

# Introduction to Morphology

In this resource, we'll introduce the basics of morphology. We'll be introducing many different terms but don't worry about committing every single term to memory right now. We invite you to make connections to what you already know.

## Types of Morphemes

Words are composed of morphemes put together. There are two types of morphemes, **free** and **bound**.

A **free** morpheme stands alone as a word, such as ball. It can also be combined into a compound word, such as baseball.

A **bound** morpheme cannot stand alone but must be combined with another morpheme or morphemes to make a real word.

There are three types of bound morphemes.

The first are **bound roots**, which often give words their main meaning. Bound roots are usually Latin or Greek. Learning the meaning of these roots can be very useful for vocabulary learning and decoding.

The other two types of bound morphemes are **affixes**. Affixes are added on to roots or base words. When an affix comes at the beginning of the word, it's a **prefix**. When it's added to the end of a word, it's a **suffix**.

## Different Types of Suffixes

**Inflectional suffixes** are the most common. These are the first suffixes readers will encounter.

**Inflectional suffixes** don't change the part of speech when added to a base word. They do change the way the word can be used by changing the word's tense or showing possession, quantity, comparison or degree. Inflect means "to bend" so it's sort of like inflectional suffixes "bend" the word a little while still keeping it the same shape.

There are only 8 **inflectional suffixes**:  
-ed, -s/es, -'s, -er (as in bigger), -en, -ing, -est

If inflectional suffixes bend the word and change how it is used, **derivational** affixes are prefixes and suffixes that change the meaning of the base word. However, the meaning is still derived from the original base word, that's why it's a derivational affix.

**Derivational affixes** usually change the part of speech or function of the base word. All prefixes are derivational, and some suffixes. Derivational affixes are usually Latin and there are many many of them.

A few examples of derivational suffixes are -ly, -ment, -ive, -tion/sion/-cian, -ness, -ful, -al, and -er (as in teacher).

### Analyze Example Words

That was a lot of information. Let's practice by analyzing some example words using this terminology.

- Stay → stay (free root from Latin meaning to stand still) = to remain in the same place or state
- Popcorn → pop (free root meaning burst out) + corn (free root meaning a specific delicious plant) = corn heated until it pops!
- Inching → inch (free root that specifies a specific unit of measure) + ing (inflectional suffix that changes the function of the root) = moving along slowly as if by an inch at a time
- Harmless → harm (free root meaning hurt) + less (derivational suffix meaning without) = something that doesn't cause harm
- Preview → pre (prefix meaning before) + view (free root meaning to see) = seeing something in advance
- Interrupt → inter (prefix meaning between) + rupt (bound root meaning break) = breaking into the middle of something
- Geography → geo (bound root meaning earth) + graph (bound root meaning write) + y (derivational suffix meaning characterized by) = the study of the earth

### What Morphology Should We Teach?

You may be wondering, where should I start? What morphology should we teach in early elementary classrooms?

Don't worry, we have done the research for you and we'll show you where to get started and where to concentrate your energy.

- Introduce inflectional (simple) suffixes
- Spelling rules for adding suffixes
- Use understanding of morphology as a tool for decoding
- Common prefixes
- Common derivational suffixes
- Y to i spelling rule

- Introduce roots

### **First Introduction to Morphemes:**

Begin with the most common inflectional suffixes in kindergarten (-s/-es, -ing) then proceed with the sequence of inflectional suffixes as students are ready (See our index of inflection suffixes is in at the end of this resource).

While students are learning inflectional suffixes, introduce prefixes and suffixes as a clue to word meaning during read aloud, vocabulary instruction, or other oral language activities.

Play with morphemes, draw attention to meaning, and show your students how to enjoy taking words apart and putting them together.

### **Spelling Rules for Adding Suffixes**

Once students know the syllable types, introduce the first two spelling rules for adding suffixes to base words. This will also aid students in decoding multisyllabic words with suffixes.

The first spelling rule for suffixes is the **1-1-1 doubling rule**.

*When a base word with a short vowel ends with one consonant, double that consonant before adding a vowel suffix to keep the vowel sound short.*

Examples:

rub + ing = rubbing

flat + er = flatter

string + ing = stringing

commit + ment = commitment

The second spelling rule for suffixes is the **drop the e rule**.

*When a base word ends with silent e, drop the e before adding a vowel suffix.*

Examples:

hope + ed = hoped

hope + ful = hopeful

chose + en = chosen

confuse + ing = confusing

### **Morphology as a Decoding Tool**

Once students are working on decoding multisyllabic words, teach them to identify the root or base word and any affixes to make the word easier to decode.

At this point, students should also begin to learn common prefixes for reading and writing.

