going to	
ceeu, cess		Proceed	■ To go forward	
		■ Credible	Believable	
cred, credit	to believe	Incredible	Not believable	
		■ Credit	■ Belief, trust	
		■ Current	Now in progress, running	
curr, curs,	to run	■ Precursory	Running (going) before	
cours		■ Recourse	■ To run for aid	
		■ Dictionary	A book explaining words (sayings)	
dic, dict	to say	■ Indict	■ To say or make an accusation	
,		■ Indicate	■ To point out or say by demonstrating	
		■ Induce	■ To lead to action	
duc, duct	to lead	■ Conduct	■ To lead or guide	
ado, adoc	to load	Aqueduct	 Pipe that leads water somewhere 	
		■ Equality	Equal in social, political rights	
equ	equal, even	■ Equanimity	Evenness of mind, tranquility	
		■ Facile	Easy to do	
fac, fact, fic,		■ Fiction	■ Something that is made up	
fect, fy	to make, to do	■ Factory	Place that makes things	
iect, iy		■ Affect	■ To make a change in	
		■ Defer	■ To carry away	
fer, ferr	to carry, bring	■ Referral		
			Bring a source for help/information A writing on a particular publication.	
graph	write	■ Monograph	A writing on a particular subject	
		■ Graphite	A form of carbon used for writing	
mit, mis	to send	■ Admit	■ To send in	
•		■ Missile	Something sent through the air	
par	equal	■ Parity	■ Equality	
•	3 4 3 3 3	■ Disparate	■ No equal, not alike	
plic	to fold, to bend, to turn	Complicate	■ To fold (mix) together	
pilo	to roid, to bend, to tarri	■ Implicate	■ To fold in, to involve	
	to place	Component	A part placed together with others	
pon, pos, posit,		■ Transpose	A place across	
pose		Compose	To put many parts into place	
		■ Deposit	To place for safekeeping	
scrib, script	to write	Describe	To write about or tell about	
		Transcript	■ A written copy	
		Subscription	A written signature or document	
		■ Sequence	■ In following order	
sequ, secu	to follow	■ Sequel	A second, following, book	
•		Consecutive	One that follows another	
spec, spect,		■ Specimen	■ An example to look at	
spic	to appear, to look, to see	■ Aspect	One way to see something	
Spic				

Root	Meaning	Example words & meanings		
stit, sisto		■ Status	Social standing	
		Stable	Steady (standing)	
		Desist	To stand away from	
tact	to touch	■ Contact	■ To touch together	
laci		Tactile	To be able to be touched	
	to hold	■ Tenable	■ Able to be held, holding	
ten, tent, tain		Retentive	Holding	
		Maintain	■ To keep or hold up	
tond tone tont	to stretch	■ Extend	■ To stretch or draw out	
tend, tens, tent		■ Tension	■ Stretched	
tract	to draw	Attract	■ To draw together	
liact		Contract	■ An agreement drawn up	
von vont	to come	■ Convene	■ To come together	
ven, vent		Advent	■ A coming	
	to turn	■ Avert	■ To turn away	
ver, vert, vers		■ Revert	■ To turn back	
		■ Reverse	■ To turn around	

Table 3: 23 Suffixes

Suffix	Meaning	Example words & meanings		
able, ible, ble	able to	■ Edible	■ Able to be eaten	
able, ible, ble	able to	Salable	■ Able to be sold	
acious, cous, al	like, having the quality of	Nocturnal	■ Of the night	
acious, cous, ai	like, having the quality of	Vivacious	Having the quality of being lively	
ance, ancy	the act of, a state of being	Performance	The act of performing	
arice, aricy	the act of, a state of being	■ Truancy	■ The act of being truant	
		Occupant	One who occupies	
ant, ent, er, or	one who	Respondent	One who responds or answers	
	one who	■ Teacher	One who teaches	
		Creator	One who creates	
		Ocular	■ Related to the eye	
ar, ary	connected with, related to	Beneficiary	■ Connected with one who receives benefits	
ence	quality of, act of	■ Existence	■ The act of existing or being	
ful	full of	■ Fearful	■ Full of fear	
	of, like, pertaining to	Cardiac	Pertaining to the heart	
ic, ac, il, ile		■ Civil	Pertaining to citizens	
10, 0.0,,		Infantile	Pertaining to infants	
		■ Acidic	■ Like acid	
ion	the act or condition of	Correction	■ The act of correcting	
ism	the practice of, support of	Patriotism	Support of one's country	
ist	one who makes, does	■ Artist	One who creates art	
	the state of, character of	Unity	■ The state of being one	
ity, ty, y		■ Shifty	State of shifting around	
		■ Showy	■ State of always showing oneself	
ive	having the nature of	■ Active ■ Having the nature of acting or moving		
less	lacking, without	HeartlessWithout a heart		
logy	the study of	Biology	■ The study of life processes	
ment	the act of, the state of	Retirement	■ State of being retired	
ness	the quality of	Eagerness	■ The quality of being eager	
ory	having the nature of, a place or thing for	■ Laboratory ■ A place where work is done		

Suffix	Meaning	Example words & meanings		
ous, ose	full of, having	DangerousVerbose	Full of dangerFull of words, or wordy	
ship	the art or skill of, the ability to	■ Leadership	■ The ability to lead	
some	full of, like	Troublesome	■ Full of trouble	
tude	the state of quality of, the ability to	■ Aptitude	■ The ability to do	
у	Full of, somewhat, somewhat like	MustyChillyWillowy	Having a stale ororSomewhat coldLike 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	vers. turning	ibic. abic to	Not able to turn back
Malediction	male: bad	e: bad dict: to say		To say bad things, a negative
	maio: baa			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
		ty. State Of	thing or being	
Untenable	un: not	ten: holding	able: able to	Not able to hold on