### **Prefixes**

Which prefixes should you teach? The four most common prefixes account for more than 58% of all prefixed words in English.

They are:

dis- meaning not or the opposite of.

re- meaning again.

un- meaning not.

and in-/im-/il-/ir- which are all slight variations of the same prefix, all meaning not.

Start with these power prefixes and introduce others as your students are ready (See our index of common prefixes at the end of this resource).

### **Derivational Suffixes**

By third grade, students should start to work with derivational suffixes. Teach students the meaning of derivational suffixes so they can use them as tools to figure out word meaning. -ly changes a word to an adverb. -er and -or can indicate a person who, like a doctor or a singer.

Just like with the prefixes, there is a short list of derivational suffixes that, along with inflectional suffixes, account for 93% of words with suffixes in English. Those are the suffixes to start with (See our index of common derivational suffixes at the end of this resource).

### **Y to I Rule**

The y to i rule tells us how to add suffixes to base words that end in y.

*When a base word ends in a y (and the y is not part of a vowel digraph) change y to i before adding the suffix. The suffix can be a vowel or a consonant suffix, but the rule does not apply when the suffix starts with i.*

Examples:

plenty + ful = plentiful

party + es = parties

cry + ing = crying

shiny + est = shiniest

### **Introducing Roots**

Introduce using roots to decipher the meaning of words. Connect this work with cognate instruction for English language learners.

You can introduce some common Latin roots (form, dict, ject) or focus your instruction on words in the texts you are reading or the topics you're exploring in class. Find the roots in those words. Then figure out the meaning of those roots and look for other members of that family. Practice mapping them out with your class, and have students map out their own word explorations.

For example, if you're learning about metamorphosis, look at the root morph, meaning shape or form. Other words in the morph family include morph/morphing, morpheme (!), amorphous and the beloved books the Animorphs series.

After 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, students are expected to use roots and affixes as clues to word meaning. Build their schema for these skills in the early grades by exploring the meaning and function of morphemes.

**The main takeaway for morphology instruction?** Have fun with words and play with language together. Know that you are building a rich and meaningful foundation for all of your learners.

#### **Ideas for Morphology Exploration:**

- Have students create morpheme maps where they explore the range of words created with that morpheme.
- Students can make word sums and word matrices where they decompose words into their morphemes.
- Play engaging games where students combine morphemes to make words. Games can even involve invented words or slang for fun.

Inflectional suffixes	
-s/-es	To make something plural
-s/-es	To change verb tense
-ing	Changes the function of the verb
-ed	Changes a verb to the past tense. Has three sounds, /t/, /d/, and /id/. Teach the three sounds and have students use word sorts and dictation to practice.
-er	For comparing (-er is also a derivational suffix when not used in this sense)
-est	For comparing
-'s	To show possession
-en	Changes the function of the verb (-en is also a derivational suffix when not used in this sense)

Most Common Prefixes	
<i>*These prefixes account for 97% of prefixed words in English. In order of frequency of occurrence:</i>	
dis-	Meaning not or the opposite of.
re-	Meaning again.
un-	Meaning not.
in-/im-/il-/ir-	Meaning not.
en-/em-	Cause to
non-	Not, opposite of
in-/im-	In or into
over-	Too much, above
mis-	Wrongly
sub-	Under, lower
pre-	before
inter-	Between, among
fore-	before
de-	Opposite of, down
trans-	Across, to the other side of
super-	Above, beyond
semi-	half
anti-	against
mid-	middle
under-	Too little, below
White, T., Sowell, J., & Yanagihara, A. (1989). Teaching elementary students to use word-part clues. <i>The Reading Teacher</i> , 42(4), 302-308. Retrieved March 11, 2021, from <a href="http://www.jstor.org/stable/20200115">http://www.jstor.org/stable/20200115</a>	



### Most Common Derivational Suffixes

\*These, combined with the inflectional suffixes, account for 93% of words in English with suffixes. The remaining derivational suffixes combined make up the other 7%.

In order of frequency of occurrence:

-ly	Changes to an adverb
-er/-or	Person who
-tion	Act, process (-sion is alternate spelling, -cian sounds the name but is another person who suffix)
-ible/-able	Can be done
-al/-ial	Having characteristics of
-y	Characterized by
-ness	State of, condition
-ity/-ty	State of
-ment	Action or process
-ic	Having characteristics of
-ous/-eous/-ious	Possessing qualities of
-en	Made of
-ive/-ative/-itive	Adjective form of a noun
-ful	Full of
-less	without

White, T., Sowell, J., & Yanagihara, A. (1989). Teaching elementary students to use word-part clues. *The Reading Teacher*, 42(4), 302-308. Retrieved March 11, 2021, from

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/20200115>

